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**Robert John Morley Amess**

**West Cornwall Methodism Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow:  
A Missional Ecclesiology**

**Abstract**

The thesis considers a missional ecclesiology, arising out of and applicable to the experience of Methodism in West Cornwall. It is important therefore to take a historical overview of West Cornwall Methodists, believing that the problems and opportunities of today in areas of mission and ministry can be traced through that history. And as against a superficial reading, the purpose is not merely negative. In fact, the conclusion is one of cautious optimism, to seek and find a positive future. Each of the history chapters will demonstrate the evolution of various factors that constitute that which makes West Cornish Methodism what it is today. It will be demonstrated that it has been moulded by certain unique facets including the Cornish personality of independence and tenacity, furthered by geographical remoteness. Added to this there were dangerous industries such as mining and fishing, and the decline of an indigenous people that held, at least formerly, strong religious beliefs.

The latter chapters will focus on how national Methodism by its pervading inflexible structures has been a mixed blessing leading to perceived tensions in the practice of the local churches. Conference initiatives, taken in areas of considerable concern, coupled to long-term numerical decline have led to insecurity and hesitancy as to the future. The fundamental reason for the last four chapters is that they will demonstrate how the previously discussed historical context shapes the here and now and indeed the future. In seeking a positive future, theological concepts such as *Missio Dei* and *Volkstum* will be defined and discussed as a basis for further mission. For this there will be a need for the local churches to prepare themselves for a positive role in the communities of which they are a part.

**West Cornwall Methodism  
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow:  
A Missional Ecclesiology**

**Robert John Morley Amess**

**A thesis submitted to Durham University  
for the degree of DThM**

**Department of Theology and Religion**

**St. John's College, Durham University**

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### **Dedications**

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## **Introduction; Definitions, Context and Beginnings**

For this task it will be necessary to place what is written in the context of Methodism both nationally and locally, and in its history, structures, and influence. It is this interaction that has much to do with this thesis. And for this there needs to be several foundational matters so as to establish clarity and continuity. The historic structures of Methodism have, in part, produced a mixed and even negative outworking in West Cornwall. It will be argued that the conservative nature of the local people, both theologically and socially, caused in part by their geographical remoteness, has been a factor. This has led, with a few exceptions, to a lack of vision for the future, whereas the primary concern is survival. Present need is demonstrated in numerous small churches, lack of consecutive pulpit ministry and financial pressures, aggravated by the assessment system, which together lead to fear of closure. Tensions within Connexion have been increased by Conference discussions in the area of sexuality. Such matters as revival, division, unity, and long-term decline in Cornwall will be studied. Lastly it will be asked what might be done, if anything, to reverse this trend.

Whilst each chapter is complete in itself, each will add to the overall argument. The final chapters seek to examine Methodism in West Cornwall today and tomorrow so that there might be demonstrated, despite Covid, the possibility of a more constructive future. The time scale of this thesis ends 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021.

### **A Personal Connection with West Cornwall**

I bring to this thesis a unique passion and a unique voice for I am a Baptist minister with strong Cornish roots, owning a property in St Ives since the mid nineteen seventies, and in fellowship with a Methodist church during the holidays. For the last nine years I have become an Authorised Person by the decision of the Methodist Conference and I have been minister of a Methodist Church in St Ives for much of that time. Now I preach throughout the West Cornwall Circuit and am part of the Circuit Leadership team.

For these reasons I share the joys and concerns of the local congregations. I understand the increasing points of pressure, caused in part through Covid and contentious issues stemming from Conference. Together these have in part resulted

in lack of resources and startling numerical decline. Nevertheless, together we seek a positive future.

### **Three Important Concepts: Mission, Missio Dei and Volkstum.**

This thesis endeavours to bring together two salient parts of the West Cornwall Methodist story. Firstly, its history and then to describe the life and ministry of the churches today. To bring this about there will be both the practical and the spiritual. These will include theological concepts such as Mission, Missio Dei and Volkstum. After this introduction these will be considered more fully in the latter chapters, thereby seeking a spiritual foundation for finding God's purpose for the churches. 'Mission' is to be found firstly in the Abstract, and Missio Dei forms the core of chapter six. The difference between these two are apparently slight but of great importance. Mission puts the emphasis on the church and its work, whilst Missio Dei puts the emphasis upon the triune God. Volkstum is an academic word that does not come from the practical theology stable but will be used to define a distinctive group, namely the indigenous West Cornish people.

Several other important matters such as secularisation will also be discussed as being central to the argument both in faith, practice and application.

### **Mission**

For a definition of mission, I look to Johannes Verkuyl who, in a densely argued book, is pertinent here. Written in 1978 its title is *Contemporary Missiology*<sup>1</sup> Verkuyl states 'Missiology is the study of the salvation activities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout the world geared toward bringing the kingdom of God into existence.'<sup>2</sup> In an expansion of his definition he includes the role of the church:

Missiology's task in every age is to investigate scientifically the presuppositions, motives, structures, methods, patterns of cooperation, and leadership which the churches bring to their mandate. And in addition, missiology must examine every other type of human activity which combats the various evils to see if it

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology an Introduction* (Michigan: Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 5.

fits the criteria and goals of God's kingdom which has already come and is yet coming.<sup>3</sup>

A second voice comes from David Bosch. At once a difficulty is revealed by the subtitle *The Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*,<sup>4</sup> for he implies in his title that the theology of 'mission' is continually changing. Something of that change will be demonstrated later, for my argument will show that mission *per se* is different today from the concepts of evangelism which were pertinent to West Country Methodism in previous years. But that is the *practice* of mission not its meaning. What mission means is confirmed by Bosch when he states that the 'reign of God which has come in Jesus Christ is intended for "all humanity."' He continues, 'Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very *raison d'etre*.'<sup>5</sup> (Italics org.) Similar approaches can be seen in Johannes Aagaard's *Some Main Trends in Modern Protestant Missiology*, and particularly in John Flett's *The Witness of God*. All of these are to confirm that, as Bosch says, 'mission is not a planned event with a gifted preacher' as thought previously, 'but the very life-blood of the church.'<sup>6</sup> As is to be expected Methodist history, practical theology and research of relevant authors have made significant contributions to what will follow in the area of mission.

### **Missio Dei**

The original and classic meaning of Missio Dei is derived from an understanding of the nature of God. John Flett demonstrates that the origins of Missio Dei did not spring, as often stated, from the International Missionary Council Conference held in Willingen, Germany in 1952 but twenty years earlier. Rather, it owed its intellectual origins to a German theologian Karl Hartenstein and was developed by a friend and neighbour Karl Barth.<sup>7</sup> In a lecture by Barth, translated as 'Theology and Mission in the present situation',<sup>8</sup> he placed Missio Dei in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. At the IMC Willingen Conference, Johannes Aagaard said that stemming from Barth it was now acknowledged that 'the ground for mission was found in the triune God and

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<sup>3</sup> Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

<sup>7</sup> John G. Flett, *The Witness of God* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010), 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart* (Zwischen den Zeiten, 10, no.3, 1932), 189-215.



his Mission.<sup>9</sup> So whilst West Cornish Methodists might blanch at a Latin phrase such as *Missio Dei*, its meaning is of course simple - namely 'The Mission of God.' Yet simple though the statement be, it is not without its problems. Flett writes that *Missio Dei* 'lacks coherence.'<sup>10</sup> He writes of the ambiguity that 'surrounds axiomatic phrases such as "God is a Missionary God," and complains that the concept is something more than a few seminal texts.'<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless Flett still writes of the triune God being 'both the Initiator and Completer of His Mission.'<sup>12</sup> So in the context of West Cornwall Methodists, and their possible alarm, it is necessary to state that this is not so much a disconnected academic study, but rather a cause to be both warmed and encouraged by what it has to say.

Of extra encouragement is that the time when Hartenstein and Barth were discussing *Missio Dei* was not totally dissimilar to that which is being faced in West Cornwall today. John Flett writes 'Missio Dei constitutes an apologia for the church's Missionary activity during a period of crisis.' It is the 'Church's assumption of Christ's Mission activity during an interim period between the ascension and the *Parousia*.'<sup>13</sup>(italics orig.) And for German theologians, that particular 'interim period' was indeed a 'period of crisis.' Barth and other German theologians were writing during the rise of Naziism prior to the Second World War, faced by political and social upheaval. David Bosch writes of 'Europe traumatized by the First World War, challenged by the rise of totalitarianism, ideologies like National Socialism, Fascism, Marxism,'<sup>14</sup> and more. In just such a context *Missio Dei*, with the emphasis on God rather than on a broken and divided church in a corrupt society, helped to demonstrate the activity of God, rather than any inadequate work of the *status quo*.

So it is that West Cornwall Methodists too live at a time of crisis, not of course of the same magnitude as Nazism and the leadup to the second World War, but nevertheless real. And this crisis is at least fourfold. Firstly, this chapter is being written during the ongoing Covid epidemic, with the full implications for the churches unknown but

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<sup>9</sup> Johannes Aagaard, "Some Main Trends in Modern Protestant Missiology," *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology*, vol. 19 1965. Quoted in in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 370.

looking ominous. They are hardly able to contemplate some new church-based mission initiative. Secondly, is the fact that most of these same churches have suffered numerical decline for decades, and have become introverted, rather than stirring themselves to be partners in God's Mission. Thirdly, which again will be touched upon later, is the general climate and norms of society today. Now is almost the antithesis of a climate ready or prepared for fresh evangelistic initiative. Words such as secularisation seek to describe the current age, leading the churches into negativity. Cornish society is either ignorant of, antagonistic to, or disinterested in personal faith. And lastly, the God in Love Unites Us debate that comes to Conference in July 2021 is already having serious repercussions for a mainly Evangelical constituency. This thesis was completed before the working out of Conference decisions became part of local church life and therefore it cannot be fully engaged with in detail by this present work.

Nevertheless, *Missio Dei* declares that the perilous condition of the church is not the nub of the matter. Rather it is that God acts through the Church, calling it to participate in his reconciling work in the world.<sup>15</sup> Martyn Atkins puts it well when he stresses the primary importance of *Missio Dei*. 'The Church . . . derives its very existence and purpose from God's reign and mission . . . It's not the Church of God which has a mission in the world but the God of mission who has a church in the world.'<sup>16</sup>

Yet such is the pressure being faced by West Cornish Methodists, that they will wonder if God can work through *their* church and in what sense they can be partners with God. Once more there is encouragement. Bosch writes:

God's salvific (wisdom) work precedes both church and Mission. We should not subordinate Mission to the church nor the church to Mission: both should be taken up into *Missio Dei*, which now became the overshadowing concept. . . . The church changes from being the sender to being the one sent.<sup>17</sup>

A tutor of Greek at Spurgeon's College where I trained for the ministry, insisted that the accent must fall in the right place when writing Greek text. So here, the accent falls on the triune God, in both His knowledge and power to prosper His work. And this task

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<sup>15</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 53-54.

<sup>16</sup> Martyn Atkins, Tom Stuckey and Martin Wellings, *Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context* (London: Methodist Church, 2007), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 370.

for the hard-pressed Cornish Methodists will indeed require divine help, for the extent of the task is obvious.

### **Volkstum**

The German word Volkstum is not used extensively in English academic theological circles. It is a word I have discovered with some satisfaction to help describe the indigenous Cornish people. In Flett's book *The Witness of God* there is recorded a lengthy debate between Siegfried Knak and Karl Barth (over the significance of a hyphen!) regarding the secularisation of the Church, as seen in a dichotomy between Anglo-American and German attitudes to mission. This then leads on to a discussion on Volkstum, a word which has a long and mainly secular history concerning particular peoples and their communities. As to its meaning in the context of this thesis, Flett defines Volkstum as being 'the location of God's call, the framework within which individuals articulate their faith.'<sup>18</sup> It is immediately clear that here is a concept of considerable importance for mission, in the context of West Cornwall. And as to mission it is to John Wesley (1703-91) that we must turn.

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

The historical part of this thesis will tell how John Wesley found within the Cornish mind and culture a fertile and prepared soil to germinate his evangelical gospel. It will tell of rapid growth, division, and long-term decline. It will seek to show how facets of Methodist structures, many formed by Wesley himself, have become centres of unease or controversy, many of them caused through inflexibility. It will speak of the bread-and-butter challenges such as the role of Conference, connexion, circuit and inherited structures, now complicated by the fundamental problems of ageing and diminishing congregations.

Whereas this thesis does not propose solutions to these and other important issues, it does argue that Cornish Methodism's unique place within West Cornish society could be a springboard for strategic partnership with God in his mission. It will demonstrate that despite continuing numerical loss, the Methodist churches of the far West can provide a foundation for future mission, especially if seen in the broader

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<sup>18</sup> Siegfried Knak to Karl Barth, 10 March 1931 in John G. Flett, *The Witness of God*, 114.

theological perspective of *Missio Dei*. The realisation that responsibility for mission does not fall upon the hard-pressed local congregation alone could be transforming by knowing themselves to be partners with God. Seeing that such a significant partnership will need spiritual preparation and vision, the last chapter will be centred on the churches, so that they might be prepared for such a ministry.

### **Methodology**

In the task of recording the development of West Cornwall Methodism from the beginning, there will be four recurring unflagged themes; namely, change through time, identity formation, changing scale both in size and influence, and institutionalism. Under change through time the consecutive unfolding story of West Country Methodism will be recorded. Identity formation will examine Methodism's influence within the very chemistry of Cornish society and its subsequent loss of importance. Changing scale will record the rapid numerical rise of West Cornwall Methodism at times of Revival and subsequent numerical decline. It will be argued that historic revival is still part of the present-day West Cornwall Methodist consciousness, either to be rediscovered as a point of reference, or as a hope of recovery. This 'cultic' memory has an ongoing and sometimes negative effect, falsely inspiring hopes for an idealised future. Institutionalisation will examine Methodist denominational structures which, it will be argued, have become a mixed blessing. There will be chapters concerning West Cornwall today and tomorrow, encompassing themes such as denominational pressures, particularly the possibility of same-sex marriage in church, and *Missio Dei* that will be coupled with hopes for the future.

As well as the four points of methodology tabulated here, there is need to describe how this whole thesis has been brought about. Because of the nature of this thesis no particular methodology has been used. Moving to the debate about West Cornish Methodism today, the major theme of Methodist structures and their effect on the local church will be argued, seen within the context of the churches life and witness. This will include a theological aspect, seen in such matters as *Missio Dei* yet rooted in the life and witness of the local church.

In both sections of the thesis namely the past and the present use has been made of the following:

### Primary sources.

There are matters recorded where the writer was present, careful use of minutes in meetings and committees where the writer played a part, and experience from the position of being a presbyter and member of Methodist structures and their outworking.

### Secondary sources

Fundamental to this exercise has been academic research. Text books, histories, Conference reports, journals and local Newspaper archives have been a profitable source. Two Methodist archives have been available until being closed through Covid regulations. These have included historic documents and previous theses closely relevant to the subject.

Libraries have been extensively used in the two University Libraries of Durham, namely the Bill Bryson and St John's library. When possible being a member of the British Library has been productive. Unfortunately, Covid caused not only the closure of the Durham Libraries, but also their ability to post relevant material causing considerable pressure.

As to books, specific and relevant histories have been read and used, whilst biographies have produced helpful material.

As to the later chapters concerning West Cornwall Methodism today, the writing is taken up by two variables namely the Methodist denomination and the local situation of the circuit churches in their life and ministry. Much use has been made of modern relevant books on the theme of Methodism today. Tensions have been explained, concerns stemming from perceived unmalleable structures have been documented. Added to this, certain theological concepts and analysis have been studied, seeking to provide a theological foundation for a profitable future.

### **Geography**

In the early chapters of this thesis the often-used phrase 'West Cornish Methodism' is comparatively general in area at the onset, and contracts subsequently to the far West. The historical chapters begin with the area stretching along the north coast from St Ives to Redruth, a distance of sixteen to seventeen miles. It includes Camborne and Hayle with a plethora of circuits, which were formed from the various new expressions

of Methodism created in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is to capture initially the effect of Methodism on the larger centres of influence and population. As the Cornish historian Bernard Deacon records in his chapter *Identity and Territory* each of these towns have different social histories encompassing mining, engineering and fishing.<sup>19</sup> These were, in the main, where the spiritual Revivals would take place. Subsequently the circuits in this area, through union, amalgamation and demise, have changed dramatically. Until 2018 the St Ives circuit continued to look towards the northeast and passed through several reconstructions. In 2016 the Hayle circuit moved to join Camborne and Redruth, meaning that St Ives was no longer a viable circuit and in 2018 it was merged with the Penzance Circuit, to be called the West Cornwall Circuit. It stretches from Land's End in the West to St Erth (sic) in the East and encompasses eighteen churches at the time of writing. It is in this circuit where the writer is a presbyter and where the later chapters will focus. It is here that the writer ministers regularly, has a particular responsibility and affection.

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<sup>19</sup> Bernard Deacon, *Industrial Celts: Making the Modern Cornish Identity 1750-1870* (Redruth: CoSERG, 2018), 1-26.

## Chapter 1: The Early Days of West Cornwall Methodism

### Foundations

Several books such as *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*<sup>20</sup> help to describe the starting point of this thesis. Beginnings of course must be traced to John Wesley's (1703-91) home at Epworth Rectory and the strong religious influence of his mother. As an undergraduate at Oxford his disciplined religiosity, along with others, gained for them the nickname 'Method-ists', and collectively 'Holy Club'. During a disastrous missionary venture to the American colonies Wesley came under the influence of the Moravians, yet returned a disillusioned man.<sup>21</sup> There followed his deep spiritual experience in Aldersgate Street, London, when on 24 May 1738 his heart was 'strangely warmed'.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently his evangelistic travelling ministry began which, early in his ministry, brought him to West Cornwall where he discovered 'Religious Societies' already established.<sup>23</sup> The new Societies needed oversight and were linked together as a 'connexion'.<sup>24</sup> Under Wesley's authority these were ruled by a

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<sup>20</sup> John A. Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 379-82.

<sup>21</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 379-80.

<sup>22</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), 172.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Shaw, *A History of Cornish Methodism* (Truro: Bradford Barton, 1967), 13-16.

<sup>24</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 77.

'Conference' of 'Travelling Preachers'.<sup>25</sup> The travelling preachers established 'circuits'.<sup>26</sup> Circuits in Cornwall were formed as early as 1746 with a circuit in St Ives being formed in 1748. Subsequently Cornwall was divided into two circuits, East and West. Later, after the death of Wesley, various divisions within Methodism formed their own overlapping circuits, which continued in one form or another until the two major acts of unification in 1907 and 1932.

For more than a century there was suspicion of Methodism in Cornwall as in other parts of the country, holding it at arms-length by the supposedly more sophisticated religious commentators. David Hempton demonstrates this in a pertinent quote from 1861 referring to Mark Pattison, distinguished rector of Lincoln College, John Wesley's own college. He wrote in *Essays and reviews* (1861) a booklet of some eighty pages entitled *Tendencies of Religious Thought in England 1688-1750*, without mentioning Wesley's name, in fact Methodism itself is referred to as 'somewhere near the opposite pole of reasonable religion'.<sup>27</sup> It is true that even within the Methodist 'establishment' there was hesitancy regarding the revival phenomenon seen in Cornwall. The correspondence of Jabez Bunting (1779-1858) who 'ruled the connexion with an iron hand is full of complaints about Cornish enthusiasm'.<sup>28</sup> But none of this gives an answer to the question as to why Methodism found such fertile soil in Cornwall.

From the middle of the 18th century West Cornwall Methodism became the dominant body of Christians in the region. One particular reason for this is, as J.G. Rule argues, 'Methodism, with its special stress on providential interventions, was particularly suited to supplement and in some degree to replace the pre-Christian superstitions previously favoured'.<sup>29</sup> Despite some continuing interest in Cornish Druids, revivals of the Cornish language, Old Cornish Societies and the like, Hamilton Jenkins is probably

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<sup>25</sup> Susan R. Howdle, "Conference," in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A Vickers (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>26</sup> John H. Lenton, "Circuits" in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A Vickers (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 68.

<sup>27</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> John G. Rule, "The Labouring Miner in Cornwall, c. 1740-1870" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1971), 240-60.



correct when he writes of the ancient Cornish, that `the average Cornishman of today knows little and cares less'<sup>30</sup> about such things.

### **Wesley and West Cornwall**

It is surprising that the story of Methodist roots in West Cornwall began in parallel with London, if not slightly before. Reports of `societies' reached London causing John and Charles Wesley (1707-88) to visit West Cornwall frequently. John Wesley records one such visit: `They took me into their fellowship and not I them.'<sup>31</sup> Those under his personal superintendence were known as United Societies, and it became Wesley's purpose to build these Societies. The St Ives Society was adopted into Methodism and became the first in Cornwall.<sup>32</sup>

Methodism spread west from St Ives towards Land's End from around 1743. Further east, Camborne was visited by Wesley in 1744, and Redruth from Feb 1747, although there may have been previous meetings. But these large towns were not quick or easy to accept the gospel preached by Wesley.<sup>33</sup> In 1765 John Wesley said at the quarterly Meeting in Redruth that `the flame kindled last year, though abated has not been extinguished.'<sup>34</sup> It has been suggested that the older established areas, as against the new mining communities, were less responsive or even hostile to Wesley's message and that he delayed his visits to them. The evidence seems to suggest that some were often suspicious on the occasions of the evangelist's early appearances. But when no longer suspect in any political sense, John and his brother Charles were left alone.<sup>35</sup>

In each place John Wesley understood his work to be complementary to the established church, and sought to avoid places where the incumbent was perceived to be an evangelical.<sup>36</sup> Even so, the evangelical clergyman Samuel Walker of Truro instructed members of the Church of England to keep close to the discipline of mother Church.<sup>37</sup> At first Wesley seems to have avoided founding societies in the parishes of

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<sup>30</sup> A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, *Cornwall and its Peoples* (London: David and Charles, 1983), 314.

<sup>31</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> John C. C. Probert, *The Sociology of Cornish Methodism to the Present Day* (Redruth: Cornish Methodist Historical Association, 1971), 19.

<sup>34</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1982), 31.

<sup>37</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, chapter 1.

Thompson and Barret who had been converted, but not under the ministries of the Wesleys.<sup>38</sup> John Wesley went where the need seemed greatest, and to where he received the best reception. This was particularly the new mining areas.<sup>39</sup>

Those affected by Wesley's preaching varied from place to place. Obviously, miners were the dominant class, yet both the poor and the prosperous get frequent mention.<sup>40</sup> John Wesley visited West Cornwall thirty-two times.<sup>41</sup>

### **West Cornwall Distinctives**

Blanket terms such as 'Cornish Methodism' are inadequate in describing both the geography and the atmosphere of the East and West of the county. It is rightly said:

In the east, because of the relative lateness of widespread evangelism, Methodist development owed far more to connexional direction and initiative, through circuit organisation and pastoral oversight, than was the case in the west. This had significant effects on the form and ethos of Methodism in the locality.<sup>42</sup>

This is markedly true even today.

In writing of the formation of circuits in Cornwall Tom Shaw, in his *A history of Cornish Methodism* records:

Cornwall formed a single circuit from 1743-64, and at the latter date was divided into Cornwall East, centred on St Austell and Cornwall West, centred on Redruth, and St Ives. Those circuits too divided in 1785 forming new circuits growing out of Redruth and St Ives. Changes were not just for administration but for the reason of numerical growth . . . In 1791 the St Ives Circuit was called Penzance and in 1794 included the Isles of Scilly.<sup>43</sup>

As will be seen later, after the death of John Wesley, with new branches of Methodism being formed, it meant that circuits needed to be named by their respective distinctive titles. The largest, obviously, were the continuing Wesleyan Methodists.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), 222.

<sup>39</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 22-23.

<sup>40</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 22-23.

<sup>41</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> David Luker, "Cornish Methodism, Revivalism and Popular Belief, c1780-1870" (D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1987), 281.

<sup>43</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> The other new groupings will be tabulated and discussed later.

The St Ives Methodist Local Preachers' Plan, January 23rd. 1791, mentions 11 churches including Helston, Marazion, Hayle and St Just which, without modern transport, was a vast area.<sup>45</sup> The following 50 years saw circuits formed in Redruth, Illogan and Camborne. In 1834 the St Ives Wesleyan Circuit was reconstituted with Hayle.

The Bible Christians were formed on the 1st October 1815 and initially shared connexion across the Devon border. Bible Christians were a significant part of the West Cornwall Methodist story. They formed circuits in St Ives and Redruth in 1852, and at Camborne in 1865. In `September 1907 the Bible Christians, Free Methodists, and New Connexion,' all represented in Cornwall were `merged into the United Methodist Church.'<sup>46</sup> Other minor Methodist expressions can be tabulated.

The Primitive Methodists had a circuit in Redruth by 1828 and another in St Ives in 1834. In Cornwall they never became as numerically strong as elsewhere because of their similarity in theology and practice to the Bible Christians, who had already been established.

There were several other denominations who featured in the West Cornwall Methodist story including the Methodist New Connexion, the Wesleyan Reform Union, Wesleyan Methodist Association, and the Teetotal Methodists. The latter were formed in desperately unhappy circumstances at St Ives in 1841, closely followed by the Hayle Teetotal Methodists in 1842. Subsequently they joined with the Methodist New Connexion. Later, in 1876, came a small circuit of Wesleyan Reform Churches.<sup>47</sup>

But a bald statement by Shaw as to the formation of West Cornwall circuits does little to indicate that a different `atmosphere' pervaded than elsewhere in the East of Cornwall or perhaps Methodism as a whole.

In the West . . . popular support for Methodism had increased rapidly in the 1780s & 1790s before adequate connexional structures had been laid down, and in subsequent Methodist development in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>45</sup> For an exhaustive listing of the circuits, including year of being established, number of chapels in each and membership figures see John C. C. Probert, *The Sociology of Cornish Methodism to the Present Day* (Redruth: Cornish Methodist Historical Association, 1971).

<sup>46</sup> Robert Currie, *Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenicalism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 247.

<sup>47</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 87.

a strong native impulse was at work, often directly at odds with connexion . . . in sharp contrast with the situation in the east.<sup>48</sup>

Herman Merivale is correct, even if overstated, when he writes of the West Cornish that they were:

considerably self-opinionated . . . the thorough Cornishman's respect for his own shrewdness and that of his clan is unbounded, or only equalled by his profound contempt for "foreigners" from the east . . . this feeling increases ludicrously in intensity as we advance further west.<sup>49</sup>

M.S. Edwards writes that the geographical remoteness bred an independent spirit that became a feature of West Cornish Methodism itself, as illustrated in the correspondence of John Wesley:

When John Wesley visited Cornwall in 1760 . . . he found . . . all things are out of order. In 1765 he wrote to Thomas Rankin `I advise you to remove all such leaders and stewards as do not cordially love the Methodist doctrine and discipline.<sup>50</sup>

Such attitudes as recorded here are to be discovered throughout this thesis.

### **Cornish Spirituality**

To define latent West Cornish spirituality is not so much difficult as impossible. Surprisingly, despite the strong Celtic legacy, coupled to a remote geography, there would appear to be very little occult interest amongst the indigenous population of West Cornwall today and for that Methodism had a part to play, for the coming of Wesley confirmed a trend already in progress. An academic and then a social historian makes complementary yet important statements to confirm this opinion. John Luker says:

. . . The symbiotic relationship between Methodism and popular belief was closer than has generally been recognised, and that Methodism actually helped to fortify Cornish identity in an age of change and perpetuated its own brand of revivalistic religion well into the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst Hamilton Jenkin writes:

It is a curious fact, however, that whilst the influence of Methodism never eradicated the `superstition of the Cornish people, yet the latter by their own

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<sup>48</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> Herman Merivale, 'Cornwall', *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 102 (1857), 316.

<sup>50</sup> *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), iv. 104 in M. S. Edwards, "Cornish Methodism: A Study in Division, 1814-1857" (D.Min. diss., University of Birmingham, 1962), 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> Luker, "Cornish Methodism", 228.

act of leaving their native language and taking to English a century before the coming of Wesley, had suffered almost the entire loss of their *older* Celtic folklore.<sup>52</sup>

Today the Cornish occult centre is Boscastle which is in North Cornwall and is directed at the tourists from 'up country'. If there is any indigenous spiritual sensitivity or memory amongst the Cornish population, it could be argued to be the last remnant of Methodism's days of size and influence. There are indications of this. It has something to do with the high attendance at funerals in church, the religious gloss to local traditions such as St Piran's day, celebrating Cornwall's patron saint. What is not certain is whether they are a sentimental, latent spirituality, or a cultural memory - or all three. In the village of Lanner, two miles from Redruth, with a population of 2,500 and a total Sunday church attendance of less than thirty, the local pub each Christmas has an elaborate Nativity display built over the door, with a large sign saying 'No room at the Inn.' It is not clear if this is a joke or wistfulness from times past. Rather, as in Wales, that also has a revival tradition, hymns are sung in pub singalongs.

As against the pressures of mass emigration in the second half of the nineteenth century, the delightful geography has brought a new population. Many communities are made up of second-home owners who are little interested in the indigenous community. And certainly, they are not interested in the Methodist chapels which to them, perhaps puzzlingly, appear almost everywhere. Such 'interlopers' are still described as 'rich foreigners' in the writer's hearing.

### **Wesley's Heritage**

Methodist churches are not independent, as against some other nonconformist denominations. They are legally joined as a 'connexion' into circuits, connexion being a synonym for the denomination as a whole. And if this has something of the feel of the Anglican parish, that is not accidental. Owen Chadwick, writing of a conundrum bequeathed by John Wesley, explains something of the complex attitude to the Church of England that Methodists experienced until well after his death. He writes that 'Wesley bequeathed the puzzle of his attitude.' He continues, 'Wesley did not want to separate, whilst his acts led towards separation.'<sup>53</sup> From this, it is not surprising that

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<sup>52</sup> A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, *Cornwall and its Peoples*, (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1970), 255-6.

<sup>53</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Part 1: 1829-1859* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 370.

for many decades `Methodists were not sure whether they were dissenters.<sup>54</sup> Joseph Beaumont, a Methodist minister, captured the feel exactly when he wrote in 1834 `that he was like an oarsman who faced the Church of England, while he rowed steadily away.<sup>55</sup>

It is not surprising that the Anglican structure of synods, diocese, rural deans, and parishes is yet seen in Conference, districts, superintendents, and circuits today. From the beginning there was an obvious need for structure, discipline, unity and particularly pastoring for Wesley's burgeoning congregations. What will become evident, is that some of the later denominational tensions and divisions were caused through the perceived restraints of these structures. The particular bone of contention was Conference which led to several divisions in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, divisions that were to be found in West Cornwall.<sup>56</sup> They are still the cause of recurring tensions locally, as will be seen in the current debate on Marriage and Relationships.<sup>57</sup> So it is that Wesley's ever-pervading heritage will be seen in the present life of the West Cornwall churches. Here in a few sentences is the theme of this thesis – Methodism in one prescribed area of West Cornwall, that has been chosen primarily for succinctness, focus and significance.<sup>58</sup>

## Early Growth

Methodism in Cornwall did not take place in a spiritual vacuum, or to quote Luker `the history of Methodism in Cornwall did not begin on a blank piece of paper.<sup>59</sup> He continues:

A recent student of Cornish Methodism has suggested . . . that the symbiotic relationship between Methodist and popular belief was closer than has generally been recognised, and that Methodism actually helped to fortify Cornish identity in an age of change and perpetrated its own brand of revivalistic popular religion well into the nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 370.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Beaumont, quoted in Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 370.

<sup>56</sup> Both the Bible Christians and Primitives would argue that at their inception there had been difficulties with what they would have considered to be inflexibility within Methodist structures.

<sup>57</sup> The Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us: The Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group 2019 For Study and Prayerful Discussion* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2019), table 5.3.1.

<sup>58</sup> As well as my personal involvement as a Presbyterian in the area.

<sup>59</sup> Luker, "Cornish Methodism", 228.

<sup>60</sup> Luker, "Cornish Methodism", 288.

Owen Davies has argued that in Cornwall ‘there was a gap between popular religion and the institution of the church.’<sup>61</sup> But this popular religion was still a factor. Something of this can be understood when Bernard Deacon writes of 10,000 hearing Wesley preach at Gwennap Pit.<sup>62</sup> This figure is roughly one tenth of the Cornish population at that time and is without doubt hyperbole! Yet certainly a great crowd gathered, and by no means all drawn from committed Methodists. The importance of ‘religion’ in Cornwall, as elsewhere, is described by David Hempton:

Because the secular and the sacred were intertwined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the theme of national, regional and urban identities cannot be properly investigated without reference to religion.<sup>63</sup>

This statement is particularly true of Cornwall during the same timescale. But this is not to totally agree with Francis Truscott who, perhaps seeking to impress his denominational head, wrote that in the 1740s Cornwall ‘needed to be humanised as well as evangelised; it was a dark place of the earth, filled with habitations of cruelty.’<sup>64</sup> And neither with Richard Warner who writes that, without Wesleyan Methodists, ‘a large body of men . . . would still have been immersed in the deepest spiritual darkness, and grossest moral turpitude.’<sup>65</sup> Balance is brought by John Turner. He says John Wesley ‘was able in a remarkable way to bridge the gulf between the Age of Reason and the “folk religion” of the poor.’<sup>66</sup> ‘Folk religion’ and the presence of the Anglican Church were major reasons why thousands of non-Methodists made their way to hear Wesley at Gwennap Pit.

There is still a danger in giving the impression that Methodism became the panacea for every perceived lack in West Cornwall, including spiritual, economic, and social aspects. This is not correct. Bernard Deacon argues that the role of Methodism in reform must be held in balance. He quotes Luker, who demonstrates that things from popular culture such as smuggling continued. He says that ‘social-cultural custom and

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<sup>61</sup> Owen Davies, “Methodism, The Clergy and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic” in *Cornwall: A Concise History*, ed. Bernard Deacon, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 111.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Deacon, *Cornwall: A Concise History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>63</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Francis Truscott, “A letter to the Rev. Jabez Bunting”, in Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 215.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Warner, “A Tour through Cornwall in the Autumn of 1808”, *London Methodist Magazine*, no.33 (1810): 39-40.

<sup>66</sup> John Munsey Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1998* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998), 2.

behaviour showed a remarkable degree of continuity' into the early 1800s.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the rate of Methodist growth and influence was impressive.

Speaking of the rate of numerical increase, particularly in the industrial counties including Cornwall, Maldwyn Edwards says Wesley was 'going not only to those who wanted him, but to those who wanted him the most.'<sup>68</sup> He continues:

Most (conversions) occurred during teenage years, most betray some sense of deep psychological distress: most betray some or implicit fear of death; many seem to have taken place in communities experiencing rapid change or an unusual degree of social dislocation; and most converts had some pre-existing religious knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

One feels that Edwards is far too negative in the opening sentence. It is balanced by 'most converts had some pre-existing religious knowledge', for this is testified to by Edwards himself. The C of E and other religious 'societies,' which Shaw argues were more numerous than recorded, were taking place before the arrival of the Wesleys.<sup>70</sup> Revival did not take place in a vacuum.

Certainly, there have been historians who have been sceptical if not hostile to the whole revival melodrama. The Cornishman E.P. Thompson regarded the violent recasting of personalities under the 'promiscuous opportunism of Methodist theology' as one of the most unpleasant features of the English industrial revolution. He continues:

the uncertainty principle in the salvation theology of Arminian Methodist combined with a psychic compulsion to adapt to a new economic environment produced a manic spirituality driven by fear . . . both spiritual and a craven acquiescence in the work discipline of industrial capitalism.<sup>71</sup>

This view is at least modified by the Bible Christians who were initially to be found mainly in rural North Devon and East Cornwall which could not be described as 'industrial.'

## **Methodist Structures**

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<sup>67</sup> Luker, "Cornish Methodism", 216.

<sup>68</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, "John Wesley" in Rupert E. Davies, A. Raymond George and E. Gordon Rupp, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 59-63.

<sup>69</sup> Edwards, "John Wesley", 63.

<sup>70</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 14.

<sup>71</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 418-20.



In a brief overview of the history of Methodism, the development of the various key structures needs to be mentioned. Both then and now, these various structures form part of the whole and are intrinsic to this thesis. Here, along with a short description of the various parts that constitute Methodism, there will be given a preliminary indication of where the points of tension are to be found for *some* West Cornish Methodists.

The Methodist understanding of the nature of the Church is set out in two official statements, *The Nature of the Christian Church (1937)* and *Called to Love and Praise (1999)*. They create the procedural norms for the maintenance of the church as recorded in the two volume *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*<sup>72</sup>. And one of the most fundamental of these is Conference.

### Conference

Susan Howdle says Conference 'is the church's supreme legislative body.'<sup>73</sup> Beginning in 1744, under John Wesley, it was developed in 1784 by the Deed of Declaration which was enrolled in Chancery on 9 March 1784.<sup>74</sup> The purpose was to handle the future of the connexion, on the death of John Wesley. The Deed 'clearly defines the identity, constitution and powers of the Conference of the People called Methodists.'<sup>75</sup> It 'laid down rules for the annual meetings, procedure, records and officers of the Conference.'<sup>76</sup> Yet it was this very constitution and the role of Conference that led, in large part, to tensions leading to the breakaway denominations and is still causing tension today. Paradoxically, each breakaway formed a Conference, as being fundamental to their structure.<sup>77</sup> As for Wesley, whether a new Methodist denomination was his purpose is not clear. What is obvious is that the splintering of Methodism was not his intention but was probably inevitable.

What does seem to be clear was that Wesley adopted and evolved a certain theological approach so as to establish a 'distinct theology' for Methodism. Central was Armenianism and this became a feature of Methodism by whatever name, with

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<sup>72</sup> *The Methodist Church: The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, vols. 1 & 2 (2019).

<sup>73</sup> Howdle, "Conference", 75-76.

<sup>74</sup> Susan R. Howdle, "Deed of Union," in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A Vickers (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>75</sup> Howdle, "Deed of Union", 92.

<sup>76</sup> Howdle, "Deed of Union", 92.

<sup>77</sup> See chapter two.

the exception of Wales. Wales became largely Calvinistic and despite its name, 'Calvinistic Methodist'<sup>78</sup> became in essence the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

The juxtaposition between polity and doctrine can be demonstrated from two handbooks dating from different times and denominational sources. The *Ecclesiastical Principles and Polity of the Wesleyan Methodists* of 1868 sets out an exhaustive description of the legal status and procedure for Conference.<sup>79</sup> Yet in an exhaustive index including 'a prohibition on the taking of snuff,' there is no section entitled 'doctrine.' That seems to be presumed.

The *Free Methodist Handbook* of 1887 describes its position on both structure and theology. As to structure, changes are introduced in the ever-contentious area of Conference, yet theology remains exactly the same. As to Conference, described as a 'fundamental principle' of the Free Methodists it says, as against the Wesleyans, they have 'freedom in the choice of representatives to an Annual Assembly (that) has only four *ex officio* members.'<sup>80</sup> The other fundamental principle is circuit independence.<sup>81</sup> But as to doctrine, it declares that Free Methodists 'concur in those sentiments generally taught in the theological writing of the Rev. John Wesley',<sup>82</sup> namely Armenianism.

Hugh McLeod is rather sceptical about the changes, both great and small, engendered by the various strands of Methodism. He says:

. . . the division of Methodism was a small reformation. Theological, social and organisational conflicts created, on the one side, the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, a massive ecclesiastical organisation which friend and foe, Protestant and Catholic alike, have often compared to Roman Catholicism: and on the other, a dozen or more denominations more or less in opposition to Wesleyanism . . . On both sides, great ideas faded into organisational realities. Methodism, reformed and Wesleyan, was to decline into comfortable chapel life . . . At Conference, the great ideas were still paraded to vindicate the divisions of Methodism. But these divisions themselves, and later indifference

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<sup>78</sup> Is this an oxymoron?

<sup>79</sup> William Peirce, *Ecclesiastical Principles and Polity of the Wesleyan Methodists* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co, 1868), 27- 34.

<sup>80</sup> Note that this will be changed subsequently at the 1907 unity initiative. so perhaps not quite so 'fundamental'.

<sup>81</sup> W. Boyde and E. Askew, *Handbook of the United Free Churches* (London: Andrew Crombie, 1887), 6.

<sup>82</sup> Boyde and Askew, *Handbook*, 4.

to the great ideas sustained them, were to bring Methodism into its ecumenical stage.<sup>83</sup>

The outcome, he argues, was the inevitable search for unity which will be examined later.

Subsequently, there were changes in the different strands of Methodism as to Conference. Such matters as to who could attend Conference were debated. But its place, importance and power were still not in doubt. For the Wesleyan Methodists the record of the annual Conference was published in the 'Journal of the Conference' with the Minutes of Conference published subsequently.<sup>84</sup> Conference will feature in all the subsequent chapters.

### Connexion

Through John Wesley's desire to keep in contact with his preachers, societies and members he maintained a 'connexion'. In time the term became equivalent to 'denomination', and subsequently 'Church.' Surprisingly, it was not until 1891 that this was officially endorsed by Conference.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless 'interdependence' was foundational, over against other denominations such as the Baptists who were and are independent congregations in 'association' with each other.<sup>86</sup> Significantly, all the new Methodist denominations, in one way or another, continued the principle and practice of connexion. The *Dictionary of Methodism* writes concerning connexion's importance and 'catholicity' among all branches of the church as having 'continued over time and is yet seen as fundamental.'<sup>87</sup> Methodism is described as a '... structural expression at all levels of church life of essential interdependence, through fellowship, consultation, government and oversight.'<sup>88</sup> It is 'connexion' that has become a point of concern for some, to be discussed later.<sup>89</sup> Connexion as fellowship or even interdependence are things to be valued. But when Conference initiates something

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<sup>83</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> Susan R. Howdle, "Connexionalism," in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A Vickers (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>85</sup> Howdle, "Connexionalism", 75.

<sup>86</sup> Howdle, "Connexionalism", 75.

<sup>87</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 77.

<sup>88</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Chapters 5-7.

considered fundamentally wrong by many West Cornwall Methodists, it then becomes a serious problem.

### **Circuits**

R.E Davies, writing of circuits, states `Wesley realised that the society provided a framework for his rapidly expanding enterprise, beginning as a network of "United Societies."<sup>90</sup> Nationally, seven circuits or preaching "rounds" were formed. Each had an itinerant preacher or `assistant' to look after the circuit in the absence of John Wesley. The itinerants travelled a monthly or six-weekly circuit around all the societies, with only an occasional return to the central circuit town. By about 1753 Quarterly Meetings consisting of all the circuit and society stewards, and preachers - local and itinerant - were being held. The Circuit Stewards kept the accounts and paid the preachers. At the 1791 Conference circuits were grouped into Districts under a Chairman, to provide the oversight Wesley had delegated. The circuit system enabled strong societies to support the weak and for preachers to meet new mission opportunities as invitations occurred.

K.S. Inglis provides further details as to the structure and purpose of Methodist circuits. Firstly, he stresses their purpose as being `pastoral and evangelistic.,<sup>91</sup> the latter still being maintained in West Cornwall by the District Chairman Stephen Wild who is a gifted evangelist. Another matter that Inglis highlights is that the circuit enabled local preachers to officiate when the minister was unavailable. This is yet a central part of circuit responsibility. As then, one important task of the superintendent minister is to draw up the circuit plan so as each chapel to ensure that the ordained preacher visits each of the congregations to conduct communion services as often as possible.<sup>92</sup>

### **The Development of Circuits**

It has been demonstrated that circuits were a feature of each new Methodist expression. In each circuit the travelling preachers were assisted by local preachers, laymen (and later lay people) who were engaged in secular employment during the week, but who conducted services without remuneration on Sundays. The chief

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<sup>90</sup> Davies, *A History*, 325.

<sup>91</sup> K.S Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Press, 1964), 89.

<sup>92</sup> Inglis, *Working Classes*, 89.

financial officers of the circuit were the two circuit stewards, who received the monies contributed by the societies and paid the itinerants their quarterly allowance. In each society there were class leaders who had the pastoral oversight of the members committed to their charge, as well as society stewards who looked after local finances. The circuit and society officers met with the itinerant preachers for a Quarterly Meeting, presided over by the 'assistant' – the senior itinerant preacher – who himself was directly responsible to John Wesley<sup>93</sup> whilst he was still alive. The Wesleyan Methodists ordained the travellers in 1836. After Wesley's death, assistants became superintendent ministers and class lists became membership roles by the end of the century. Robert Currie writes that 'The assistant alone admitted members by administering a quarterly class ticket, the passport to chapel life.'<sup>94</sup>

Subsequently, as it will be demonstrated, the Class Meeting had a vitally important role to play. Its demise left a vacuum that contributed to weak pastoral care.

The number of circuits grew rapidly through duplication, being caused by the formation of parallel circuits in the new Methodist denominations. These were only partially rationalised through unification at the two major acts of union, in 1907 and in 1932. When Tom Shaw wrote his history in 1967 there were 26 circuits in Cornwall. Today there are fifteen with Fore Street, St Ives, consisting of only one church.

### **The Value of Circuits**

The question can be asked if the dichotomy between Methodism's heavy structure and the local church mitigated against spiritual vitality. The question is partly answered by Robert Currie in his important book *Methodism Divided*. He draws attention to Wesley's Questions published as a compendium of Conference Minutes from 1744-1753. Question 23 of the *Large Minutes* asked, 'What is the office of a Christian minister?' to which the answer was 'To watch over souls as he must give an account.'<sup>95</sup> There are not many more important things than that in any church.

The Superintendent Minister in each circuit was responsible for making the preaching plan, for chairing circuit committees, including the Quarterly Meeting, and for the

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<sup>93</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 75.

<sup>95</sup> Susan R. Howdle, "Large Minutes," in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A Vickers (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 197.

exercise of pastoral discipline. The Superintendents ensured that ministers were appointed to, and later invited by, the circuit who made payment of their stipends. This was not the responsibility of the churches.<sup>96</sup> It will be argued that some of these continuing structures have brought tensions.

The death of John Wesley brought about inevitable change. In 1795 there came the permission to have the sacrament celebrated by authorised persons and to hold services at a time when the established church was holding services.<sup>97</sup> This 1795 decision, in effect, recognised that Methodists were a denomination separated from the Established Church. Chadwick reports that as late as 1870 there were those who did not hold services at the same time as the parish church.<sup>98</sup> Most Cornish Methodists continued to be married and buried in the parish church, whilst some worshiped with the Anglicans in the morning and at a Methodist service in the evening.<sup>99</sup>

### **Class Meeting**

It is not to be imagined in a discussion of early structures within Methodism that the individual member or adherent was ignored or merely assimilated into the system. Another fundamental part of Methodism as envisaged by John Wesley was the Class Meeting. This was a visionary concept, predating by many years what wrongly might today be called 'House Groups'. It was the need for pastoral care that was clearly seen by Wesley in the introduction of the Class Meeting. Howard Snyder falls into the trap of the obvious in his *The Radical Wesley*<sup>100</sup> quoting Richard Lovelace who says:

It is startling that a strategy (Class Meetings) as obvious and effective as small groups could be discovered and widely used in recent history and then apparently lost until its modern rediscovery in popular religious movements.<sup>101</sup>

This misunderstanding to equate the Class Meeting with House Groups, or such movements as Alpha is wrong. The purpose and function of the Methodist Class Meeting was rather different as tabulated below, not just pastoral. Sadly, its strengths proved to be a weakness as tabulated by Howard Snyder who writes:

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<sup>96</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 68.

<sup>97</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 370.

<sup>98</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 370.

<sup>99</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 370.

<sup>100</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 149.

<sup>101</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 427.

The rise of the stationed pastor who gradually took over the pastoral function of the class leader: the growing sophistication and prosperity of Methodists: the loss of holiness expectations: revivalism which undermined the perception of continuing spiritual growth, and the tendency to allow classes to grow too large.<sup>102</sup>

The gradual demise of the Class Meeting caused gaps in the pastoral system including pastoral care, consecutive teaching and the recognition and developing of gifting. All of these were made possible by the Class Meeting. So, what was the Class Meeting, and what was it attempting to accomplish?

Andrew Goodhead, in a MPhil/PhD research proposal<sup>103</sup> on the Methodist Class Meeting, asks several important questions and his succinct replies are paraphrased here. What he describes can only be understood as an ideal, not typical of every Class.

To the question 'What was a Class'? Goodhead replies that it was a group who met together thereby forming the membership of the local church. Each made a regular payment or 'subscription' for a card which indicated membership of a Methodist Church. Ideally such classes were made up of those of similar Christian experience. At these weekday meetings the lay leader would seek to build the faith and give a sense of 'belonging' to the members. They sought to meet the need for fellowship, Bible instruction, mutual support and discipline. As to the theology of the group Goodhead describes it as Arminian, thereby reflecting its Wesleyan and Methodist doctrinal position. As would be expected the emphasis was on holiness, seen as repentance, justification, sanctification and perfection. The latter two were particularly, if not uniquely, Methodist doctrinal emphases, and being rooted in a particular community where there was knowledge of its needs and opportunities. To this extent Goodhead argues that the meeting was socially aware.<sup>104</sup>

The Class Meeting had mostly died out by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Goodhead seeks to answer the complex question of why. He suggests that the rise of middle-class sensitivities revealed dislike of corporate spiritual vulnerability. People did not want to talk openly of their own spiritual journey with its triumphs and failures.

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<sup>102</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 175.

<sup>103</sup> Andrew Goodhead, "From Class to Cell – On the Methodist Class Meeting" (M.Phil./PhD research proposal, Sheffield University).

<sup>104</sup> Goodhead, "From Class to Cell".

Class Meetings were replaced by the sort of church programmes known prior to Covid-19. These included such as Women's and Men's meetings, Youth activities and Sunday Schools. None of these were exclusively spiritual, and included lectures, drama and a host of activities. The demise of the Class Meeting easily lead to a loss of the pastoral oversight and care which it had previously provided, or was meant to, in accordance with Wesley's vision.

### **Statistics and Finance**

It is John Wesley's structured mind-set, worked out in connexion and circuits, that finds expression in the meticulous keeping of statistics. This phenomenon has been noted by many, not always positively. Hugh McLeod infers that this characteristic stemmed from a lack of self-confidence on the part of Methodism. He writes in *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City*:

Methodism fascinated by statistics, and aware of itself as a very recent and dynamic phenomenon in English Christianity expressed its arrivism (sic) in a cult of size. Methodists contemplated their membership returns with the pleasure that a successful business might derive from his sales graph.<sup>105</sup>

This feature of Methodism not only records membership figures but overlaps into money. Finance might appear to be an irrelevance to a thesis of this kind, but in fact it is of some considerable importance. As has been indicated above, it is finance and the Assessment system that form two of the major areas of frustration and tension today in West Cornwall Methodism.

As to statistics, it is the numerical decline, so minutely and painfully recorded, and is readily admitted by the denomination, that will be one of the features traced throughout the thesis. And, as will be seen, for this there are many, sometimes conflicting, reasons given. There is a valuable discussion of Methodist statistics in Currie's *Methodism Divided*.<sup>106</sup> Some of the conclusions he draws are debatable. For instance, while justifiably scornful of Methodist passion for numbers, Currie is himself prepared, with

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<sup>105</sup> Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Epworth Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>106</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 85.



a minimum of argument, to equate falling membership totals with 'the decline of Christianity.'<sup>107</sup> What Currie means is not clear. In the later chapters it will be demonstrated that secularisation might indeed entail loss of members but is but one factor amongst many. Whatever, Methodism has a particular problem in regard to numerical decline.

John Probert in his exhaustive *The Sociology of Cornish Methodism* says in his preface that 'we are probably the most statistically-minded church, with our vast collection of schedules, which provided an amazing amount of source material which we use but little.'<sup>108</sup> One disagrees with Probert in one regard. Figures of membership and finance, rather than only being sparsely used, seem to be a constant source of reference, and dominate fiscal considerations in the national and local church. It will be argued that this causes inflexibility, in that finance and its demands on the churches exercise a continuing pressure, thereby causing disquiet. This is now highlighted by many churches being shut through Covid, with the concern of the recovery of congregations.

A brief overview from *A Dictionary of Methodism* explains how finances were organised at the beginning and have, in the main, continued unchanged. At the beginning there was no set pattern for the raising and handling of monies, though in time the Class Ticket became a source of revenue. Preachers were supported by gifts of money or kind and sometimes a distribution from Love Feast collections. Taking a collection at services was a later development becoming the main income source, followed by pew rents and giving at Chapel and Sunday School Anniversaries. Envelope schemes were introduced by 1932 and standing orders came later.<sup>109</sup>

Today each circuit makes an assessment to be shared out for expenditure. This is based on each church's membership numbers, attendees and, in theory, each church's ability to pay. It pays for ministerial stipends, local costs, provision of manses as well as District and Connexion requirements.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 178-85.

<sup>108</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism*, 120-1.

<sup>110</sup> Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism*, 69.

It is the *Dictionary of Methodism* itself which is brave enough to state that membership assessment is a disincentive to enrol new members.<sup>111</sup> In the writer's experience some who attend Methodist churches do so for reasons other than the name over the door. They feel little or no sense of responsibility for national Methodism as a denomination and give to other Christian causes or for projects within their local church. This leads inevitably to an increased burden on those who feel committed to meet the circuits' financial requirements.

The numbers attending Methodist churches in this prescribed area of Cornwall are of keen interest. Figures of early growth in Redruth and Camborne, by far the most populous area, can be seen in the following statistics and are not without significance:

West Cornwall Membership Returns from the Camborne/Redruth Area 1774-1796-1799

Gwennap 1774. 146 with a jump between 1796-1799 from 212 to 242

Redruth 1774. 128 with a sizable increase between 1796-1799 from 262 to 342

Camborne 1774. 78 growing to 142 in 1799

Illogan and Tuckingmill 1774 with a huge jump from 1794 of 120 to 414<sup>112</sup>

These figures draw two almost contradictory pieces of information. Firstly, the sizeable increase seen at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicates the first waves of revival. And secondly, the numbers are not as large as one would imagine in this densely populated mining area, even after much talk of revival.

### **The Dichotomy Between Rigid Structure and Spiritual Spontaneity**

Throughout this thesis it will be debated whether 'denomination' and its demands are a hindrance to spiritual experience and spontaneity. Alec Ryrie, in his book *Protestants*, establishes well the Methodist dichotomy when he writes that 'None of these elements of "this Methodism" were new, but Wesley combined them into a

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<sup>111</sup> Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism*, 120.

<sup>112</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 10.

formidable alloy of *heartfelt* (italics mine) spontaneity and rigorous order.<sup>113</sup> Though not writing specifically of Cornish Methodism, in one sentence Ryrie uses two significant words, namely 'heartfelt' and 'rigorous' thereby describing the white-heat of revival. Perhaps today something of the 'heartfelt' has been lost. The financial demands made on Methodist members are as rigorous as ever.

Dialectical tensions, so much a feature of the early years in West Cornwall, are of great significance. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century frustration was revealed regarding the tight rules of Wesleyan Methodism and as will be seen are still evident in West Cornwall today. This can be illustrated from both history and the present. In Redruth, at the centre of the geography in the early part of this thesis, there was a move towards democracy from the beginning. Tom Shaw quotes a letter of John Wesley from near the end of his life. Wesley's complaint was that some of the members 'were apt to despise and very willing to govern their preachers'.<sup>114</sup> Shaw continues:

It was perhaps not a coincidence that it was at Redruth, that at a meeting of lay leaders from the Cornish Societies was hastily convened within a few weeks of Wesley's death. At this a series of resolutions, beginning with a demand that class leaders and society stewards should be elected by the local members and not appointed by the ministerial agents of the conference, were adopted. Basically, the question at issue was whether Methodism was to be governed ministerially or democratically.<sup>115</sup>

Central Methodist governance is still an issue with some churches. This has been illustrated recently by Angarrack Methodist Church in West Cornwall being moved in 2018 from one circuit to another against its will, leaving it feeling isolated.<sup>116</sup> For some it is felt that finance is the overriding consideration, rather than long lasting and treasured circuit identification.

The tightness of Methodist structure is seen from the beginning. Perhaps this was partly a response to John Wesley's consciousness of the complexities of his continuing Anglican background contrasted with leading a radical, new and rapidly growing ecclesiastical expression. Kenneth Collins describes the rigidity of Wesley, expressed

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<sup>113</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 173.

<sup>114</sup> Telford, *Letters of John Wesley*, 102.

<sup>115</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Geographically the move made sense. In terms of the local church's sentiment, history and wish it was anything but.

in legal deed and practice, as he sought to protect Methodism into the future. What Collins says is all inclusive, clear and important enough to quote in full:

Though Wesley repeatedly affirmed that he had no desire for Methodism to leave the Church of England, he was realistic enough to prepare for just such a possibility. Indeed, the earlier promulgation of the Deed of Declaration in 1784 must not be viewed simply as the way in which Wesley provided for the institutional structure of Methodism beyond his death. The Deed must also be seen as a structure that could, if necessary, provide order for Methodism independent of the mother church. Indeed, among other things the Deed of Declaration defined the Methodism Conference for the Trust Deeds, established a connexion throughout Britain, appointed a hundred preachers as the legal Conference (thereby providing the basis for future Annual Conferences), and laid down guidelines for the reception of preachers into full connection. With such a structure in place, and if several members of Conference were fully ordained and thereby able to administer the sacraments, the Church of England would hardly be needed. Surely, Wesley must have realised this.<sup>117</sup>

K.S. Inglis's *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* might seem an unlikely place to underline the point when he writes of Methodist circuits. In stating the primary place of circuits in the life and structure of the church he highlights, perhaps unintentionally, one of the recurring problems:

The pastoral and evangelistic organisation of Methodism rested first on the circuit . . . the circuit was a device for distributing the services of a given number of ministers throughout a much greater number of congregations.<sup>118</sup>

This necessary expediency was to have long-term repercussions as will be demonstrated subsequently. Ongoing dichotomy, if not tension, seems to have been built into the Methodist structure from the beginning. John Smith, reviewing David Hempton's book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* says:

Methodism is shown to be a religion that carried the genes of dialectical tension—the tension between enlightenment and enthusiasm, rational calculation and direct inspiration of the spirit, godly discipline and emotional excess, work ethic and ecstatic ritual, female empowerment and submissive domestication, and between the spiritual egalitarianism of the message and the authoritarianism of its ecclesiastical structure.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian – The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>118</sup> Inglis, *Working Classes*, 89.

<sup>119</sup> John T. Smith, "Review of David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*", *The Historian*, vol.68, no. 4 (Winter 2006).

It is this 'dialectical tension' that will be traced throughout the thesis right up to the conclusion, when an effort will be made to see how these inherited tensions might be, not so much addressed or resolved, but mitigated or made more malleable for a positive future.

### **Conclusion: The Historical Legacy**

Prior to the divisions caused in large part from the death of John Wesley and the times of revivals that were to follow, one of the geniuses of John Wesley is demonstrated in that most Methodist structures he initiated are extant today. These structures, with their inevitable parallels with Anglicanism were essential to give shape and identity to the new ecclesiastical expression. In the following chapters the increasingly perceived pressures of these structures will be discussed, for they might be construed and demonstrated as being a straitjacket thereby being a hinderance to spontaneous, fresh expressions of the church that Wesley founded.

## **Chapter 2: West Cornish Methodism Post Wesley Methodist Character, Division, Revival and Growth 1791-1850**

The purpose of this chapter is to build a picture which describes the life and structure of West Cornwall Methodism in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It will tell the story of the divisions that took place in the early decades after the death of John Wesley, and of the rapid numerical growth that nevertheless followed. This growth was encouraged by various revivals that took place. Though by no means unique to West Cornwall, revival is central to the Cornish story with effects that still echo today. A major part of this chapter will ask what these revivals were, what was their value or otherwise, and their legacy for today.

This section is fundamental, not only to explain an idealised memory, but also in the depressing spectacle of the empty or converted chapel buildings that litter nearly every West Cornwall community. And paradoxically, this depressing legacy is not primarily the fruit of revival but its antithesis. This was through the splintering of Methodism into fresh denominational expressions. Yet each employed the ubiquitous Methodist structures of conference, connexion, and circuit. The inevitable duplication that these new Methodist denominations caused will be examined as being relevant for today, thereby demonstrating something of the Cornish mind.

### **The Cornish Character and Society**

David Hempton begins his book *Empire of the Spirit* effectively by quoting from George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Written in 1859 it is set in the time covered by this chapter, but is of particular relevance for painting the Cornish Methodist atmosphere and scene. It is too long to quote in full but is enough to reveal a Cornish perception from a uniquely gifted novelist of the time:

And this blessed gift of venerating love has been given to too many humble craftsmen since the world began, for us to feel any surprise that it should have existed in the soul of a Methodist carpenter half a century ago, while there was yet a lingering after-glow from the time of Wesley and his fellow-labourer fed on the hips and haws of the Cornwall hedges, after exhausting limbs and lungs in carrying a divine message to the poor. . .

It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical jargon – elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters. That would be a pity.<sup>120</sup>

Eliot was anything but a lover of Methodism, yet here, with a degree of empathy, she lays down a pen picture or perhaps a stereotype of Cornish Methodism. But it is to the historians of the time that we must look for an assessment of the Cornish character.

So it is that Fortescue Hitchins and Samuel Drew write:

Among the prevailing propensities of the Cornish, there are some striking features in their character, which seem to arise from their natural courage, and from that proud spirit of independence, which no revolution, either in politics or morals, has hitherto been wholly able to subdue . . . their spirit of independence not only pervades their general actions but it enters into their various views, and incorporates itself, with their conflicting opinions.<sup>121</sup>

This chapter, right up to the last, demonstrates the Cornish propensity for 'various views' and 'conflicting opinions.'

Running through this narrative there are clear pointers to the Cornish mind. There is of course the geographical remoteness, and its parallel feature of the Cornish sense of independence. Eliot's pertinent description is certainly reflected in the events and thinking that formed Methodism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Drew and Hitchins continue by writing that 'a conspicuous feature of the Cornish was warmth and ardour with which they undertake an enterprise, and persevered to its

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<sup>120</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: John Blackwood, 1859) in frontispiece of Hempton, *Empire of the Spirit*.

<sup>121</sup> Fortescue Hitchins and Samuel Drew, *The History of Cornwall* (Helston: William Penaluna, 1824), 710.

prosecution.<sup>122</sup> Another mid-19<sup>th</sup> century historian, Merivale Herman, describing the Methodist scene, writes of what he calls a 'spirit of aggregation' which 'rather finds a vent in camp-meetings, temperance parties and monster tea drinking.' Significantly he continues that this aggregation was 'a tendency to the enthusiastic.'<sup>123</sup> The modern writer Bernard Deacon comments that 'the revivalist aspect of Cornish Methodism was helping to underpin this representation of enthusiastic combination.'<sup>124</sup>

Scholars argue that there was a link between industrialisation and Methodism in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Bernard Deacon makes the point directly in describing the Cornish working class mind. 'Industrialisation produced a way of life structured by Methodism and mining . . . plus an associated identity with a dominant ideology of progress.'<sup>125</sup> A classic illustration of this drive for progress can be given by such as John Harris (1820-1864) who was a Cornish miner, poet and preacher and is to be found in the Dictionary of National Biography. He describes his time when as a thirteen-year-old his father took him underground and what he writes is worth quoting so as to demonstrate the terrors of mining experienced by a sizeable portion of the working men and boys of West Cornwall:

On my first descent into the mine . . . my father went before with a rope fastened to his waist, the other end of which was attached to my travelling self. If my hands and feet slipped from the rounds of the ladder, perhaps my father might catch me, or the sudden jerk might pull us both into the darkness to be bruised to death on the rocks. Sometimes, with the candle stuck to my hat-crown I could not see from side to side. The descent was over sixty or seventy ladders to a depth of 200 fathoms or 1,200 feet.

His first education was received at Troon Wesleyan Sunday School, becoming a renowned poet and author, winning the international Shakespeare Tercentenary Prize in 1864.<sup>126</sup>

Yet it could also be argued that Methodism had a negative influence on the personal academic wellbeing of its adherents. Deacon draws attention to the absence of dissenters from the various cultural and academic societies. He quotes Denise Crook who concludes that 'only a small proportion of the membership of the Royal Cornwall

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<sup>122</sup> Hitchins, *The History of Cornwall*, 710.

<sup>123</sup> Merivale, "Cornwall", 289.

<sup>124</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 50.

<sup>125</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 85.

<sup>126</sup> Paul Langford and Tony Langford, "Cornish Methodist Historical Association", vol. 12, issue 5 (2019): 3.



Geological Society belonged to one of the dissenting groups, and none of the clergy<sup>127</sup> Deacon continues that Crook could only identify with confidence four Methodists from among the original membership.<sup>128</sup> And it must be remembered that Methodists and their circle were a large proportion of the Cornish population. Subsequently, Deacon offers a balanced explanation for this lack of Methodist participation in the various intellectual societies. He argues that the `Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, and its various offshoots, (was) an institution that had a more pervasive effect upon the lives of local communities than the county literary institutions or their small-town imitators.'<sup>129</sup>

### **Relationship with the Church of England**

Relationships with the Church of England were maintained in some places throughout the first half of the Nineteenth Century with a rare personal account from a Methodist layman, John Boaden who was Mayor of Hayle. He writes of his father from 1814 speaking of the dichotomy of worship attendance:

. . . but for many years . . . no Methodist service was held in Church service hours, and all the Methodists and their families went to Church. . . . Members attended the classes (Class Meeting) with great regularity; to be absent two weeks in succession would demand a visit from the leader; the little preaching places of a week-night preaching service would be crammed full.<sup>130</sup>

He then continues to remember his own experience, from some 28 years later, demonstrating that there was still obviously care taken not to overlap with the Parish Church:

In 1842 there was no public service at the Garras (Methodist Chapel) save only on Sunday evenings and fortnightly on Monday nights. The Church (C of E) had no Sunday evening services. The Methodists attended the church services. There was an afternoon service held at the Baptist Chapel at Roseveare. . . .<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Denis Crook, "The Early History of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall, 1814-1850" in Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 92.

<sup>128</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 92.

<sup>129</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 92.

<sup>130</sup> John Rowe, *Changing Times and Fortunes: A Cornish Farmers Life 1828-1904* (Exeter: Cornish Hillside Publications, 1996), 15.

<sup>131</sup> Rowe, *Changing Times*, 45.

Of great interest to the writer was the mention of the Baptist church. Baptists have never been numerically strong in West Cornwall, mainly through the overwhelming dominance of Methodism.

### **The Inherited Methodist Structures**

In this chapter we move from the *system* of Methodism that Wesley created to its outworking in West Cornwall during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. This was accompanied by the fracturing of Methodism into several new expressions. Perhaps surprisingly, there was dramatic growth in each of these new denominations, especially in times of revival. If it were only for this, Wesley might have been pleased. Currie argues that the minutia of detail in Wesley's structure was not an end in itself, but rather its chief concern was the preservation of his highly successful *evangelistic* organization.<sup>132</sup> (Italics mine) Yet it will be argued that this minutia of denominational detail is a hinderance to evangelistic fresh initiative today, thereby pointing to the liberty seen in the concept of *Missio Dei*.

Until his death in 1791 John Wesley had clearly and obviously been the focal point of unity, but with his death change was almost immediate and inevitable. The loss of Wesley's indomitable personality led to its inevitable outcome of divisiveness, and this was more than just personality. As John Vincent states, 'his own stance remained sufficiently equivocal to provide his heirs and successors with a legacy of conflicting attitudes.'<sup>133</sup> Yet though the force of his leadership may have ended, the system of government that he had inaugurated and ensured by the Deed of Covenant (1784) did not.<sup>134</sup> It was this unmalleable structure of Conference and connexionalism that came to cause resentment. Wesley foresaw the danger when he wrote of 'every tendency for the growing of the Methodist community to slip, by natural and easy stages, into the position of a religious denomination of the usual type.' This he said, 'must be resisted.'<sup>135</sup> So the outcome would have disappointed Wesley, for as John Lawson writes:

By this time, at the end of Wesley's long career, Methodism was much more than a chain of Societies, divided into Bands and Classes. His organisational

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<sup>132</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 26.

<sup>133</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 382.

<sup>134</sup> Howdle, "Deed of Union", 92.

<sup>135</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Independently Published: 1784) in Davies, *A History*, 198.

genius had welded it into a closely-articulated Connexion, which in many ways admirably displayed the tradition of the Catholic ideal of strong and responsible authoritative Church government, reflectively exercised over the whole constituency of the faithful, and uniting into one body.<sup>136</sup>

Yet it was difficult for the far South West of England to fully appreciate connexion for obvious reasons. Speaking generally of remoteness, a very real factor at the time, Deacon says accurately that 'interference from English Foreigners was resented'.<sup>137</sup> For much the same reason Conference itself was regarded with suspicion. This is demonstrated in a letter to William Aver, a member of Conference and a West Cornishman, which accurately illustrates the attitude of local Methodists. They 'would rather trust neighbours they knew than they would trust the Conference of whom they know just about nothing at all.'<sup>138</sup>

John Boaden says:

. . . much dissatisfaction was felt by a section of the members of these societies with the power invested in the Conference and exercised over the Societies by the Superintendent Minister as the Agent of the Conference. Local self-government was only in its infancy stage in civil life and its correlative in Methodism was weaker still, and the Superintendents in many instances very unfit persons to be entrusted.<sup>139</sup>

Yet the circuit system was accepted and implemented by all fresh expressions of Methodism, with effect on its whole cultural ethos. An independent witness to this is J. Rule. In *The Labouring Miner in Cornwall* he writes, almost as an aside to his main thesis, that 'West Cornwall Methodism, led by the local preachers, moved from a minority position in the culture of the mining village during the first half of the nineteenth century.'<sup>140</sup> Sadly this is not true either of mining or Methodism today. Mining is but a memory and Methodism has retreated into a 'minority position' in the community. Hamilton Jenkins, in a secular publication on Cornwall, writes of a more recent time when he says 'Methodism, in fact, seems to stand in need of a new interpretation today, if it is to regain the hold which it once had upon the lives of the people'.<sup>141</sup> His

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<sup>136</sup> John Lawson, "The People Called Methodists: Our Discipline" in *History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 198.

<sup>137</sup> Deacon, *A Concise History*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Letter to William Aver (Penryn: 1814) in Thomas Shaw, *The Bible Christians: 1815-1907* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1965), 37.

<sup>139</sup> John Boaden, of Mawgan-in-Meneage, Cornwall in Rowe, *Changing Times*, 40-41.

<sup>140</sup> Rule, *The Labouring Miner*, 291.

<sup>141</sup> Jenkin, *Cornwall and its Peoples*, 201.

book was first published in 1945, and sadly this thesis will record that the loss of both influence and numbers have continued apace since then.

We now turn again to the structures that were then in place and which caused so much division.

## Conference

It would be wrong to imply that concern with Conference was purely a Cornish phenomenon. Owen Chadwick records a power struggle over tensions in training preachers, and the constitution of Conference.<sup>142</sup> He writes of a 'shower of pamphlets, and disgraceful scenes' in the Manchester area to demand that Conference should vote by ballot and allow laymen to attend 'at least as spectators.'<sup>143</sup> And this concern was more than a structural issue. Conference stationed ministers in their circuits and 'this gave Conference power over ministers, much greater power than any Anglican bishop could expect over his incumbents or their curates' says Chadwick.<sup>144</sup> Currie records that one zealous reformer contrasted 'the excellent civil government which we enjoy as Englishmen and the extremely arbitrary and unequitable ecclesiastical government under which we labour as Methodists.'<sup>145</sup>

It became evident that a new figurehead was needed, for it was said in 1805 that Methodism 'was a body without a head'.<sup>146</sup> For good or ill that 'head' was to be Jabez Bunting. (1779-1858). Bunting is described as 'A second Wesley with all the autocracy and none of the saving graces.'<sup>147</sup> He was no lover of revivalism as was seen in the growing antagonism between 'the Cornish Methodist 'rabble' and the bureaucratic managers of Methodism'.<sup>148</sup> The correspondence of Bunting, who ruled the connexion with an iron fist in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is full of complaints about Cornish enthusiasm, for 'Revivalism and connexional managerialism were always unhappy

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<sup>142</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 377.

<sup>143</sup> Chadwick, *Victorian Church*, 377.

<sup>144</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 377.

<sup>145</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 15.

<sup>146</sup> J. Munsey Turner, "Dr Jabez Bunting" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 48.

<sup>147</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Ecumenical Studies in History: The Future of John's Wesley's Methodism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 23.

<sup>148</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 27.

bedfellows.<sup>149</sup> He dominated the Wesleyan scene to the benefit of some and the frustration of others. `Jabez Bunting was the manager thrown up by the need for management,<sup>150</sup> and almost inevitably the fracturing of Methodism into various groupings took place. `The centralised polity groaned and crept along',<sup>151</sup> said Chadwick. The sensitivities and negativism of many towards Conference were compounded by Bunting. `The whole of Methodist Conference is buttoned up in a single pair of breeches' was the sarcastic comment of one.<sup>152</sup>

No Methodist leader today is a Bunting, yet still today Conference initiatives such as the recent matter of same sex marriage in church, cause concern and, according to your viewpoint, damage.

### Division

Thomas Shaw records succinctly the secessions that took place in Cornwall and will be described later. They began in Redruth in 1802 and continued till 1841.<sup>153</sup> The death of John Wesley had revealed that all was not well with his legacy. The matter was not one of theology but practice. Owen Chadwick astutely gives reasons for these tensions which were personified in Bunting:<sup>154</sup>

The young Connexion was inflaming a sore which afflicts every church; natural antipathy between front-line infantry and general staff, between otherworldly vision and worldly business; between pastors and managers . . . But in Methodism the antipathy was sharper; since the *raison d'etre* of the Connexion was conviction that law and discipline which hampered the free course of the gospel was bad law and worse discipline.<sup>155</sup>

Examples can be given as to the depth of antagonism. As always there was sensitivity in regard to money and property. The depth of vitriol can be felt. Robert Currie records that `The constitutional doctrine of Wesleyanism was that he who pays the piper does *not (italics original)* call the tune.<sup>156</sup> And as for property, the Rev. Thomas Jackson,

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<sup>149</sup> W. R. Ward, *The Early Correspondence of Jabez Bunting, 1820-1829* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1972), 27.

<sup>150</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 373.

<sup>151</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 373.

<sup>152</sup> Chadwick, *Victorian Church*, 375.

<sup>153</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 77-97.

<sup>154</sup> This is a feature of every denomination. Either a suspicion of or a resentment towards headquarters.

<sup>155</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 376.

<sup>156</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 25.

President of the Conference in 1849, allegedly told trustees 'The Chapels are ours, and the debts are yours.'<sup>157</sup>

It is no surprise that Michael Stone states that 'New Methodist connexions of a revivalist and democratic character came into being amid circumstances of often acute bitterness.'<sup>158</sup> Stone continues, speaking of 'caustic people who proclaimed the one gospel of reconciliation to all men.'<sup>159</sup> This was against the backdrop of divided loyalties, frantic chapel building, and mutual suspicion, yet there seemed no interruption in rapid numerical growth.

The tensions that caused schism were not new in West Cornwall. 'As early as June 1791, a meeting at Redruth indicated popular desire for some redistribution of power.'<sup>160</sup> In fact, 'power' in Methodism became even more centralised. By a Plan of Pacification of 1795 and the Leeds Regulations of 1797, the Legal Hundred<sup>161</sup> were recognised as the only legal persons who constituted Conference.<sup>162</sup> As Currie points out 'the Conference effectively announced its intention to replace Wesley's autocracy with a hierarchal rule if anything more rigid and far-reaching.'<sup>163</sup> Edward Stone writes:

This ran contrary to the growing aspirations of laymen to share the government of Methodism. The rule of spiritual authority jarred in an age of developing political democracy. Fears included "cramping officialdom", class distinctions, Wesleyan clericalism, unevangelical respectability. Methodism was growing from a connexion of Religious Societies into a settled Christian Church. Many Methodists neither understood or wanted this. Saving souls was being obscured.<sup>164</sup>

Once again Stone makes the point of tension exactly. One word is always prominent in the concerns and resentments expressed and it is the word 'Conference.' But as Stone demonstrates 'each denominational stream perpetrated the strengths and weaknesses of the system'.<sup>165</sup> What is more, 'Each denomination tended to consider itself as a self-sufficient, isolated Methodist empire.'<sup>166</sup> So, having established the

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<sup>157</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 50.

<sup>158</sup> Michael Stone Edwards, "The Divisions of Cornish Methodism 1802-1857" in Deacon, *A Concise History*, 92.

<sup>159</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 1.

<sup>160</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 28.

<sup>161</sup> Appointees made by Wesley to secure the future.

<sup>162</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 273.

<sup>163</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 362-364, 677-705.

<sup>164</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 2.

<sup>165</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 2.

<sup>166</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 2.

basic point of general unrest, each new initiative was in essence similar to the rock from which it had been hewn. The spirit of John Wesley was still a powerful influence and seems to have directed thinking, thereby causing several duplications of the original.

The tensions between officialdom, or in this case Conference, and those doing the work are described by Currie and deserve to be given in full:

The conflict of the two ideas arose from an organisational conflict of chapel and connexion. This conflict was sharpened in Methodism by the development of a local lay officialdom, essential to the expansion and survival of the movement, taxed but not represented, indispensable but unrecognised; opposed to an omnipotent hierarchy, divorced through itinerancy from any permanent share in chapel society, invested with absolute power over persons and property and committed to the rigorous quest for perfection.<sup>167</sup>

Yet, as always, the search for perfection was a vain exercise.

### **The New Denominations**

Edward Stone provides a concise and definitive account of the major Methodist divisions that took place in Cornwall. Some of those which were of little significance in the long term have been omitted.

Wesleyan Methodists were the parent body and considered themselves to be as such. They were larger than the combined bodies of all the others. They were influential in the community, endeavoured to ignore the other newly formed Methodists, and eventually had a distrust of undirected revivalism. By 1857 there were 19,342 Wesleyan members in 24 Cornish circuits.<sup>168</sup>

The Methodist New Connexion was the first breakaway, founded by Alexander Kilham in 1797. They were never significant in Cornwall. They sought equal partnership between ministers and laymen in Conference. They came to Cornwall in 1834 and could boast William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, as one of their ministers in St Ives.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 81.

<sup>168</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 2-3.

<sup>169</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 2-3.

The Bible Christians were founded by William O'Bryan in 1815 and despite their rather unfortunate name, had considerable influence. He desired freedom in evangelism. His ministry began in north-east Cornwall and north-west Devon, before spreading through the whole of Cornwall, with particular strength in the villages. Their niche was among the working classes and by 1857 had 7,129 members.<sup>170</sup>

The Primitive Methodists came to West Cornwall between 1825-1831, having been founded in the Midlands and the North from successive revivals. They would have been immensely successful in West Cornwall had not the Bible Christians already been established and were similar in ethos and doctrine. The Primitive Methodists had a strong lay influence with less central control. As with the Bible Christians they used women in evangelism. Tom Shaw reports that they never gained a foothold in the villages and by 1857 had gained only 2,083 members in five circuits throughout the whole of Cornwall.<sup>171</sup>

And as to the reasons for these separate forms of Methodism in a small region Currie describes the problem well:

The adherent cleavage in Christianity between priest and people, between those who control and direct the religious system and prescribe its goals, and those who support and submit to this system, was exacerbated to the point of prolonged and disastrous conflicts in a few decades by the velocity of the Methodist movement.<sup>172</sup>

The red-hot heat of revival coupled to the independent spirit of the age combined to bring about this inevitable consequence.

The outcome of these new Methodist expressions is obvious. Loyalties were divided and chapels multiplied, even as competing Methodist causes proclaimed unity in Christ. The fresh memories of each separation prevented the growth of mutual understanding, highlighted by strong, even bitter disagreements over teetotalism.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, despite schism and internal disputes, successive revivals continued. Because of its legacy both positive and negative, revival needs to be studied as being part of the West Cornwall Methodist psyche, colouring the thinking of some to this day.

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<sup>170</sup> Edwards, "The Divisions", 3.

<sup>171</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 95.

<sup>172</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 81.

<sup>173</sup> Norman Longmate, *The Water-Drinkers* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968), 38.



Hence the need to study this subject in depth, as being mainly positive at the time, but for various reasons somewhat negative today as a vehicle for church growth.

## Revival

This is a long section on revival, yet it is fundamental to the West Cornwall Methodist history and present-day psyche.

David Hempton writes of Jabez Bunting's 'unpleasant confrontations with Methodist revivalism red in tooth and claw' This 'ecclesiastical bureaucrat . . . fearful of unrestrained revivalism placed his faith in sound management and connexional discipline.'<sup>174</sup> Even today, perhaps unfortunately, 'sound management' is seen by some as the antithesis of revival in its widest sense of renewed spirituality. But in fact, this dichotomy, as Hempton points out, was ever such:

Methodism was a religion that carried the genes of dialectical tension. It could scarcely be otherwise, given the background of its founder. The most pervasive was the tension between enlightenment and enthusiasm, between rational calculation and the direct inspiration of the spirit.<sup>175</sup>

For some, it is the perceived contrast between the natural and the super-natural that is the concern. It is a dichotomy that will ever be with us, as seen in the various reactions to the Charismatic Movement today.

Two extreme views of revival in the context of West Cornwall can be dismissed, one from Deacon and the other from a poster printed in Camborne, Spring 1831. Firstly, an understatement. Bernard Deacon says 'Historians credit revivals with the function of binding communities together, providing a periodic ritual whereby a new generation of Methodists were publicly welcomed into the field.'<sup>176</sup> That might be true in detail, but revival was more than that.

The second is a poster from April 1831. The heading (in capitals) says:

A HUMBLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO ALMIGHTY GOD, FOR HIS  
GOODNESS IN REVIVING HIS WORK IN THE CAMBORNE CIRCUIT;  
WHERE SINCE THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE RECENT YEAR, MORE

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<sup>174</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 205.

<sup>175</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 204.

<sup>176</sup> Deacon, *A Concise History*, 113.

## THAN ONE THOUSAND SOULS HAVE BEEN ADDED TO THE WESLEYAN METHODISTS

The heading is followed by 22 four-line doggerel verses naming each place and chapel within the Camborne Wesleyan circuit.<sup>177</sup> This is clearly an exaggeration and would appear to be a work of God exclusively among the Wesleyan Methodists! Of equal interest is that at this time Cornish Wesleyans were involved closely in the revival story. As has been demonstrated, they later became suspicious of the whole revival phenomenon.

Revival is a word known and remembered among West Country Methodists with the constant reminder of the empty buildings that are, in part, its heritage. Stories are still told of rough and ready characters such as Billy Bray who was described by John Horner as a 'successful' Bible Christian evangelist.<sup>178</sup> John Vickers, whilst mentioning Bray's famed eccentricity writes of the 'six chapels which he built with his own hands'<sup>179</sup> Sadly, none of these are still open for worship.

So, there is a pragmatic as well as a religious dimension in the study of historic revival. As Robert Currie writes, 'One very obvious area of discrepancy (lies) between the connexional ideal and local practice in respect of revivals.'<sup>180</sup> Yet underlying much discussion of revival, its fact and significance, there is little as to what actually constituted Revival itself. It became a blanket term, still used today by some for fresh expressions of spiritual spontaneity and growth in the church. It is not 'revival' that will be important in the final chapters, but certain elements of revival that are coveted for today. This rather than the strange phenomena reported from the past, of which stories are still frequently told. These nebulous hopes must be seen in a modern context, using a fresh vocabulary, for the positive and fruitful advance of God's Kingdom. But it is still necessary to examine what our forebears believed and experienced.

Typical of Methodism, the context of revival was John Wesley. His attitude to revival was not so accommodating as would initially be imagined. In Wesley's view, 'exact discipline, rather than spontaneous enthusiasm, is the main principle of spiritual

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<sup>177</sup> *Kresen Kernow Poster* (Camborne: 1831).

<sup>178</sup> John Horner, *What Mean These Stones?* (Penzance: John Horner, 2015), 6.

<sup>179</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 41.

<sup>180</sup> Luker, *Revivalism & Popular Belief*, vii.

power.<sup>181</sup> And here is one of the reasons for the tensions that were to emerge between the enthusiastic outbreaks of unregulated, apparently disordered religious excess and respectable Methodism. William Parkes writes rather tersely that the Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists and Methodist New Connexion 'sought to diminish the influence of revivalists.'<sup>182</sup>

A serious complication is that the understanding of the word 'revival' has developed in a way that is radically different from previously. This catchall word today is a Bible word, and it is informative to appreciate what Scripture understands it to be. The Greek word is *anazao*<sup>183</sup> and means 'coming back from the dead.' This definition is often confused with 'renewal,' and when ignored or forgotten causes the confusion that various authors reveal.

Revival, in the historical context of Methodism, is nearly what Richard Lovelace describes when he writes of '... broad-scale movements of the Holy Spirit's work in renewing spiritual vitality in the church and in fostering its expansion in mission and evangelism.'<sup>184</sup> Yet how people's understanding of 'revival' evolved is another matter. Julia Werner illustrates this when she writes that amongst the Wesleyans revival could mean 'the acquisition of members.'<sup>185</sup> This is often the modern understanding of revival, or at least the hope amongst many today in the context of Cornwall, where there is widespread numerical decline.

But the Biblical definition also reveals a problem for today. In writing of a spiritual, transforming dimension, the context of *anazao* in Romans 14:9 is 'the Church' and its relationship with its members. As Christ returned to life so 'you then' says the apostle.

The problem of misuse is compounded as one reads more widely of both the past and the present. The confusion has been caused by revival becoming a synonym for evangelism – especially in America. Evangelism means good news; revival is new life. So, it is frustrating to discover that *The Radical Wesley* by Howard Snyder,<sup>186</sup> has no

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<sup>181</sup> Lawson, "The People Called Methodists", 198.

<sup>182</sup> William Parkes, "Revivalism" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 294.

<sup>183</sup> Rom 14:9.

<sup>184</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 21-22.

<sup>185</sup> Julia S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 171.

<sup>186</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, index.

mention of Revival in the index, yet it is included under the heading Evangelism. This is wrong. For the early Methodists, caught up in the heady days of revival, it was something believed to be unprecedented. It was something that God did. Or, in the context of this thesis, *Missio Dei* and God's ministry of restoration.

Owen Chadwick, using revival's more modern meaning, provides a reason why it began to decline, if not in name, then as against its original meaning. He writes of the '*methods* (italics mine) for old-fashioned revival', and even worse, of 'others, who hitherto could not believe in revivals at all, gave them a trial'.<sup>187</sup> In large measure this thinking came from America where there were attempts to codify revival and even to artificially manufacture it. This was closely associated with names such as Charles Finney who held so called revival meetings.<sup>188</sup> Though springing from the United States, this understanding of revival was to continue in the United Kingdom till modern times, with the word replaced by 'campaign' or 'mission'.

Alister McGrath, writing of Finney says 'Revivalism involved a stereotypical form of preaching, where the hearers were called to "accept Christ."<sup>189</sup> Names such as D.L. Moody continued Finney's '*method* here in Britain as well as the United States.'<sup>190</sup> Perhaps the last major exponent of this pattern in the British Isles was Billy Graham and Mission England. These great men succeeded because they caught the attention of their time, but it was not revival, and in recent years evangelism by '*method*' has thankfully gone out of favour.

What is not understood today is that revival did not evolve in a vacuum, unaffected by pressures from the world outside. Werner points out that the Toleration Act 1812, the defeat of Napoleon and decline of wheat prices all indicated the '*way* Revivalism traded on the rise and decline of communal anxieties.'<sup>191</sup>

What took place in revivals needs an objective account. This comes from the Great Revival of 1814 and was recorded the following year. In a letter from George Russell to Isaac Clayton of Helston, July 7, 1815, he writes:

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<sup>187</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Part 2: 1860-1901* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 286.

<sup>188</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 12.

<sup>189</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 189.

<sup>190</sup> I was a chair for Mission England and two of my daughters came to faith in those meetings. I am not negative in principal to such evangelistic initiatives. But I do feel their day is over in the present climate.

<sup>191</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 8-9.

Dear Brother,

. . . the revival began last year in the chapel at Redruth where the doors were scarcely closed for eight successive days. It spread with amazing rapidity . . . the increase was from 1,880 – 4,000 . . . <sup>192</sup>

Yet Russell does not accept the reality at face value for he continues `There were considerations connected to the suddenness, and in many cases shallowness of the work . . . for the loss we have suffered which amounts to about 200.' Nevertheless, he is impressed by a sense of decorum. Apparently `there was none of the Ranterism and False Fire that have followed revivals . . . in the North of England.'<sup>193</sup> Russell continues `there were times when it is reported that churches stayed open all night, crowded to suffocation.'<sup>194</sup>

There are few eyewitness accounts of revival from the people who actually experienced it. An explanation comes from Julia Werner who is a definitive authority on revival<sup>195</sup> When E.K. Brown reviews her book *The Primitive Methodist Connexion* he regrets that these `meticulously documented pages from Werner, are not more personally alive and vital to the reader,'<sup>196</sup> he also acknowledges the reason. This was that the early revivalists were, in the main, illiterate country folk, leaving little or no written sources.<sup>197</sup> So with West Cornwall revivals. The miners, quarrymen, iron workers and fishermen of West Cornwall were the very essence of working class. Most of the accounts of Cornish revivals are not from the people who experienced them and who might overstate what happened, but articulate reports from the interested observers who were from the educated classes elsewhere.

What took place at Camborne in 1814 was typical. Writing to a colleague, Francis Truscott describes what he had seen. `There were scenes of wild excitement: singing, clapping and shouting, and leaping in the air, with often-made exhortation from the pulpit.' He describes a youth `who leapt on to the table of the leaders' seat in his

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<sup>192</sup> George Russell to Isaac Clayton, 7 July 1815 in Davies, *A History*, 349.

<sup>193</sup> George Russell to Isaac Clayton, 7 July 1815 in Davies, *A History*, 349.

<sup>194</sup> George Russell to Isaac Clayton, 7 July 1815 in Davies, *A History*, 349.

<sup>195</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 142.

<sup>196</sup> E. K. Brown, "Review" in *The Journal of American History*, Boston University Vol. 71, No. 231 (Oxford Academic 1986), 175-6.

<sup>197</sup> Brown, "Review", 175-176.

excitement.' What he thought most deplorable, was `of a crowd of children standing on the seats to survey the wild disorder of the scene.'<sup>198</sup>

It would be wrong to imagine that such phenomena were a constant. What was constant was that the various branches of Methodism grew rapidly. Tom Shaw describes the reality of the situation on the ground:

So great was the impact of Methodism upon the community that prayers and hymns were not thought out of place in the depths of the mines; the quarrymen at Delabole would gather to hear a preacher, and on one occasion a factory owner at Ponsanooth stopped work for a whole day while he conducted a revival meeting among his employees.<sup>199</sup>

Gradually these `revival memories' became just that – memories. And as with most memories they gained exaggerated status and significance.

Geoffrey Milburn gives a succinct statement of Methodism's origins and the context of revival with a caveat. He states that `John Wesley's original mission ... was renewed by revivalism in the 1790s and early 1800s, only to be frustrated and repressed by Conference.'<sup>200</sup> Though perhaps containing truth this is a mistake. These events are matters fundamental to the Methodist story, taking place within its structures. Werner goes some way to providing an explanation as to why this should be:

It is tempting to ... attribute Methodist growth solely to its theological, organisational, and human resources . . . This error is more damaging to the process of historical explanation . . . because it generally ignores context, and decontextualised history turns into hagiography or institutional reconstruction.<sup>201</sup>

Certainly, there were factors in Cornish revival that were beyond a purely institutional context. Werner says `Methodism grew more vigorously in those parts of the English-speaking world where it largely abandoned . . . dependency on Anglicanism and became both the instrument and the beneficiary of the rise of more populist and egalitarian brands of Christianity.'<sup>202</sup>

Revivalism was, in the main, the domain of the working classes who constituted the majority of the population of Cornwall. `Humble in spirit, as in circumstances, their lives

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<sup>198</sup> F. Truscott to J. Benson, 10 May 1814 in Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 65.

<sup>199</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 101.

<sup>200</sup> Geoffrey Milburn, *Exploring Methodism, Primitive Methodism* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>201</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 17.

<sup>202</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 22.

of patient endurance and self-sacrifice passed unknown and unrecorded . . . ' <sup>203</sup> As in most places, it is this segment of society that is largely untouched by Cornish Methodism today. Yet at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was otherwise. Nevertheless, revivals did not just happen.

Julia Werner writes that there was a sequence of events as a precursor for revival. The most important was the need for communication about what was taking place elsewhere. Nearly all the churches involved were within a two-hour walking distance of each other. Gerald Parsons establishes the point in a footnote from David Luker. 'Cornish Methodist revival as a popular 'indigenization' of Methodism, both reflecting and contributing to the relative isolation of nineteenth-century Cornwall, its strongly local communal identity and the lay ethos of Cornish Methodism.' <sup>204</sup>

It is argued that the cause of the variance of revival outbreaks involved the matter of leadership. As to revival theology, little is written. There was nothing particularly distinctive between the various strands of Methodist belief. Owen Chadwick, writing of the Primitive Methodists, says that they, as with other Methodist breakaways, were 'broadly in respect for Wesley in doctrine.' <sup>205</sup> And later he writes that preachers 'pressed . . . instantaneous conversion'. <sup>206</sup> Werner states that the message preached was fundamental evangelical doctrine, teaching the necessity of a 'new birth . . .' But that was not the end for the convert. 'He was then able to strive for sanctification.' <sup>207</sup> In other words religion had to be felt and experienced personally, thereby making a tangible difference.

The difficulty for the present-day is that, what was perceived as so powerful in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, appears to be ineffective or unavailable today. So, Edward Royle reviewing Hempton's *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, writes of these fundamental beliefs, typical of the revival days. He says of Hempton:

Above all, he grasps what it was that gave Methodism its power: the liberating optimism of Arminianism with its belief in the conditional salvation of all mankind; the inspired determination to spread the good news of salvation, the

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<sup>203</sup> Jenkin, *Cornwall and its People*, 187.

<sup>204</sup> Gerald Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 1: Traditions* (Manchester: Open University, 1988), 215.

<sup>205</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 386.

<sup>206</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 387.

<sup>207</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 147.

confidence that an interventionist God constantly present in the Holy Spirit would ensure success whatever the odds.<sup>208</sup>

The temptation is to hope for the return of the imagined greatness of what revival was, and how it was achieved. More than that, there is the hope that by preaching the same simple fundamentals of revival, it will further that same end. Yet, the constant teaching of a 'simple gospel' may lead to a simple people. Another, almost inevitable reaction from this, is to seek for something new, which is often imagined to be found beyond Methodism with its structures and apparent constraints.

Methodist respectability was to be the death of revivalism. Julia Werner gives her own rather negative verdict on later Wesleyan attitudes. 'With Revival excesses forbidden, and Wesleyans worship dominated by eloquent preaching and sedate hymns, there was little left to thrill the soul.'<sup>209</sup> The Wesleyans wanted to play safe. Or perhaps it was not a matter of 'playing safe', but rather that they had become suspicious and tired of the whole 'revival' business. Recent ecclesiastical history confirms that when radical, new religious movements mature and settle down they grow away from earlier extremes.<sup>210</sup>

Gradually the social and religious climate changed. This was partly through factors such as emigration, decline in both the mining industry and heavy engineering.<sup>211</sup> There were also changes of theological emphasis and a new flavour of Methodism began to emerge. Snyder describes it well when writing of Ministers . . . 'who gradually took over the pastoral function of the class leader', and the 'growing sophistication and prosperity of Methodists: the loss of holiness expectations: revivalism which undermined the perception of continuing spiritual growth, and the tendency to allow classes to grow too large.'<sup>212</sup>

The above is of great significance in understanding the development of circuit ministry over the next one hundred and fifty years. Individual spiritual nurturing was falling away with the gradual demise of the Class Meeting, and with it, perhaps, Wesley's 'warmed heart.' It is this loss of 'expectation' that, it will be argued, is one of the fundamental

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<sup>208</sup> Edward Royle, "Review" in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol.58 No.4 (2005), 864-5.

<sup>209</sup> Werner, *Methodism Connexion*, 182.

<sup>210</sup> As Chair of the Evangelical Alliance, I watched with interest how new charismatic expressions 'settled down.' Whether that has been to their gain or loss is a matter of debate.

<sup>211</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>212</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 175.



problems facing West Cornwall Methodism today and sometimes causes people to look elsewhere for spiritual experience and renewal. Hempton describes the dichotomy between structure and spiritual experience and is well worth quoting:

Wesley could be fiercely logical in his many polemical arguments . . . and deeply gullible when evaluating the religious experience of people . . . Others have seen similar dialectical tensions; between the spiritual egalitarianism of the Methodist message and the authoritarianism of its ecclesiastical structure, between the religion of the heart and the methodical disciplines of the holy life, between libertarianism of grace and the works-righteousness driven on by fear of backsliding or lack of progress towards perfection, between the freedom of the spirit's leading and the ubiquitous rules and disciplines governing Methodist societies, and between religious revivalism as a way of transforming the human condition for the life hereafter and a focus on political reform as a way of redeeming life here and now.<sup>213</sup>

And in time the whole classic revival phenomenon began to wane and die. As to the reason why, Deacon writes `revivalist fervour had begun to wane, . . . (through) the diversion of energies into the need to maintain the institutional and administrative fabric of the various Methodist denominations.'<sup>214</sup> And again Deacon, a leading authority on Cornish identity, says `Methodism was irrevocably mutating and losing its distinctiveness'.<sup>215</sup>

Most of the literary reviews tend towards a hesitant even negative view of revival. Speaking of the founding of the Primitive Methodists near the beginning of the nineteenth century, Robert Currie writes of `transports and gymnastic exercises' with `few parallels in contemporary Wesleyanism outside Cornwall.'<sup>216</sup> An early Victorian "theological dictionary" seems to reveal that revival was treated with scepticism in learned circles at the time. It describes four identifying characteristics of the Ranters, not of the Primitive Methodists *per se*, but derogatorily of the people involved. They were generally illiterate, they were extremely noisy, they relied mostly on local preachers, and apparently the most damning of all, as we have seen, they allowed "women to preach in promiscuous assemblies."<sup>217</sup> Other than the emotive words `ranters' and `promiscuous' there is some truth here in perception and detail. But it does not do justice to peoples and events that we have discovered to be of

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<sup>213</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 204.

<sup>214</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 224.

<sup>215</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 224.

<sup>216</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 199.

<sup>217</sup> Werner, *Methodist Connexion*, 142.

significance, and a phenomenon that has left its mark on West Cornwall until the present time.

Unlike revivals elsewhere it was reported that in West Cornwall revival was not through the agency of any one particular Methodist segment or evangelist but rather it was `by drawing ever-larger numbers into chapel-going, albeit temporarily, creating the `critical mass' on which future revivals could in turn flourish.'<sup>218</sup>

In the generation from the 1810s to the 1840s Methodism in Cornwall became more clearly `Cornish', clinging to revivalism when other parts of Methodism, especially the Wesleyan Connexion, rejected it . . . This was a period of divergence, when the symbolic shape of Cornwall became more explicitly differentiated from the other parts of the British Isles. . . . This period accompanied a parallel emergence of a more explicit consciousness of being `Cornish'. . . Methodism in Cornwall began to fill a role as a symbol of Cornish uniqueness.<sup>219</sup>

Chadwick writes that `In Methodism there was already a definitely `connexional' structure, but the relationship between centre and locality was still very much in process of definition and still an ongoing cause of friction, controversy and perhaps secession'.<sup>220</sup> As will be discussed in the final chapters what was a feature, particularly among the Wesleyan Methodists over a hundred and fifty years ago, is still a feature today, as evidenced in local debates on *God in Love Unites Us*, that are raising strong concerns in West Cornwall.<sup>221</sup>

### **The Numerical Effect**

Tom Shaw writes of the 1840s that `A new community had come into being, of which the 26,000 members were but the central core; around them was the wider circle of adherents, including many regular attenders at the preaching services, and the still wider, but more amorphous, company of occasional attenders.'<sup>222</sup> David Luker estimates that `around three times as many people attended Methodist chapels to members'.<sup>223</sup> These numbers indicate substantial growth in the first fifty years of the

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<sup>218</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 218.

<sup>219</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 226.

<sup>220</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 162.

<sup>221</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

<sup>222</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 23-24.

<sup>223</sup> David Luker, "Revivalism in Theory and Practice: The Case for Cornish Methodism", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, no.37 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 603-19.

nineteenth century, with figures which are largely correct due to Methodism's penchant for record keeping.

In the three population centres of West Cornwall Methodism covered in this chapter namely St Ives, Camborne, and Redruth, all saw spectacular growth. St Ives 2,714 – 6,699. Camborne 4,811 - 14,926 and Redruth 3,924 – 10,451.<sup>224</sup> Whereas revival numbers are not central to this chapter, it must be remembered that they represent a large proportion of the indigenous population. And neither was this without adverse connexional pressure from within and outside. Luker explains that the tension between the Wesleyans and the new Methodist expressions was not easy. 'In Cornwall ... both the notion and reality of pastoral authority was severely restricted at least till the 1840s, . . . despite connexional efforts to re-direct local Methodism into a more orthodox and 'respectable' channel.'<sup>225</sup> One positive outcome of connexion was that, as David Luker writes, 'revival also offered a philosophical and ethical support to a rising demand for greater personal autonomy'.<sup>226</sup> Revival was by definition not only a mass movement but emphasised the place of the individual through his or her personal response.

A complexity that has to be remembered when studying the figures of West Cornwall growth, is demonstrated by putting the Methodist figures into context with the rest of the country. With the one exception, all the various groupings saw significant numerical growth. In 1828 the various Methodist denominations had 245,194 members, rising to 338,861 in 1845. At the 1851 census 654,349 members were reported. The exception was the Wesleyans themselves, who experienced serious decline through various tensions with Bunting, Conference, anonymous letters, and organ arguments.<sup>227</sup> They lost 20,946 members between 1851-2 and a third of the membership by 1855.<sup>228</sup>

## **Conclusion: Growing Tensions**

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<sup>224</sup> From *Victoria History of the County of Cornwall - Social and Economic History* (Truro: VCH Publications, 1908), Cornwall County Library.

<sup>225</sup> Luker, *Revivalism & Popular Belief*, 396.

<sup>226</sup> Luker, *Revivalism in Theory and Practice*, 37.

<sup>227</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 91-93.

<sup>228</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 384.

It might be expected that after the death of John Wesley there would be a reaction, that tensions previously held in check would reveal themselves. The above has initially told the story of secession and disunity. Some made light of these tensions. Writing fifty years later In *A New History of Cornish Methodism*, John Scott Lidgett wrote of 'the fundamental unity of Methodism'. He states that 'The theology of all branches of Methodism is identical. . . .'<sup>229</sup> Which begs the response of Sidney Dixon 'With so impressive a recital of the uniting factors one may wonder why outwardly Methodism was so fragmented and why the process of union took so long.'<sup>230</sup> It should be noted that the conflicts were between the principles of authority and liberty. John Lidgett sums up the main points of contention well:

The controversies which led to the various secessions turned upon either general or particular disagreements in regard to church government, the rights and responsibilities of the ministry on the one hand and of the laity on the other, the power of the Conference as representing the whole church and the local liberties of particular churches.<sup>231</sup>

The next chapter will endeavour to demonstrate how social change and new theological emphases, marked by the rise of Biblical Criticism and Darwinism, began to feature. No longer would there be theological uniformity in Methodism.

Another running theme through the thesis will be numerical loss. Highlighted, will be the effects of emigration which resulted in the loss of members and adherents particularly in West Cornwall. But alongside these negatives a realisation began to dawn that several factors were pointing to the need for unity.

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<sup>229</sup> John Scott Lidgett in Sidney O. Dixon, *The Road to Unity in Cornish Methodism 1791-1907* (Truro: CMHA, 1969), 3.

<sup>230</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 3.

<sup>231</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 3.

## Chapter 3: The Evolution of Methodism 1850-1932

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of West Cornwall Methodism from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the formation of The Methodist Church in 1932. This was the second of two major acts of union. As with the other chapters, this is not a general history, but continues to trace the development of West Cornwall Methodism both in its place in the denomination and in the unique society where it is placed – an area which becomes of strategic importance subsequently. This will record another stage of their evolution towards what these Methodists are today and what they might become with God's help.

It must be remembered that, at the beginning of the period under review, many in West Cornwall still had memories of the high tensions caused by the formation of new denominations, and the rapid growth stemming from Revival. Nevertheless, the next eighty years were to reveal signs of pressures yet to come, and will be debated in the closing chapters. As with all the mainline Christian denominations of the time, there were to be the challenges of Biblical Higher-Criticism, Darwinism and other intellectual pressures that inevitably percolated down to the far south-west of England. There were also social problems that touched the churches, caused by social change, recession in the mining industry, emigration, and the First World War. The first moves towards Methodist unification began during these years and had been brought to fruition by the end. These initiatives were encouraged by the apparent needless waste of people and resources. This was caused by the duplication of several newish denominations who all called themselves Methodists.

Neither was West Cornwall unaffected by national developments in Methodism, and it is important to understand and remember how these pressures came about. Christopher Oldstone-Moore, writing of some of these tensions, says that Wesley had 'created a distinct denomination without establishing a complete ecclesiastical apparatus or theology,'<sup>232</sup> causing tensions on both counts.

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<sup>232</sup> Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes, Founder of a New Methodism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 73.

## Methodist Social Attitudes

Writing of the middle-class generally and of the mine captains who 'occupied' a strategically important role, Bernard Deacon concludes that the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion was 'an institution.'<sup>233</sup> Although he includes these Methodists with secular institutions it carries more than a degree of truth, for the Wesleyan Methodists 'had a more pervasive effect upon the lives of the communities than the county literature institutions or their small-town imitators.'<sup>234</sup> That is, they had become a self-fulfilling community *within* the community. This was not the case with the new Methodist denominations. Deacon writes that the main centres of population in West Cornwall 'were growing rapidly.'<sup>235</sup> But this is not to imply an equal distribution of Methodism, for Deacon continues that 'at the same time the religious respectable, (were) deliberately distancing themselves from rural small chapel Methodism.'<sup>236</sup> These new communities, both social and religious, were becoming parallel centres within the town and country. It will be argued that there is a need for the present-day Methodist chapels, strategically placed within their various communities, so as to become increasingly part of that society, not a religious island within it.

Methodism, to a degree, had been protected from the social norms that pervaded elsewhere, argues Bernard Deacon. 'Early industrialisation had preceded the ideas of class, and Wesleyan Methodism . . . provided a cocoon of institutions that surrounded labouring families and communities.'<sup>237</sup> But, as will be demonstrated, that was to change.

And then there was the matter of geography. West Cornwall was, and to an extent *is*, an area far distant from the power centres of both secular government and the church. This is vividly demonstrated by a Camborne Circuit Preaching Plan from July-Sept 1860 that encompassed sixteen Chapels. Under 'Notices' it declared 'It is the unanimous wish of the local preachers that the services through the circuit should punctually commence at London time, which is nearly half an hour before the time in

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<sup>233</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 106.

<sup>234</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 106.

<sup>235</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 139.

<sup>236</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 139.

<sup>237</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 194.

the country.'<sup>238</sup> Even with the coming of the railways, with its need to synchronise clocks so as to enable the running of a timetable, not all others had followed suit.

This religious independency, typical of West Cornwall, was reflected in social requirements. Though mirrored elsewhere in the country, but perhaps not to the same extent, was the heavy weight of a lifestyle orthodoxy demanded for Methodists. To fall foul of these requirements was to activate antipathy, and even a diatribe of nastiness. Such matters as teetotalism and Sunday observance were particular areas where uniformity with Methodist lifestyle was required. In St Ives, the atmosphere was particularly vitriolic on the teetotal issue. The Rev. Jonathon Turner wrote:

I lament the irreparable mischief which is done to individuals, and to Christian churches, the strifes, alienations, contentions, schisms, divisions, the declensions, backslidings and apostacies which are its melancholy fruits . . . The guilt and mischief of teetotalers in some parts of Cornwall, and especially in the St Ives circuit, are so far too great to be imagined, except by those who have witnessed their proceedings.<sup>239</sup>

The antagonist-in-chief proposed a suitably worded memorial tablet on the wall of the new Teetotal Chapel:

This chapel was founded by the tyranny and injustice of one Jonathan Turner, Wesleyan Priest, who superintended the St Ives circuit only one year. The death of the wolf is the life of the lamb.<sup>240</sup>

After the inevitable closure, the Teetotal Methodist Church became firstly a Drill Hall and is now a Cooperative Shop. It will be seen that the distancing between the Methodist and secular communities was an unfortunate phenomenon over the coming years, fostering mutual suspicion.

## **Emigration**

Emigration was a factor that impinged on Cornish Methodism and particularly in the west of Cornwall as the main mining area. Writing of 'ethnic identity' Philip Payton speaks of a 'Cornish culture of mobility.'<sup>241</sup> Evidently the Cornish left their identity wherever they went. He describes this Cornish self-awareness by saying 'Cornwall's

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<sup>238</sup> *Camborne Circuit Preaching Plan July-Sept (1860)*, Redruth Reference Library.

<sup>239</sup> Longmate, *Water Drinkers*, 101.

<sup>240</sup> Longmate, *Water Drinkers*, 102.

<sup>241</sup> Philip Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall* (Redruth: ICS/Truran, 1993), 29-20.

predominantly Methodist culture, committed to self-help, improvement and individual salvation, was also especially suited to this self-image.<sup>242</sup>

There is a fascinating confirmation of the effect of emigration to be found in the appendix of the statistical returns for the Cornwall Methodist District in 1876. Running perpendicular to the figures it states, ‘the diminution in the numbers of members in those circuits in which the population subsist principally on mining, is the result of extensive emigration, consequent on the cessation of most of the mining works in the county.’<sup>243</sup> And naturally Cornish culture and Methodist faith travelled with them.

The vacuum caused by the departure of the miners, many leaving their families behind, is important. Tom Shaw demonstrates this. St Agnes, he writes, was typical of other mining areas, where in 1854 it was said ‘a great many active, useful members had gone to the Gold Diggings of Australia and the United States.’<sup>244</sup> The Redruth Primitive Methodist circuit alone lost eighty-seven members through emigration between 1853-8.<sup>245</sup> Increased ease of travel was, of course, a factor. William O’Byryan, the founder of the Bible Christians, journeyed to North America no less than thirteen times.<sup>246</sup>

On Thursday, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2018, in a packed Truro Cathedral there was given a ‘Concert of carols of the Cornish Diaspora.’ This testified strongly to the extent and effect of emigration. ‘Cornish’ carols were sung from the United States of America, Australia and South Africa.’ The introduction to the printed order of service briefly described these emigres. ‘They took . . . food, engineering, skills, yarns, humour, folklore and wrassling (carol singing).’<sup>247</sup>

Dr John Rowe, speaking at a University Extension lecture on ‘Cornish Methodism and Emigration’ said ‘Cornish Methodism and mining had developed side by side and were so inter-connected that the exportation of the one involved the exportation of the

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<sup>242</sup> Payton, *Making of Modern Cornwall*, 165.

<sup>243</sup> Cornwall District statistical summary, 1876, in *Journal of Cornish Methodist Historical Association*, vol. 12, no. 6, 24.

<sup>244</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 69-70.

<sup>245</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 70.

<sup>246</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 69.

<sup>247</sup> Kate I. Neal, *Carols of the Cornish Diaspora* (Truro: 2018), order of service.



other.<sup>248</sup> Deacon, writing of Cornish emigration, makes a contrast with the Lowland Scots who also experienced a large emigration phenomenon:

They deployed (their) ethnic identity ... stressing thrift, hardiness, determination; (and) their Protestant work ethic.,' whereas 'Cornwall's predominately Methodist culture, was committed 'to self-help, improvement and individual salvation . . .' He says that these were 'especially suited to this self-image. The Cornish carried this aspect of their identity with them to their communities overseas.<sup>249</sup>

And it is not unrealistic to suggest these are still recognisable characteristics of Methodists in Cornwall today.

### **Numerical Decline**

But emigration was not the major reason for numerical decline. That was centred on the churches themselves. For this David Hempton makes a list of convincing arguments that are précised here. Firstly, he points out that Methodism was evolving from a revivalist sect to an established denomination. Perhaps a structured, maturing church was not so exciting as the heady days of revival! Secondly, that the Methodists' distinctive practices and doctrines were becoming commonplace. They were no longer challenging the establishment, and thereby losing the appeal of the new. Another point that Hempton makes is significant, concerning the Methodists themselves. Many Methodists were settling down. They were now the third and fourth generation and by now mobilising their resources of time and money. They had seen growth from the children of the committed, but this was now coming to an end. By the fifth and sixth generations a rapprochement with other people had been built into society at large, thereby losing some of their distinctiveness.<sup>250</sup>

How the Cornish persona was brought to bear on their own society is somewhat difficult to demonstrate. Yet there was an effect on society *per se*. John Gilbert writes:

The effects of Cornish Methodism in making the drunkard sober, the idle industrious, the profligate moral, and in inducing men to provide decently and comfortably for their families, and to give a suitable education to their children, can be attested by thousands of witnesses.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> John Rowe in Cornwall Methodist Historical Association, Vol. II, 6. Oct 1966.

<sup>249</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 165.

<sup>250</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 182-4.

<sup>251</sup> John William Gilbert, quoted in T. R. Harris, *Methodism and the Cornish Miner* (Cornish Methodism Historical Association, Publication No.1., 1960).

Sadly, the personal testimony of 'thousands of witnesses' seems scarcely written down and what there are, by no means positive.

Writing from St Ives in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, one R. Alder wrote to Jabez Bunting concerning 'agitators and slanderers' for whom he held 'injudicious and imbecile Superintendents' to be responsible.<sup>252</sup> The atmosphere seems to have soured. Yet even here emigration may have had a contributory negative effect. The sociologist and historian Bernard Deacon writes 'when the population began to decline and (with it) economic stagnation in Cornwall it undermined the self-confidence and dynamism of local Methodism. . .'<sup>253</sup> The numerical significance of this can be demonstrated by the recorded statistics.

### Statistics

In the two decades from 1841, while the population of Cornwall grew by only eight per cent, that of the growing parishes of Camborne, Redruth and Illogan increased in size by almost 30 per cent. By 1861 the population of these three parishes was over 35,000.<sup>254</sup> There were not only changes in demography but socially as well. 'At the same time the religious practice of these Cornish towns was becoming markedly more respectable.'<sup>255</sup> And statistics are important, for if we understand growth in the latter half on the nineteenth century, then we will be better equipped to analyse the almost continual numerical decline that occurred in the next.

John Probert recognises the value of Methodist statistics when he writes:

It is sad that Methodism is not giving a greater lead in this country, as we are probably the most statistically conscious church with our vast collection of schedules which provided an amazing amount of source material which we use but little.<sup>256</sup>

Statistics can certainly tell a story, even though, as in this thesis, it is not always a happy one. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> cent there seemed little cause for concern. And this was not true only of Methodists. James Munson, in the *Nonconformists*,

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<sup>252</sup> R. Alder to Jabez Bunting in W. R. Ward, ed., *Early Victorian Methodism* (Oxford: University of Durham, 1876), 268.

<sup>253</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 225.

<sup>254</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 24.

<sup>255</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 139.

<sup>256</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 1.

tabulates growth which he calls 'impressive' for the whole nonconformist constituency.<sup>257</sup> National growth between 1875 – 1885 saw important increases among Baptists and Congregationalists, as well as Methodists.<sup>258</sup>

In regard to Methodism, statistics reveal that the Bible Christians, who were strongly but not exclusively Cornish, experienced the second highest growth by proportion. Their impressive increase of membership was from 18,324 to 23,455, a rise of 28% over the same time scale as above.<sup>259</sup> But locally, as against nationally, for the Wesleyans it was a rather different story. Probert's definitive research reveals that the Wesleyans of Redruth peaked in 1863, and St Ives in 1862. After this there was, with a few exceptions, continuous gradual decline through the period of this chapter.<sup>260</sup> So why was it different for the Bible Christians and Primitive Methodists? Tom Shaw makes the point that they were different from other new Methodist denominations, in that their origin had not been through schism. He says 'they were more in the nature of evangelical off-shoots of Methodism than divisions within it.'<sup>261</sup> Both denominations 'were trying to revive what they supposed to be the original or 'primitive' form of Methodism.'<sup>262</sup>

Nationally the Wesleyans saw a 15% rise and the Primitive Methodists 12%. Over the same period the population of England and Wales rose by 3%.<sup>263</sup> This is sometimes spoken of, inaccurately, as The Second Great Awakening. Alec Ryrie rightly argues that it was but a 'continuation of the First.'<sup>264</sup>

It is of particular interest to draw contrasts between these national figures and Cornwall. Two 'snapshots' are available. The first comes from the 1851 Census, the last census where church attendance was counted. It states: -

#### Estimated Church Attendances in Cornwall on 30 March 1851

Not attending places of worship (51%)

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<sup>257</sup> James Munson, *The Nonconformists* (London: SPCK, 1991), 9-13.

<sup>258</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 13.

<sup>259</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 98.

<sup>260</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 81.

<sup>261</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 88.

<sup>262</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 88.

<sup>263</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 227.

<sup>264</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 211.

Methodists (32%)

Anglicans (13.2),

Congregationalists (2%),

Baptists (1%)

None of the others totalled (1%)<sup>265</sup>

To choose just one of the largest communities featured in this census it reveals that Redruth *and* district had a population of 53,628. The places of worship numbered were - Anglican 19, Methodist 82, Others 6. It can be presumed that this would be a typical ratio of the other centres of population in this study. On the day of the census some 113,000 Cornish people were counted as Methodist, while another 63,000 were attending other places of worship. The figures confirm that roughly half of the worshipping population in Cornwall would describe themselves as Methodists of one shade or another.

Secondly, and later in the century, there are other figures which indicate that decline was beginning to set in, obscured somewhat by what today would be more than healthy congregations. This can be demonstrated by Figures of Membership in 1879 in the three circuits, directly applicable to this study.

Redruth town Sixteen Chapels 6,650 sittings - 1906 members

Camborne Eighteen Chapels 6,687 sittings - 2380 members

St. Ives Thirteen Chapels 3,312 sittings - 854 members<sup>266</sup>

Although the number of members for 1879 looks impressive, even astronomical by today's West Cornwall standard, the ratio of members to seats tells a slightly different story. This is caused by the negative effect of duplication. In the area under review there were four chapels seating in excess of 1,000. St. Ives had one, Camborne two, with one in Redruth seating 1,500.<sup>267</sup> This was a legacy of the revival from the first half of the nineteenth century. Rapid numerical growth was accompanied by extensive and

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<sup>265</sup> *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (xi,1,1960).

<sup>266</sup> R. Symons, *Wesley's Itineraries in Cornwall* (Truro: Private Publication, 1879), back cover.

<sup>267</sup> Sadly this church closed in 2019.

excessive chapel building and re-building `much of it beyond the needs of the time and the probable needs of the future,' says Probert.<sup>268</sup>

Neither did the large membership figures above lead to financial wellbeing, at least not in Cornwall. Tom Shaw writes that the `Methodist rule of one penny per member per week was not being observed in Cornwall.' It was `a fact unprecedented in the history of Methodism that seven to eight hundred members in any one church should declare themselves incapable of supporting a minister.'<sup>269</sup> Finance is a recurring difficulty that will be examined again.

### **Pointers for Numerical Decline**

One of the conclusions Robert Currie draws for decline is not wholly convincing. While being justifiably scornful of Methodist passion for size, Currie is prepared, with a minimum of argument, to equate falling membership totals with `the decline of Christianity.'<sup>270</sup> It was more than that. Of first importance, when discussing decline, is not to solely blame the Methodist system, or blame weaknesses that had been bequeathed from an earlier generation. For numerical decline has become a feature of all the main-line denominations.<sup>271</sup> Nevertheless, it is the Methodists that are being addressed here.

There are clear indications as to future problems that were a particular feature of Methodism at large. One reason would be that by 1883 lay preachers outnumbered ministers by seven to one.<sup>272</sup> Though this might be lauded for using and developing lay-gifting, it would seem clear that the loss of `hands-on' input of a pastor for the care of a particular congregation was seriously damaging.<sup>273</sup> A Liverpool minister said in 1886 `No man can win the confidence and love of poor fallen people who only appears in the same pulpit once a month in the morning, and once a month in the evening, and that for the short space of three years.'<sup>274</sup> A presbyter, invariably the only recognised

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<sup>268</sup> J. C. C. Probert, "The Architecture of Cornish Methodism" in Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 67.

<sup>269</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 109.

<sup>270</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 85.

<sup>271</sup> Cullum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 161.

<sup>272</sup> Kenneth D. Brown, *Nonconformist Ministry* (London: Clarendon Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>273</sup> For Baptists these years were the time of the fruitful ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Not only did he establish many churches but founded a theological college to train ministers to pastor them.

<sup>274</sup> Charles Garrett, *Methodist Times* (29 April 1886) in Inglis, *Working Classes*, 90.

person to officiate at the Eucharist, was consumed by the demands of maintaining the bread and butter life of a chapel or circuit. This could lead to frustration and strain in conducting individual pastoral care, or the impossibility of a consecutive preaching ministry.

There is another explanation for numerical decline. K.S. Inglis in his *Churches and the Working Class in Victorian England* says, as almost a throwaway comment. 'The evangelical revival aroused earnest dedication in all denominations to the task of saving souls, but most souls in the town (Sheffield) remained outside of the churches.'<sup>275</sup> The opposite was the problem in Cornwall where, in many villages most of the population *were* to be found in Methodist churches,<sup>276</sup> leading to inevitable complacency and eventual shrinkage.

Tom Shaw suggests another problem particular to Cornwall, which he calls 'a defect.' He reports that 'In the view of some of the leading laymen, . . . Cornwall did not get its rightful share of the more talented ministers.'<sup>277</sup> It was argued that this was not without consequences. 'Prominent West Cornwall Methodists such as George Smith of Camborne, and others, suggested that one or two leading ministers would help to remedy some of the disciplinary defects, and lack of connexional loyalty, which have been noted in the district.'<sup>278</sup> It is certainly true that West Cornish Methodism was perceived as 'difficult' by the powers that be.<sup>279</sup>

Another obvious factor was the outcome of duplication. For some considerable time Methodism had known no single guiding hand like that of John Wesley. At the same time in West Cornwall, Methodism had been divided into several parallel denominations leading to a superfluity of chapels.<sup>280</sup> Gerald Parsons could be describing the West Cornwall scene when he writes that 'The last strands of late Victorian Protestant Revivalism, the various evangelical groupings, revealed a widespread dissatisfaction with the increasingly structured and centralised life of main

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<sup>275</sup> Inglis, *Working Classes*, 327.

<sup>276</sup> Deacon, *Industrial Celts*, 204.

<sup>277</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 108-9.

<sup>278</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 109.

<sup>279</sup> See chapter four.

<sup>280</sup> Even today St Ives with a population of some 7,000 people has six Methodist Churches, with only two having a regular congregation of over twenty.

denominations.<sup>281</sup> This was certainly echoed in West Cornwall with its revival history, interdenominational suspicion and hesitancy of all things ‘up-country.’ The combined effect of these factors led to decline and in 1886 a Wesleyan Methodist survey noted ‘a marked decrease in Cornwall’.<sup>282</sup>

## Methodist Structures

### Class Meeting

Of the established elements of Methodism that came under particular pressure in the last part of the nineteenth century was the Class Meeting. It is firstly important to place the Class Meeting in time and place. In this James Munson and Robert Currie help. So, Munson writes:

John Wesley’s appeal had lost its more universal appeal when racked by various secessions between the end of the eighteenth century and the 1850s. This left Wesleyan Methodism holding the middle classes, and the other divisions, like the Primitive Methodists, the working classes. It also created certain regional divisions. . . the Bible Christians were strong in Cornwall . . .<sup>283</sup>

The Class Meeting endeavoured to meet the needs of differing groupings with different needs and tastes. Currie argues that ‘The Class was converted from the organ of discipline and control to the organ of “fellowship”, sociability, and entertainment.’<sup>284</sup> He illustrates this by quoting from the Cornish dominated Bible Christians who wanted the Class to be ‘more social – more like a family circle’.<sup>285</sup> This reflects sociological and theological changes that were taking place in Methodism at large, and in Cornwall in particular. So, Currie writes ‘Such doctrinal change demanded organizational change. The older structure of Methodist life was too rigid and severe to express the new theology of friendly religion.’<sup>286</sup> In the 1870s there were some who were concerned as to how the Class Meeting was developing. One correspondent, writing to his denominational newspaper, declared that the Class was:

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<sup>281</sup> Parsons, *Vol. 2: Traditions*, 233.

<sup>282</sup> Nicholas Orme, ed., *Unity and Variety – A History of the Church in Devon and Cornwall* (Exeter: University Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>283</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 37.

<sup>284</sup> *Bible Christian Magazine*, June 1888, in Currie, *Methodism Divided* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 128-9.

<sup>285</sup> *Bible Christian Magazine*, in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 128.

<sup>286</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 125.

the inmost institution of Methodism . . . the matrix within which every element characteristic of Methodism is nurtured' and that 'If ever the day should come when the Class Meeting is either actually or virtually abolished, Methodism will lose its identity, and be merged into something else, widely, if not essentially different.'<sup>287</sup>

But Currie, writing of the same passage, gives another strong reason why some 'superior members were hostile to the Class.' There was a social element to this hostility. Currie reports that '*a dislike to class meetings* (italics org.) is spreading among the families of our more wealthy people.' Again, Currie reports on a Wesleyan writer of 1864 who noted that:

Methodists began to resent the threat to their respectability of guidance by fervent but poor leaders who they regarded as inferior to themselves: Class-leaders now consist mostly of poor, illiterate men; how unseemly for a person of respectability and education to be taught by a humble artisan.<sup>288</sup>

As Currie concludes, 'Methodists objected, however, not merely to being governed by poor saints but to being governed at all.'<sup>289</sup>

Today there seems to be an incorrect and simplistic understanding of the Class Meeting, both as to its function and demise. An example would be Howard Snyder. Writing an important book from an American stable<sup>290</sup> he is nevertheless mistaken when he states that the Class Meeting was a strength that would be of benefit today. In it he quotes Richard Lovelace:

It is startling that a strategy as obvious and effective as small groups could be discovered and widely used in recent history and then apparently lost until its modern rediscovery in popular religious movements. A generation of formal Christians intervening between awakenings, appears sufficient to erase them from the church's memory.<sup>291</sup>

With respect, Lovelace has perhaps not understood the purpose of the Class Meeting as perceived by John Wesley. The demise of the Class Meeting indicated something far more than the loss of 'small groups' or 'home groups' as used in modern parlance as an effective tool in the life of the local church. They were always something more than that.

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<sup>287</sup> *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, April 1865 in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 125.

<sup>288</sup> *Methodist New Connexion Magazine*, February 1867 in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 126.

<sup>289</sup> *Methodist New Connexion Magazine*, February 1867 in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 126.

<sup>290</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*.

<sup>291</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 427 in Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 149.



There was another contributory factor that led to their coming to an end, that being the Class Ticket. Since their inception, being a member of a Class Meeting was 'evidenced in the continued quarterly issue of the class ticket.' It was a requirement of membership for the Wesleyan Methodists.<sup>292</sup> This became increasingly contentious, and debates took place through the 1880's and in 1890. Reasons for this include questions as to their 'purpose, content and leadership' plus the membership criterion mentioned above.<sup>293</sup> In 1890 the class ticket being a qualification for membership was replaced by a roll-book of members of the society.<sup>294</sup>

### **Circuit**

John Lenton demonstrates how the emphasis from Class Meeting to Circuit was taking place, leaving behind previous associations with the Church of England. 'The circuit was now the place and focus of Methodist life and the historic identification with the Church of England was coming to an end.'<sup>295</sup> The parish church at St Just in West Cornwall had many Methodists attending for communion, marriage and burial in the 1860s, but a marginal note in the burial register in 1889 described Betsy Bottrall as the last Methodist who regularly attended communion services there.<sup>296</sup> One suggested reason for this departure, even if a little forced, comes from Francis Knight. He interpreted it as a sign that 'the pan-Protestant Evangelical consensus had run out of steam, and that after the rise of the Oxford Movement, and ritual it became harder to perceive the Church of England as a Protestant body.'<sup>297</sup> But this departure from worship in the Church of England did not necessarily mean the strengthening of the circuit, for Robert Currie expresses concern about the way that the circuit was developing. 'Great ideas faded into organisational realities. The Methodism circuit life was apparently declining into comfortable existence, which Hugh Price Hughes, one of the key leaders of the time, called 'shopocracy.'<sup>298</sup> This implies that Methodists

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<sup>292</sup> Howdle, "Membership" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 228.

<sup>293</sup> Howdle, "Membership" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 228.

<sup>294</sup> Howdle, "Membership" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 228.

<sup>295</sup> Lenton, "Circuits", 69.

<sup>296</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 122.

<sup>297</sup> Francis Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>298</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 82.

chose the chapel that best met their personal preference, and there were certainly enough Methodist chapels to choose from.

Change was afoot. John Obelkevich writes that ‘By the 1870s, religion, both popular and official was becoming less intense and less distinctive. In Methodism, evangelism yielded to entertainment, the ‘community of the saints’ to ‘fellowship,’ and soul-making to character-building.’<sup>299</sup> Despite Methodism becoming less strident, new concerns were becoming evident and were the precursors of some of the suggested structural weaknesses that will be discussed later.

The problem of the circuit system, so important for Methodist connexion as a conduit for Conference and District, was revealing new tensions and pressures. A letter appeared in the *Methodist Times* ‘Ministers carrying the gospel among non-worshippers in great cities found the circuit and the itinerary hindered them.’<sup>300</sup> Ministry for Methodist clergy in pastoral charge was in the circuit. It was, and is, the location where their work was centred, despite its apparent frustrations. By the end of the Victorian era the Methodist circuit system was readily acknowledged to have the disadvantage of spreading the resources of the minister too thinly. Alfred Sargent complained that ‘as head of a circuit and responsible for seven churches and missions, he had little or no time for visiting individuals.’<sup>301</sup> No doubt the sentiments of many a circuit minister today.

### Conference

Geographical distance did not separate Methodists, particularly the Wesleyans, from denominational structures such as their respective Conferences. What is clear is that their mandate and their power to enforce their decisions at that time was absolute. James Munson writes ‘The Methodists might reject the right of Rome or Canterbury to speak with authority on matters of faith, but they had no doubt about Conference’s role as *ecclesia docens*.’<sup>302</sup> He continues by quoting Conference as saying something very difficult to take seriously. ‘Its remedies have been tested . . . everywhere and the

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<sup>299</sup> J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society* (London: OUP, 1976), 72.

<sup>300</sup> Charles Garrett, *Methodist Times*, 29 April 1886, in Inglis, *Working Classes*, 90.

<sup>301</sup> Gerald Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain Vol. 2: Controversies* (Manchester: Open University, 1988), 277.

<sup>302</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 165.

first failure yet to be recorded.’ Munson comments ‘In short, the connexional system seemed to be infallible.’<sup>303</sup>

James Munson overstates the matter when speaking of Methodism at the end of the century. He says:

The elaborate and centralised organisation of Wesleyanism, with its powerful hierarchy, was to give way to a simple democracy of Brother Christians in every neighbourhood, a peculiarly efficacious doctrine in support of lay control in the chapel.<sup>304</sup>

This was nonsense then and is not true today. Nevertheless, the spontaneity of the revival times had not been wholly forgotten. But in Cornwall things were changing here too.

## Revival

The word ‘revival,’ though still frequently used, was now other than detailed in the previous chapter, for there was now a demographic complication. The reason was, as Hugh McLeod details, that there were villages in West Cornwall ‘where 90% of the adult population attended Methodist meetings.’<sup>305</sup> Gerald Parsons describes the situation pertaining to the Cornish communities:

By 1850, however, even Primitive Methodism was well on the way to becoming an established denomination – still more intense and revivalist than Wesleyan Methodism, but also less emotional than in its early days – and the older tradition of spontaneous, unstructured revivalism was becoming increasingly a localised phenomenon. It survived, for example, in Cornwall . . . but the distinctively local character of such revivals became increasingly evident.<sup>306</sup>

Alec Ryrie makes the point exactly when speaking of various significant evangelistic initiatives. He says that these events ‘acquired a new label, which has since become standard jargon: “revivals.”’<sup>307</sup> Derek J. Tidball, a Baptist minister and academic, says of the middle of the nineteenth century revivalism, that it became ‘routinised.’(sic) Evangelistic campaigns or initiatives took on little more than a ‘revivalist

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<sup>303</sup> Wesleyan Methodist Conference, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1896 in Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 161.

<sup>304</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 77.

<sup>305</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, 291.

<sup>306</sup> Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain*, 215.

<sup>307</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 174.

complexion,<sup>308</sup> and this was certainly not revival as has been defined or experienced.<sup>309</sup>

A historian of the nineteenth century church, David Bebbington, when writing of 'revivalism,' says 'Respectability and decorum were gradually gaining the upper hand.'<sup>310</sup> In fact one gets an impression from Bebbington that revivalism was seen as a short cut for success. He writes that in 'the plodding work of the societies (evangelical agencies) . . . there was much prayer for Revival',<sup>311</sup> as with today in some parts of West Cornwall. Richard Lovelace confirms this when he writes that revival was 'consolidated and augmented by missionary endeavour and social reform.'<sup>312</sup> It is debatable whether in Cornwall revival has ever been such, for in the latter half of the nineteenth century they were still expected, if only occasionally.<sup>313</sup> One Methodist minister, writing of revival as late as 1882, says revivals are expected 'only periodically, as the Cornish folk look at certain seasons for large catches of fish.'<sup>314</sup> Yet the same minister *does* go on to describe just such a 'a large catch of fish' as a dramatic revival event.<sup>315</sup> But even this was ending, for as Shaw writes 'revival went on until it burnt itself out. Towards the end of the century the revivals were overlapped by what many regarded as "new-fangled" special missions. Instead of praying that revivals might come.'<sup>316</sup> As a Bible Christian leader said in 1889 'they hired peoples to get up revivals.'<sup>317</sup> Revival was being watered-down thereby pointing forward to a general acceptance of a variety of views and emphases for evangelism, pertinent today in all mainline denominations.

It is disappointing to see a change in the use of the noun 'Revival' which causes a down-grading of its significance. Of concern is the influential and important *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, published at the turn of this century. In a book of four hundred and seven double-column, closely printed pages, the entry on revivalism

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<sup>308</sup> Derek J. Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals? Tracing the Roots of Today's Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 45.

<sup>309</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>310</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Victorian Nonconformity* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 32.

<sup>311</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 76.

<sup>312</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 27.

<sup>313</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 120.

<sup>314</sup> R.E. Davies et al., *A History of The Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London, 1988), 38-42.

<sup>315</sup> Davies, *A History*, 32.

<sup>316</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 120.

<sup>317</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 120.

is a quarter of one column and is almost condescending. It states `that they (revivals) did lead to large periodic increases in membership in Cornwall and many parts of the North and Midlands.'<sup>318</sup> What took place might be unpalatable to modern sensitivities, but they had a dramatic and lasting effect - something more than `large periodic increases.'

Howard Snyder, gives several cogent reasons for the decline in revival expectations:

The rise of the stationed pastor who gradually took over the pastoral function of the class leader: the growing sophistication and prosperity of Methodists: the loss of holiness expectations: Revivalism which undermined the perception of continuing spiritual growth, and the tendency to allow classes to grow too large.<sup>319</sup>

Nearly every clause of the above is open to debate, but it could be paraphrased in one sentence, namely that individual spiritual nurturing was falling away and with it, perhaps, Wesley's `warmed heart.'<sup>320</sup>

As to individual experimental faith, an American author, Richard Helmstadter, was dubious regarding the evangelicalism so typical of many English Methodists. Writing of a faith that was to be felt, he says `Evangelical Christianity was an intensely personal religion grounded in subjective religious experience, which could often lead to immense introspection.'<sup>321</sup> It is certainly true that the Class Meeting and revival emphasised an experimental religious faith and that sadly, with the demise of both, late Victorian Methodism was losing something intangible, yet real, in terms of Christian experience.

One late experience of Cornish revival that did take place is of keen interest, not only that such memories lived on, but particularly for the one at the centre of the occasion. Hugh Price Hughes, the national Methodist leader and founder of what was described as a New Methodism or Forward Movement,<sup>322</sup> was its catalyst. He was Commissioned by the (Wesleyan) 1876 Conference to promote the Home Mission Department in Eastern Cornwall. There, it is reported, he `witnessed a modest revival

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<sup>318</sup> Parkes, "Revivalism", 293.

<sup>319</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 175.

<sup>320</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 26.

<sup>321</sup> Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>322</sup> Timothy S. A. Macquiban "Hugh Price Hughes" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 167-168.

of his own.<sup>323</sup> He significantly reveals the social change that was taking place in Cornwall church life. He reports that ‘A number of respectable people have found peace.’<sup>324</sup> The phrase ‘respectable people’ signified that Cornish Methodism was becoming ‘nice,’ which is a word that could, in time, describe the general perception of West Cornwall Methodism. So it is that Hugh Price Hughes handled his Revival with attempted decorum:

At the Cornwall services there were, as might be expected, cases of over-excitement and hysteria which Hughes, like Wesley before, quietly discouraged. He appealed to people “just fix your mind on Christ and do not make this noise.” Or he conducted them into another room and engaged the congregation in silent prayer.<sup>325</sup>

Clearly, this lack of decorum was not unprecedented. Nevertheless, as Shaw writes ‘the turbulence and rapid expansion of the early part of the century was replaced in the middle part of the century by slower growth and doctrinal moderation.’<sup>326</sup> Wesleyan Methodism became the preserve of the middle classes, and the working class was progressively side-lined.

The demographic of Cornish Methodism was changing. This change as to the meaning of revival can be demonstrated from a much-respected source. What Chadwick argues in his second book on the *History of the Church in England* became true of Cornwall. Having spoken of the famous 1859 revival in Northern Ireland, he speaks of it giving ‘new stimulus to everyone who believed in the methods of old-fashioned revival, and persuaded others, who hitherto could not believe in them at all, to give them a trial.’<sup>327</sup> This again implies something rather different from historic revival as described in this thesis – and by Chadwick himself in the first part of his history.<sup>328</sup> Now he is writing of special evangelistic occasions, or missions organised by the churches. This is not revival. Under the same heading of revival, he tells the story of the rise of the Salvation Army along with other evangelistic initiatives. So, when Chadwick describes William Booth as ‘The most remarkable revivalist of the age who

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<sup>323</sup> P. H. Hughes to Katherine Price Hughes, 13 Feb 1877 in D. P Hughes, *Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (London: 1904), 124.

<sup>324</sup> Hughes, *Life*, 124.

<sup>325</sup> Hughes, *Life*, 124.

<sup>326</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 121.

<sup>327</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 286.

<sup>328</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 386-91.

appeared among the radical Methodists,<sup>329</sup> he writes, as has been seen, of one who knew everything there was to know about Cornish revivals. But here Chadwick is writing, not of revival in its historical context, but rather in its new connotation as to his being a gifted evangelist.

Reports of great missions and revival-like occurrences continued, but the day of the historic revivals in Cornwall were over. Nationally, times of dramatic conversions affecting both church and society, that echoed Cornish revivals, have been reported in South and West Wales, the East Coast of Scotland, East Anglia, the Hebrides and elsewhere. It is not without significance that all of these places where revivals have been reported are, if not rural, then like West Cornwall they were geographically cut-off from the social and political mainstream.

### **Doctrine**

Even to independent observers it is possible to discern that things in West Cornwall Methodism were changing, not only socially but also theologically. This can be illustrated painfully by Canon Thomas Taylor, an Anglican commentator on religion in Cornwall at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who wrote:

Methodism on the old lines is moribund in Cornwall, . . . Revivals have almost become things of the past. Conversion, theoretically the starting point of Methodism religion, is no longer required to be sudden. The Class Meeting has lost much of its attractiveness . . . Many of the old doctrines are being recast. Methodism is in a state of transition.<sup>330</sup>

Whatever the standpoint of the writer, obviously there was the appearance of a change in doctrinal emphasis amongst many of the Cornish Methodists. This was typical of what was taking place elsewhere. Other than the Baptist C. H. Spurgeon and the Down Grade Controversy, few evangelicals remained untouched by the milder spirit of the age.<sup>331</sup>

The first point of tension came from the debate as to the inspiration of Scripture. Robert Currie addresses the issue. 'As the century (19<sup>th</sup>) progressed, Methodists became

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<sup>329</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 287.

<sup>330</sup> T. Taylor, *The Celtic Christianity of Cornwall*, (Norderstedt: BoD, 1916), 102.

<sup>331</sup> D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 186.

more prosperous and more educated. They modified their attitude to the Bible in the light of new ideas, and consequently amended various beliefs based upon their reading of the Bible.<sup>332</sup>

The Methodist Press began to draw attention to the implications of Biblical Criticism. Writing in the 1870s it was said that 'many orthodox believers . . . have a great aversion to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. They think the theory mechanical and degrading.'<sup>333</sup> No longer were Methodist doctrines set in stone. So, continues Currie, 'By the 1880s and 1890s, a large number of Methodist ministers had been trained in modern types of biblical criticism.'<sup>334</sup>

West Cornwall, of course, was not unaffected by these doctrinal pressures. Tom Shaw says that 'in the seventies, Thomas Oliver, a working miner and local preacher, had already spoken favourably about the theories of Darwin and the Higher Critics from the pulpits around Camborne, and got into trouble about it.'<sup>335</sup> John Probert writes 'We have evidence that the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis on the sources of Genesis was known to Redruth . . . leaders at the end of the last century.'<sup>336</sup>

Perhaps, as a result of these academic tensions there was suspicion of theological colleges for the training of ministers.<sup>337</sup> One lecturer in just such a Methodist college wrote to his denominational newspaper of an 'irrational clamour . . . has recently been raised against dogmas and creeds'. It was said that the 'theological students of Methodism were much unsettled in mind during 1891-1892.'<sup>338</sup> Though not without an evangelical reaction, the Primitive Methodists in 1892 appointed A. S. Peake (of Commentary fame) to be tutor at Hartley College, even though his critical opinions were already known.<sup>339</sup> A change of emphasis began to take place in Methodist ministry. 'During the nineteenth century Methodism had to accommodate itself to the fact that it was no longer a primarily evangelical force.'<sup>340</sup> 'By 1900 . . . the Methodists

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<sup>332</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 113.

<sup>333</sup> *Methodist New Connexion Magazine*, March 1870, in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 113.

<sup>334</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 113.

<sup>335</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 131.

<sup>336</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 70.

<sup>337</sup> Even as a boy in a Baptist Church in Bristol, if the announced minister had qualifications after his name there would be mutterings of 'emptying the churches by degrees'.

<sup>338</sup> *Methodist New Connexion Magazine*, May 1897, in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 121.

<sup>339</sup> Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Independent Press: 1954) in Chadwick, *Part 2*, 105.

<sup>340</sup> Gerald Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain Vol. 2: Controversies* (Manchester: Open University, 1988), 269.



and Primitive Methodists had also accommodated a range of moderately critical opinions alongside their traditional views.<sup>341</sup> In time, some of these newly trained ministers would inevitably have found themselves in Cornwall.

During this time, the status of the minister was a key point of tension, being a spin-off from the intellectual debate. The authority of ministers and their training had tangible repercussions for both clergy and laity. David Wilkinson describes how 'Secession after secession within Methodism was sparked at least in part by fundamental disagreement concerning the place of the ministry in God's church and its distinctiveness from lay membership.'<sup>342</sup> The core question related to the vocation of the minister – was it or was it not distinct from the people? This touched upon structure, training, and ordination for ministers who needed to be cognisant of, and prepared to, handle the pressing doctrinal issues that Biblical Criticism and Darwinism were bringing.

Yet, for Methodists these academic pressures saw little official comment.<sup>343</sup> A book from 1868, a compendium of the Wesleyan Methodist 'laws, regulations, and general economy; together with a full . . . account of all their ordinances, institutions, funds, and customs in the matter of doctrine . . .,' was unequivocally plain about its doctrinal position. It repeated an unamended statement of Conference from 1807:

No person shall, on any account, be permitted to retain any official situation in our societies, who hold opinions contrary to the total depravity of human nature, the divinity and atonement of Christ, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and Christian holiness, as believed by the Methodists.<sup>344</sup>

But matters such as the Inspiration of Scripture and evolution were here to stay. Sir Percy Bunting, Methodist editor of the *Contemporary Review*, wrote: 'The influence of the evolutionary idea in all subjects of human thought is permanent, and has deeply affected theology.'<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain*, 247.

<sup>342</sup> David Wilkinson, *The Activity of God in Methodist Perspective in Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 143.

<sup>343</sup> Baptists were at this time deeply involved with Spurgeon and the Down-grade controversy.

<sup>344</sup> *Methodist Conference* (The Methodist Church: 1807) in William Pierce, *The Ecclesiastical Principles and Polity of the Wesleyan Methodists* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1868), 370.

<sup>345</sup> Sir Percy Bunting in Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 157.

It became a matter of comment that the West Cornwall Wesleyan Methodists were more doctrinally sophisticated than seems to have been presumed elsewhere. In 1874 The Wesleyan National Conference was held in Camborne. A debate took place on liturgy revision:

By the 1870s many Wesleyans (nationally) had ceased to use the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in the chapels, although the number who clung to it despite its newly-found popish connections remained considerable for want of a better alternative. . . . It was commented in the *Methodist Recorder* that 'considering that nine-tenths of the congregation were unprovided with prayer-books the form of worship was much more effective in its character than might have been anticipated.'<sup>346</sup>

There are four things of significance to be drawn from this report of Conference. Firstly, a note of condescension to the Cornish in the last line when writing of the West Cornish Methodist's form of worship as 'more effective ... than might have been anticipated.' Secondly, that Cornish Methodism was significant enough in both number and influence to consider moving the National Conference so far West. Thirdly, the effect of the Oxford Movement was causing ripples beyond the Church of England for it noted 'newly found popish connections' in the revision of the Prayer Book. And fourthly, and of little surprise, that the vast majority of the Cornish congregation were not in possession of a Prayer Book!

By the end of the same century, it could be argued that even conversion itself, a central feature of historic revival, had become less important, if not questioned. Michael Watts writes in an important modern book *The Dissenter Vol III* that 'Even Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists, who had long regarded John Wesley's strange warming of the heart as the normative Christian experience, were beginning to doubt the need for sudden conversion.'<sup>347</sup> Such thinking permeated as far as West Cornwall. At the 1892 Primitive Methodist conference again in Camborne, William Hartley, (himself a prominent Primitive Methodist), said Primitive Methodism's insistence on conversion 'had lost thousands of young people.'<sup>348</sup> Such thinking was, of course, wider than Methodism. In the late 1890s Joseph Parker - not a Methodist but a highly regarded

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<sup>346</sup> Herbert W. White, *Cornish Methodist Historical Association Journal No.7* (Truro: Mid Cornwall Printing, 1963).

<sup>347</sup> Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters Vol. 111. The Crisis and Conscience of Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 97.

<sup>348</sup> Watts, *The Dissenters*, 27.

nonconformist representative of evangelical thought - 'always insisted that there must be a real 'conversion' for each individual although he also thought that the belief in individualism had been pushed too far both in the Church and in society.'<sup>349</sup>

McLeod speaking of the end of the nineteenth century, argues that those:

who enjoyed the total certainty of having found the meaning of life was becoming rare among Christians . . . What had gone was the appearance of consensus that Evangelicals Christians had succeeded in imposing on the middle and upper classes generally (and in Wales and Cornwall on the population as a whole).<sup>350</sup> (brackets original).

Inevitably Methodism was becoming a group of theologically mixed denominations.

### **Social pressures**

Methodism in West Cornwall experienced many of the social changes that were taking place elsewhere. Writing of late nineteenth century nonconformity in general, Munson argues that it 'suffered from its own prosperity' and 'absorption into the mainstream of urban life.'<sup>351</sup> Equally true is what Hugh McLeod writes concerning Victorian Nonconformity in Cornwall:

Many people wished to attend the church, and it was regarded as the thing to do: but there was less of the feeling that society has specific claims in the matter. . . What was needed was to keep yourself to yourself, a safe job, a respectable anonymity, a local esteem.<sup>352</sup>

Merely 'saving souls' was no longer sufficient, yet the loss of that impetus was to have an effect in focus and direction. The population at large was looking for something other than that which was being offered by the churches. Miners Institutes, Trade Unions and Fishermen's Co-ops, all outside of the churches, were a testimony to this fact in West Cornwall. People were looking for wider experience or something different.

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<sup>349</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 115-6.

<sup>350</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, 257.

<sup>351</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 304.

<sup>352</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, 146.

K.S. Inglis writes of this specific point. In his *Churches and the Working Class in Victorian England* he makes an almost throwaway comment of significance to this thesis when writing of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Great social change took place in the century, but the pattern of religious habit in the second half of the century, certainly of the middle and labouring classes, is basically determined by the habits of the first half; so strong is the law of social habit, a “law” to which churches have paid virtually no attention.<sup>353</sup>

Nevertheless, habits were changing. The ‘law’ ensured strong Sunday church attendances, with even stronger Sunday Schools numbers. But this camouflaged negative trends. Because of this the Methodists of West Cornwall became either complacent or unaware of the wider issues at play. And one of those issues was the need for unity.

## Unity

Apparently in the late 1860s unity with the other new Methodist denominations hardly crossed the mind of the Wesleyan Methodists, nor was it to do so for several decades. In *The Ecclesiastical Principles and Polity of the Wesleyan Methodists*, a book of over 800 pages tightly printed pages, there is no mention of unity with other of the new expressions of Methodism and ‘unity’ does not appear in the index.<sup>354</sup> And this continued throughout the century.

John Boaden who was a Methodist farmer living in Hayle and active in local politics, thought otherwise. Writing in 1902 he said:

after nearly seventy years of experience the effects of divided Methodist Churches could still be plainly seen. The spirit of party rivalry had led to lavish expenditures on the decoration of chapels, the provision of musical instruments, and so forth, that in too many cases could be considered as wasteful extravagance; many parishes had twice the chapel accommodation they needed and there was consequently much wasted spiritual labour.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Inglis, *Working Classes*, 327.

<sup>354</sup> Peirce, *Ecclesiastical Principles*.

<sup>355</sup> John Boaden in John Rowe *Changing Times and Fortunes: A Cornish Farmers Life 1828-1904* (Exeter: Cornish Hillside Publications, 1996), 42.

And using acidic Cornish bluntness he adds `It would seem to me, that if the Methodist bodies are to be reunited, the initiative will have to be taken by the people, the ministers seem the least likely to promote it.'<sup>356</sup>

John Smith helps to take the debate further. `As Methodists moved from "cultural outsiders to insiders" the result was increasing influence and decreasing recruitment, a pattern that is obviously unsustainable over the long haul. Methodism thrived on opposition, but it could not long survive equipoise.'<sup>357</sup> Something needed to be done.

### **Unifying Factors and 1907**

From the benefit of hindsight, it seems inexplicable that the various Methodist denominations in the second half of the nineteenth century did not grasp the first opportunity to come together. Gerald Parsons says that phrases such as `“diverse unity” were offered. Through such wordplay `Victorian Nonconformists claimed underlying unity, a shared identity which transcends the many individual expressions of nonconformity.'<sup>358</sup> Hugh Price Hughes had a less convoluted yet more pointed view saying that `Division . . . was the curse of Methodism.'<sup>359</sup> Whilst James Munson describes the situation facing Methodism at the end of the Nineteenth Century in an understated sentence; `facing competition among five separate bodies, had not always worked for the best and there had been much wasted effort.'<sup>360</sup>

Toward the end of a lecture given by Sidney Dixon to the Cornish Methodist Historical Association, he speaks of the past and of what is also relevant for today. `It is possible to look back, to recognise and approve the reasons which brought about divisions within the church, while seeing the futility of battling for territory that is no longer in dispute.'<sup>361</sup> He records in detail the various moves towards unity:

. . . in 1904 the following two questions were put to the Quarterly Meetings (of the various denominations). 1. Do you approve of Union with the above-named Churches, if found practicable? 2. Do you approve of an effort being made forthwith by duly appointed representatives to draft a constitution with a view

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<sup>356</sup> Rowe, *Changing Times and Fortunes*, 42-43.

<sup>357</sup> John Smith, "Review" in *The Historian* (2006), Vol.68, No.4.

<sup>358</sup> Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain*, 87.

<sup>359</sup> Hughes, *Life*, 147.

<sup>360</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 158.

<sup>361</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 27.

to its being submitted to the to the Quarterly Meetings for approval? Approval was given overwhelmingly for both questions.<sup>362</sup>

But although the initial inter-church `conversations' achieved little, the ecclesiastical climate was changing. Sadly, one of the difficulties hindering reunion in Cornwall was class discrimination.

This was not new, nor was it the end of systemic prejudice. Robert Currie writes `When the New Connexion tried, unsuccessfully, to unite with the Bible Christian in the 1860s, there was much `talk' of the difference of social status.'<sup>363</sup> And when the Free Methodists entered the United Methodist Church in 1907, there was comment as to the inferiority of the Bible Christians, a collection of `Devonians and Cornishmen . . . waiting with open mouths in their little antiquated chapels among the hills.'<sup>364</sup> This feature was to raise its head again in regard to the unity discussions before and after the 1932 act of Union.<sup>365</sup> Nevertheless things were beginning to change.

Gradually, as the early years of the new century took their course, bitter memories began to fade. Disagreements over doctrine between the various Methodist denominations were minimal. The festive occasions of the church year such as Sunday School anniversaries, outings and harvest became occasions for local churches to get together and the woeful duplication of resources became obvious.

Robert Currie argues from a more academic standpoint when he writes `most Methodist denominations operated in a frame of reference provided by the Methodist world. They understood critical size as a level below which the organisation could not survive. Each of the Methodist denominations must have an adequately paid trained ministry and capital must be mobilized for expansion.'<sup>366</sup> As he points out, maintaining a denomination was expensive. There was the need to publish literature such as Conference Reports and minutes, the payment of salaries and stipends for employees and ministers, as well as to carry out the myriad other functions that constitute a

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<sup>362</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 22.

<sup>363</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 207.

<sup>364</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 207.

<sup>365</sup> See chapter four.

<sup>366</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 89.

denomination. In Currie's thinking only Primitive Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists had the size to accomplish these fiscal demands.<sup>367</sup>

As for the other Methodist denominations who were seeking common ground, the give and take of compromise inevitably caused certain things to die. Circuit independence, one of the Free Methodist Churches defining fundamentals, came to an end with the following resolution to its conference in 1906:

The conference of the united church acquired the right to take such action as it may deem necessary or expedient, to induce circuit loyalty, to fulfil in any manner which the Conference may think desirable, and their obligations to sustain all institutions and funds of a Connexional character.<sup>368</sup>

The *Methodist Union Minute Book, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1902, to September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1907*; and *Minutes of the United Methodist Free Churches, 1907* records that the reformers adopted the principle of *connexionalism* (italics org), co-ordination of effort and centralisation of control and direction through a series of courts, culminating in one supreme authority.<sup>369</sup> Separate circuit independence had died a quiet death.

In 1907 the Methodist New Connexion, the Bible Christian Church and the United Methodist Church came together as the United Methodist Church. The Conferences of each were formally adjourned to a Uniting Conference at Wesley's Chapel in London on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1907, where the motion to unite was carried unanimously. This followed votes of approximately 90% in favour by the various Quarterly Meetings taken in 1904-5. The Union became legal with the United Methodist Church Act 1907, and the Foundation Deed was duly adopted under an act of Parliament named Edward VII, Chap. lxxv. A new Methodist Model Deed was executed in 1908.<sup>370</sup>

Nevertheless, the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists remained aloof from thoughts of unity. They still fulfilled the necessary requirements to be separate denominations as commented on above. Full unity had to wait to 1932.

Looking at the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a whole there are two matters that stand out from others, each having an ongoing effect for Cornish Methodism. Firstly, 1932 saw the

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<sup>367</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 89.

<sup>368</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 150.

<sup>369</sup> *Methodist Union Minute Book: December 18 1902 - September 18 1907* in *Minutes of the United Methodist Free Churches (1907)*, 51.

<sup>370</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 22.

culmination of complex efforts for Methodist union.<sup>371</sup> The coming together might be seen as a great success, but there were caveats. This national initiative, uniting most of Methodism's various strands, had to be worked out locally. It was here where many of the tensions were to be found. A significant editorial appeared in the *Methodist Recorder*:

Without doubt the devotion displayed in the cause of Methodist Union has been inspired by the hope that, in some way, the accomplishment of Union will be followed by a revival of the essential spirit of Methodism. But the experiences of the other Churches which have recently united hardly justifies an expectation . . . There is nothing in the union of Churches, considered in itself, that inevitably or even probably leads to the new birth of the Spirit.<sup>372</sup>

The other important matter was the continuing numerical decline within Methodism, both nationally and locally. This is of particular purport to Cornish Methodists, for it is within the local churches that this negative trend was experienced first-hand. The loss of adherents is as complex as it is painful and its effect on Cornwall is obvious even to the casual observer. It will be asked later if there are features peculiar to Cornish Methodism that have facilitated or accelerated decline.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Cornish Methodism had apparently settled down from the revival fervour and internal tensions of the previous century. Wesleyans at least were calling themselves churches rather than chapels, following the recommendation of Conference in 1891, thereby adding gravitas and declaration of complete separation from Anglicanism.<sup>373</sup>

Yet sadly the coming together in 1907 ' . . . failed to reduce leakage. . .' says Curry.<sup>374</sup> And this 'failure' can be demonstrated. The overall number of the uniting members in 1907, the year of the first union, was 149,110. By 1911 membership was 144,888 and by 1921, it had reduced to 138,110, a drop of 11%. The Methodist unity schemes, whatever their intrinsic value, were never agents for growth.<sup>375</sup>

### **Pressure for Further Union**

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<sup>371</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 286.

<sup>372</sup> *Methodist Recorder*, 4 August 1932, 10.

<sup>373</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 130.

<sup>374</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 98.

<sup>375</sup> Dixon, *The Road to Unity*, 24.



Reasons for declining numbers have been much debated. There was the obvious disaster of human slaughter in the first World War. But that is not a clear-cut explanation. Historians have demonstrated that war deaths did not equal, let alone surpass, the number of men who probably would have left the country over the same period as emigrants to the colonies or America.<sup>376</sup> In fact says James Munson, between 1901 and 1931 there was an increase in Nonconformist church membership, in some cases by over seven per cent despite war losses.<sup>377</sup> He continues to speak of the undoubted effect of Urbanisation and is caustic when he says 'Yet the far more important 'leakage' was to no church at all.'<sup>378</sup> Whilst the Wesleyan Conference 1920 spoke of 'the swirl of rising dissatisfactions and disputings' before listing the 'many sins of society.'<sup>379</sup> All these were factors towards a loss of church attendance.

There was a need for another initiative in bringing the various Methodist expressions together and this was not only a need from economic pressures or spiritual niceties, but from sheer logic. J. H. Shakespeare who was General Secretary of the Baptist Union in the early decades of the last century, wrote an important book *The Churches at the Crossroads*. Writing of the various shades of difference between the then disunited Methodist churches, he says:

The two largest and most powerful (forces) in our English religious life today (after the Wesleyans) are the Primitive Methodist and United Methodist Churches. They differ little in any respect. It is said that a Primitive Methodist officer in France was asked to explain the difference, but he replied that, though he had understood it when he left England, he had now forgotten what it was.<sup>380</sup>

## 1932 Union

The next and final Union event took place in 1932.<sup>381</sup> Yet it would be wrong to imagine that this later act of unity was a simple inevitability. Both nationally and within the prescribed area of West Cornwall there were elements of opposition and distrust.

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<sup>376</sup> J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 65-6, 71, 92, 266-7.

<sup>377</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 348.

<sup>378</sup> For a full record of the figures see Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 348.

<sup>379</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 293.

<sup>380</sup> J. H. Shakespeare, *The Churches at the Crossroads* (London: 1918) in Robert Amess, *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1996), 286.

<sup>381</sup> Howdle, "Methodist Church Acts" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 231.

In the white heat of revival, it had been easier to form new churches than to merge or close them. Tom Shaw draws attention to the superfluity of chapels in many parts of Cornwall as in Camborne- Redruth.<sup>382</sup> Perhaps he was being either naïve or idealistic when he comments `Despite all their differences the divided Cornish Methodists knew that they were one people.'<sup>383</sup> The Wesleyan reluctance for union was tangible. Robert Currie tells of a conversation from a Primitive Methodist perspective reflecting Wesleyan attitudes. `We are wishful to come into Union in order to rid ourselves of intolerable financial burdens . . . (yet) socially, we occupy a grade which makes it difficult for the Wesleyans to associate with us . . . I confess that my blood has been stirred.'<sup>384</sup> With attitudes such as this, it is not surprising that Shaw states that `reunion came by stages.'<sup>385</sup> Nevertheless things moved gradually forward towards unity, yet never more slowly than in West Cornwall.

Susan Howdle gives a succinct record of the formal procedures that brought about the new Methodist Church in 1932. Negotiations were first opened for further union in 1913, the first tentative scheme being reported to the Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists, and United Methodist Conference in 1920.<sup>386</sup> Wesleyan opposition became known as `the other side.'<sup>387</sup> In Cornwall the proposed scheme for union was accepted by 68 but turned down by 94. Among Primitive Methodists there were strong misgivings about what they considered to be sacerdotalism and bureaucracy.<sup>388</sup> But a positive influence came from the Primitive Methodist A.S. Peake who was `certain that the evangelisation of England would receive new impetus if the Methodist Churches led a united attack.'<sup>389</sup> In that he was no doubt disappointed. After many revisions, the proposals were approved in 1925 by the Primitive Methodists and United Methodist Conference, but the required 75% was not achieved in the Wesleyan Methodist Pastoral Session until 1928.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 132.

<sup>383</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 132.

<sup>384</sup> Samuel Horton in Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 207-8.

<sup>385</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 132.

<sup>386</sup> Howdle, "Methodist Union" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 235-6.

<sup>387</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 132.

<sup>388</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 132-3.

<sup>389</sup> Leslie S. Peake, *Arthur Samuel Peake: A Memoir* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930), 165.

<sup>390</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 209.

There is a reason why Union caused long term hurt to sensitivities in Cornwall. In April 1922 a manifesto over the signatures of twenty-six significant Wesleyan ministers was published, resisting Methodist Union. As to why, Currie points out that Wesleyan Methodist ministers 'were to go where they were sent and do what they were told'.<sup>391</sup> And this was at the behest of Conference. Nevertheless, the less advantageous areas such as Cornwall, though strong in numbers, were underserved. Advantageous areas such as 'Surrey with 1% of the Wesleyan population, organised in wealthy and educated suburban congregations, were grossly over-supplied by these same signatories.'<sup>392</sup> This might confirm the truth of the accusation, noted in a previous chapter, which complained that the less able ministers were sent to Cornwall!<sup>393</sup>

The Deed of Union 1929 led to the Uniting Conference of 1932.<sup>394</sup> Such a document could be in danger of the accusation of compromise, so as to bring the disparate expressions of Methodism together. But perhaps this was not the case. There is an important letter from Rev John Lawson on the Deed of Union in the *Methodist Recorder*, Thursday, March 13, 1997 and worthy of studying at length. He had been a witness to the signing of the Deed of Union and writes to deny the document being a "masterpiece of imprecision".<sup>395</sup> He argues that it displays the two sides of John Wesley's character of being 'a strong Churchman and a powerful evangelical preacher.' It is of great importance for this thesis when he says that Methodism is a 'Connexional Church, with a strong sense of nationwide disciplined cohesion' He argues that this connexion brings sides together and this is reflected in the Deed yet is careful to avoid compromise when he writes, quoting the theological content of the Deed, that there is 'room for constructive theological thought, so long as this does not move us away from original, historic and scriptural principles.' This he bases on the Deed regarding the Person and Work of Christ as a "fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation". In closing he argues that the Deed 'should continue to be the statement where we stand.'<sup>396</sup> And most West Cornish Methodists would agree with that.

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<sup>391</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*. 209.

<sup>392</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 209.

<sup>393</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 210.

<sup>394</sup> Howdle, "Conference", 92.

<sup>395</sup> *Methodist Recorder* (13 March 1997).

<sup>396</sup> *Methodist Recorder* (13 March 1997).

Yet in West Cornwall the fundamental problem of duplication of buildings and resources caused by the various denominations was not helped by the Deed. John Tabraham points out that 'Conference had no power to close churches or compel circuits to join together. Decades afterwards, ex-Wesleyan churches could still be seen alongside ex-Primitive and ex-United societies in the same street.'<sup>397</sup> And in West Cornwall one must add the Bible Christian churches as well.

Tom Shaw is confident as to the Cornish opinion of the Union. He says, 'Despite all their differences the divided Cornish Methodists . . . ministers, local preachers, class leaders, society stewards and trustees all recognised that their work was essentially the same.'<sup>398</sup> But that did not mean that this 'work' would take place in the same chapels, for duplication was not only across previous denominations but also within denominations. In four Wesleyan circuits from Camborne to Helston and west to Penzance, there were 48 chapels that had previously rejected Union. These chapels each had an average of 330 seats and sixty members, the ratio of seats to members being 5.6:1. The nine circuits of the various denominations in West Cornwall probably had 23,000 empty seats between them.<sup>399</sup>

In Cornwall the local situation of loyalty to chapel and circuit conflicted with ecumenical designs from the centre.<sup>400</sup> And the Unionists could not seriously argue that short-term sacrifice would bring long-term benefits, nor that members might lose their beloved chapel but would have the satisfaction of seeing membership centred in a few selected chapels. In fact, the excess capacity and acute overlap would still characterise areas that had long ceased to be major growth centres of population with the closing of the Cornish mines. The close affinity to the local chapel meant that there was a negativism, caused by loyalty from members in moving to the chapel 'next door.' They found the scheme implausible. And this negativism was to continue for decades. Currie says that for many Cornish Methodists, Union was 'traumatic' and long remembered.<sup>401</sup> As late as December 1955 a group of Cornish local preachers

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<sup>397</sup> Barrie Tabraham, *Exploring Methodism: The Making of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), 86.

<sup>398</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 135.

<sup>399</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 199-200.

<sup>400</sup> Currie *Methodism Divided*, 199-200.

<sup>401</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 200.

demonstrated their negativism. 'Some of us already have cause to regret Methodist Union when we see ritualistic and sacerdotal tendencies growing.'<sup>402</sup>

For many, 'union' of any sort and at any time has been a matter of the head rather than the heart. And this is pertinent to the present-day situation in West Cornwall. The writer was told of the painful formation of the United Methodist Church in St Ives between two churches, literally a stones-throw apart, yet still leaving five others in the immediate area! And sadly, the United Methodist Church is now a painfully small congregation fighting to stay open.

Writing of the merging of churches, Currie writes of the scene nationally at the time of writing. 'On average a couple of chapels have been closed every week since union. Each closure is accompanied by a decrease in membership, partly due to the removal of dead wood from the membership roll, partly due to alienation of members.'<sup>403</sup> This is a statistic that needs to be acknowledged today when taking the often essential, yet controversial action of encouraging chapel closures. There is a present-day illustration of this. A Church in West Cornwall, with a Neo-Gothic building seating several hundred, a four-manual pipe organ and in the centre of the community, is not surprisingly unable to support itself financially. With a regular congregation of less than ten it has voted six to four to remain as an independent church.<sup>404</sup> Nothing much has changed since the time of Union when a member looked at his chapel building and said that it was 'sacred and I won't have so much as a hand laid upon it.'<sup>405</sup>

So back to the Union. When it actually took place in 1932 it declared fundamental Methodist beliefs. The Deed of Union declared '(It humbly and proudly) claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic Faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation.' It continued with the four 'alls.' 1. All need to be saved. 2. All can be saved. 3. All can know they have been saved. 4 All can be saved to the uttermost.

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<sup>402</sup> *Methodist Recorder* (8 December 1955).

<sup>403</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 209.

<sup>404</sup> Details available but unsuitable for publication.

<sup>405</sup> *Methodist Recorder* (30 September 1920).

Later a fifth was added by George Eayers and confirmed by W. E. Sangster. 'All must witness to their salvation.'<sup>406</sup>

John Turner helpfully places the Methodist Union of 1932 within the context of the age. In the same year Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of the Third Reich in Germany, unemployment had reached three million and within seven years the Second World War would break out.<sup>407</sup> As to the issues to be resolved between the various denominational bodies the key debate was in the area of ministry, and the role, place and understanding of lay ministry.<sup>408</sup> There were assurances given that Union was right as being the will of God according to the New Testament, the removal of Methodist disunity, and the hope that evangelism would be given impetus.<sup>409</sup>

Yet Turner is not without his doubts:

The great hopes for union were not fulfilled. Reality was very different from the dreams . . . Church people – and Methodists are no exception – tend to be 'local' rather than 'cosmopolitan', . . . 'Local' people feel an enormous sense of belonging to their particular chapel, often due to deep family ties. Chapel – its life, its ethos, its people – could not easily be let go, and consequently closures pointed to non-viability rather than to great enthusiasm for union.<sup>410</sup>

And Robert Currie was not without negatives either:

Unionists were caught in a peculiar dilemma. On one hand union was to make Methodism a greater evangelistic force throughout the country, the rationalisation consequent upon closure of overlapping chapels was essential. On the other hand, if they advocated closure of chapels as the main plank of their programme, the union movement was doomed. They prevaricated . . . the purpose of union was to close the chapels; the price of union was to keep them open.<sup>411</sup>

Later Currie seems to be even more caustic when he says:

rationalisation has very little to do with success or failure in evangelisation; and that the belief that reducing the number of church buildings will promote religion

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<sup>406</sup> "The Deed of Union 1932" in *Minutes of the Uniting Conference* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1932), 30.

<sup>407</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 8-9.

<sup>408</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 293.

<sup>409</sup> John 17:20-26.

<sup>410</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 10.

<sup>411</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 197-8.

in the twentieth century is as fallacious as the belief that increasing the number of church buildings would promote religion in the nineteenth.<sup>412</sup>

Dr Eric Baker, Secretary of Conference in the 1950s, underlined the intended purpose of Union when he said that 'the sequel of Methodist union challenged the assumption that unification will ever be sufficient to guarantee the effective union where it really matters – that is, where Christians meet the non-Christian.'<sup>413</sup>

Unfortunately, as indicated previously in the matter of the Class Meeting<sup>414</sup> and the 1907 act of union, there was negativity again concerning the matter of 'class.' One Primitive Methodist leader said 'Any Church which stands on social position unchristianises (sic) itself. We are a Church of cottage homes and we are not afraid of the fact.'<sup>415</sup> Whatever, it made Methodist Union more difficult than it should have been. But these prejudices were gradually overcome.

Nevertheless a fresh understanding of Methodism as an established Church was taking place, aided by the 1932 coming together. Shaw quotes J.H. Rider, the Chairman of the Cornish Wesleyan District 1915-30, as saying that:

Cornish Methodism could no longer be regarded as a revival or series of revivals, but that it must be seen to be a church of the New Testament pattern, offering all the ministries of grace. It was to be a church that endeavoured to display the maturity that should be evident in such a church.<sup>416</sup>

Inevitably there was pervading complication of a different sort. Problems arose when a leader's position and a chapel's tradition were called into question:

On one side of our chapel within a hundred yards is a Free Methodist Chapel; on the other side is a Primitive Methodist Chapel about the same distance away. In each of these chapels are a band of eager, enthusiastic officials who have had a life-long connection with their Chapel, and sphere of work. Supposing, through Union you close two of these chapels what is going to become of these various officials?<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 293.

<sup>413</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 10.

<sup>414</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>415</sup> *Methodist Times* (11 May 1922).

<sup>416</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 130.

<sup>417</sup> *Methodist Recorder* (30 September 1920).

It must be acknowledged that matters of building, history and responsibility exercised within a local church cause strong emotional reactions, complications of position and leadership that cannot be rationalised and are only overcome with difficulty.

### **Conclusion: Unity and Decline**

This chapter reveals trends which have become crystallised in West Cornwall Methodist life today. Numbers were falling and even two significant acts of unity failed to reverse the trend. Opinion became less focused, practice less directed and theology less closely defined. These factors have become more pressing today when propositions that would have been considered contentious previously are seeking ratification by Conference.

The next chapter will record that a mere forty years after the act of Union in 1932, another ecumenical initiative resulted in the failure to bring together Methodism with the Church of England, the rock from which it was hewn. Other than this, the years up to the present did not have great events or new thinking in themselves, save that the trends documented have continued with increasing clarity. Yet the last years of the period were to bring matters of monumental importance, even bringing the future of the West Cornwall Methodists into question.



## Chapter 4: 1932 - 2021

### Introduction

It would appear from Tom Shaw's perspective that, compared with what has gone before, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is somewhat sparse in significant history. His redoubtable book *Cornish Methodism*,<sup>418</sup> published in 1967 and consisting of some one hundred and forty-five pages, has only seven pages subsequent to the Act of Union in 1932.

But two matters of great importance have overtaken this thesis and are ongoing. The first is Covid-19 and secondly is the God in Love Unites Us Report as a motion to be brought to Conference this June.(2021) Though they are recorded here they will be analysed in subsequent chapters as continuing issues.

### Setting the Scene

Once again, a clearer understanding of the present is revealed by a reminder of the past.<sup>419</sup> At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Nonconformist power and influence were at their zenith. This strategic religious role was demonstrated in the national arena by all the major denominations, not only in the yet large numbers attending worship.<sup>420</sup> It was evidenced in such areas as education, morals, and sobriety. The combined power of nonconformity was described by the term the `Nonconformist Conscience.'<sup>421</sup> Owen Chadwick does not overestimate this. He writes that the phrase `was gladly accepted by the Methodist Hugh Price Hughes,<sup>422</sup> as with other non-conformist denominations. Wesleyan Methodists in particular played a major, if not leading role in their resolve `that public life should be seen to follow Christian standards of morality.'<sup>423</sup> The contrast with today is well described by the confidence and tone heard in the Wesleyan Conference of 1892. Speaking in the language of the time concerning it's ministry it declared that `though it has never passed as a social reformer it has . . . rescued men from sin; it has created a sense of self-respect; it has

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<sup>418</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*.

<sup>419</sup> For membership figures see chapter three.

<sup>420</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>421</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 233.

<sup>422</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 424.

<sup>423</sup> Chadwick, *Part 2*, 424.

trained intelligence and conscience . . .<sup>424</sup> Perhaps for the better, because for all denominations this self-assurance has gone. Methodist structures may be little changed, but the sense of confidence has evaporated. By the middle of the century there was a different religious temperature in the land.

### **Post-1950s**

At first, there might be a positive note to John Turner's assessment of Methodism in the years after the Second World War. Two churches a week were opening, and reports published from Conference were on such subjects as *Doctrinal Preaching* (1951) and *The Message and Mission of Methodism* (1946). Yet as Turner states, membership figures made salutary reading.<sup>425</sup> As to the 1960s, Turner quotes Adrian Hastings who said, 'Methodism in the 1960s . . . had little history except for an unprecedented rate of numerical decline.'<sup>426</sup> And a wider sweep accentuates the decline. Every five years from 1950 to the end of the century there was a marked decrease. 1950 – 744,815 and in 2000 – 267,000 a decrease of 64%. 1972 stands out as a key and perhaps depressing year. The Church of England's Convocations and Methodist's Synod brought the scheme for union between the two churches to an end. In the same year women were ordained as presbyters – a positive. But it is the former that needs to be examined.

### **Fresh Ecumenical Initiatives**

Together with other mainline denominations 1932 was not the end of national ecumenical consideration. For Methodists this was to lead to 'conversations' for union mentioned above. Cornish Methodism reaction was polarised and strong. Ian Haile, one-time Chairman of District writes 'In any case, Methodism, especially in Cornwall was still coming to terms . . . with the consequences of the 1932 Methodist Union.'<sup>427</sup> The essential steps to these conversations can be recorded.

Immediately after the second world war there was a national stirring of ecumenical interest. Archbishop Fisher preached a sermon at Cambridge in November 1946,

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<sup>424</sup> Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 215.

<sup>425</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 19-21.

<sup>426</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 21.

<sup>427</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 197.

inviting the Free Churches to consider embracing episcopacy.<sup>428</sup> The official Methodist response was warm. 'We, therefore, readily respond to Your Grace's appeal and to the spirit which prompted it . . .'<sup>429</sup>

Subsequently the World Council of Churches was formed in 1948, the First Assembly being held in Amsterdam. It declared:

The World Council of Churches has come into existence because we have already recognized a responsibility to one another's churches in Our Lord Jesus Christ. There is but one Lord and one Body. Therefore we cannot rest content with our present divisions. Before God we are responsible for one another.<sup>430</sup>

In 1955 and 1958 there was a proposal for the Anglican and Methodist Churches to 'unite their ministries on an episcopal basis.' Conversations ensued. Ian Haile is definitive in recording the events as to how Cornish Methodism hesitantly moved towards rapprochement with the Church of England.<sup>431</sup> Initially, in response to a District Study Group report to the non-contentious question 'Do you desire closer relations with the Church of England?' as was to be expected, there was a strongly positive support when 206 voted for with 30 against. But to the question 'Do you consider that in broad outline the main proposals of the Report point the right way forward to full communion between the Church of England and the Methodist Church?' the voting was Yes – 107 and No --128. Fears were expressed locally, as elsewhere, as to Methodist ministers being consecrated as bishops, and also concern that the 'Act of Reconciliation' could be 'understood as involving the reordination of ministers.'<sup>432</sup> Conversations continued, but the thoughts of an Anglican take-over, and the re-ordination question caused concern.<sup>433</sup>

The matter was resolved for Cornish Methodists when eventually in 1972 the required 75% was achieved by the Methodists but not by the Anglicans. This resulted from what has been described as an 'evangelical-Anglo-Catholic unholy alliance.', by the

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<sup>428</sup> Geoffrey Nuttall and Owen Chadwick, eds., *From Conformity to Unity: 1662-1962* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), 385.

<sup>429</sup> Ian Haile, *The Next Chapter: Cornish Methodism, 1965-2005* (Truro: The Cornish Methodist Historical Association, 2009), 197.

<sup>430</sup> Neil Stephen, *The Church and Christian Union* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 32-33.

<sup>431</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 200.

<sup>432</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 200.

<sup>433</sup> Gordon S. Wakefield, "Church of England" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 66-67.

Anglicans.<sup>434</sup> The formal search for uniting the two churches was over. But in Cornwall its independent spirit had again been in evidence. The *Dictionary of Methodism*, writing of the end of the `Conversations`, closes with a statement of stark realism, that `the agenda is now less dominated by questions of ministry.' It continues `If ecclesiology fails economics may force the Churches together.'<sup>435</sup> A prophetic statement which would seem to be demonstrably true.

Later, in the next millennium a less ambitious ecumenical initiative was taken. A national initiative for an Anglican-Methodist Covenant took place which by definition, includes Cornwall. The Methodist Conference of July 2017 received a report of the Covenant, and following debate in General Synod, Feb. 2018 it was agreed the same year. It contained six commitments and four affirmations including `shared consultation and decision-making, on the way to a fully united ministry of oversight.'<sup>436</sup> It was affirmed `that one another's ordained and lay ministry are given by God as instruments of Grace . . . for the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care and to share in God's mission in the World.'<sup>437</sup> But as to the thorny question `What difference did it make in Cornwall?' nothing concrete is clear. A report by Margaret Barnes given to the Cornwall Methodist Synod, Spring 2019 gave information of ecumenical activities through the year. It ends `BUT (caps original) still there are many instances of `going it alone,' with no apparent reason; it is such a shame – there really is strength in `doing it together'.<sup>438</sup> My observation as a Circuit Leader would imply that this regret would be particularly true of West Cornwall, where nothing of relevance can be recorded.

## Church and Community

### Church

Outside of the national ecumenical debates, things were changing for Cornish Methodism, and not always for the better. After 1932 complacency set in. This can be illustrated, for there seems to have been a deluded throwback to the `glory days' of

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<sup>434</sup> For a detailed account of the `Conversations' in the context of Cornish Methodist see Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 200-1.

<sup>435</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 66-67.

<sup>436</sup> The Methodist Church, *An Anglican Methodist Covenant* (3 November 2017).

<sup>437</sup> The Methodist Church, *An Anglican Methodist Covenant* (3 November 2017).

<sup>438</sup> Margaret Barnes, "Ecumenical Officer's Report", Methodist Cornwall District Synod (Spring 2019).

the previous century. In St Ives, 1938, comparatively soon after the Methodist Union, there was celebrated `Wesley Day.' In a lame, even pretentious `Introduction' from the printed Foreword of the Order of Service it read:

New life has come to the hearts of men, the poor and the oppressed and the Church of England (sic) . . . Three outstanding things have happened Repentance, Redemption and Regeneration: and these released the mighty forces of fellowship and service throughout Britain and overseas.<sup>439</sup>

Subsequent years brought with it a more realistic assessment of ministry and, as against the above, for both women as well as men! What did take place, in contrast to the revival days of the previous century, was for Methodism to become more `respectable'. But this very respectability became a hindrance to mutual identification with the local community.<sup>440</sup>

### **Community**

Ian Haile, reflecting on the perception that some still have of Methodism's place in society, endeavours to refute what he understands to be an unfortunate impression. He writes of `the caricature of a Methodist as someone who is narrow-minded and doesn't drink, smoke or swear, is not an accurate reflection of Methodism's moral stance.'<sup>441</sup> But suspicions of such Methodist otherworldliness were not without foundation.

A review of various subjects discussed at Synod<sup>442</sup> might confirm the impression of detachment from the widely held norms of Society over the last fifty years. These included criticism of Bingo in 1966 which engendered a newspaper headline `Methodists condemn bingo.' Other subjects addressed included the opening of cinemas on Good Friday and Sunday (1967), the moral standard of some TV programmes, Mary Whitehouse being noted (1967), concern about bad language and use of alcohol as portrayed on TV (1969), pornography (1972) and apparently of particular concern, as being often debated, human sexuality (1981, 1991, 1992).<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Wesley Methodist Church, *Order of Service* (Wesley Day 1938), in the Courtney Library, Truro.

<sup>440</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 100-1.

<sup>441</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 28.

<sup>442</sup> A Meeting of Presbyters and others qualified to attend.

<sup>443</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 29.

All of these subjects, or at least some, might be a legitimate concern for Methodists, or for all Christians for that matter, but the overall impression would have sounded repressive and unconnected to many in the community. An earlier reaction was exemplified by Stanhope Forbes 1857-1947 a famous painter of the Newlyn School of West Cornwall and is worth quoting in full:

I am in a hotbed of narrow-minded bigotry and bigotry of the worst kind, snivelling low church primitive Methodist bigotry – oh you railers at the blind papists and the wicked ways of people across the water. Come down to study these people. Study the effects of religion upon ignorance – I wish people who say ‘oh you must have religion to keep the lower classes in order’, would come to such a place as this and see the people as they really are, without it is true any and every glaring or obvious vices, but with all the petty ones developed by their wretched intolerant canting education. All the men, or nearly all are teetotallers and every one of them goes to church or chapel and keeps the seventh day holy, and the effect of this abstinence from strong drink and indulgence in strong prayers, is to make them a most disagreeable set of people, full of hypocrisy and cant.<sup>444</sup>

Random newspapers confirm the cumulative perception of some West Country Methodists as legalistic and killjoys.

Cornishman 10 Jan 1985

Headline: Churchgoers Bid to Ban Nude Bathing

‘Mr Inger (minister) says this appeal follows unanimous objection to topless bathing at a recent circuit meeting, which represented the views of some 600 residents.’

Cornishman June 15, 1972

Headline: St Ives Churches Lead Opposition to the Sunday Trading Extension

‘The Rev. Victor Lee of the St Ives Circuit spoke for a few minutes, pointing out that the petition was not a question of the church trying to inflict its will upon the community. It was trying to give expression to the wish of the majority of the community.’

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<sup>444</sup> Stanhope Forbes in M. Jacobs, ‘*The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 146.

Methodist Recorder Thursday Sept 4<sup>th</sup>, 1969 quoting **IT** (International Times) writing of St Ives

St Ives ‘... has also got vigilantes – the St Ives version of thickies. These are mostly very puritanical Methodists who are about as far from Christian as people could be. They once had Sunday Observance rules that included sinking boats sailing on Sunday. Observance rules that forbid anyone enjoying themselves on Sundays ...’

Added to this, the publicity given by the local press to Methodist internal disputes that sadly often took place, indicated the keen interest in affairs of local Methodism by the community, yet also of the negative reaction that such reporting inevitably causes:

Officers of St Ives and Hayle Methodist Church Circuit in a statement issued this week, explain the reasons for a controversial recommendation that Pastor David Newman, a Lay Pastoral Assistant, should be given eight months’ notice of termination of his contract. It was reported that this had shocked many people in the town.” The reasons reported were 1. Repeated requests to upgrade his status and 2. Deep unresolved personality conflicts. Passed 23 votes for to nil with two abstentions.<sup>445</sup>

Letters from aggrieved or disillusioned members often caused serious negativism from within the community. Public disillusionment was but one reason for falling numbers.

## **Changing Social and Theological Positions**

### **Social**

Within Methodism itself, running parallel to secular attitudes to sex and marriage, attitudes began to change. Related to the negative impressions, John Turner records the various ‘reports’ that were published from Conference that seemed to become increasingly radical. The statement on *Divorce and the Law of Marriage* states ‘In the light of New Testament principles and teaching . . . the Methodist Church is at one with other Christian communities in affirming as the norm and standard of Christian marriage the lifelong and exclusive union of one man and one woman.’<sup>446</sup> 1990 saw the *Statement on Human Sexuality*.<sup>447</sup> As to its conclusions Turner says rather blandly

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<sup>445</sup> *Cornish Times*, 22 November 1984.

<sup>446</sup> The Methodist Church, *Declarations of Conference on Social Questions* (London: Epworth Press, 1959), 87.

<sup>447</sup> Methodist Conference, “Minutes”, 1993.

that 'advocates of the 'Evangelical position' were given greater confidence.'<sup>448</sup> But from the Derby Conference of 1993, often named as the 'Derby Declaration on Human Sexuality' which addressed the tricky matter of homosexuality, the conservative evangelical Donald English was 'in anguish personally, and on behalf of his constituency.'<sup>449</sup> That confidence was to be further shaken by the Conference *Report of Marriage and Relationships* that was published in 2019 and is to be decided upon at Conference 2021.<sup>450</sup> This will be discussed in depth later.

### **Theological**

It has been noted previously that views such as Higher Criticism of Scripture had been heard in the pulpits as long ago as the previous century, even in a geographical and intellectual outpost such as Camborne.<sup>451</sup> Ministers became more theologically aware.

Nationally, from 1919, Wesleyan ministers formed what was to be called the *Fellowship of the Kingdom* under the watchwords Quest, Crusade and Fellowship. David Bebbington describes this group as 'one of the chief expressions of liberal Evangelicalism.'<sup>452</sup> In 1952, along with other mainline denomination equivalents, the Methodist Revival Fellowship had been formed so as to be a meeting point for Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism.<sup>453</sup> Nevertheless, despite preachers such as W. E. Sangster, Bebbington, writing of the middle of the century, says that 'Evangelicals were probably at their nadir.'<sup>454</sup> Liberalism inevitably came to Cornwall. Ian Haile writes critically in his history of Cornwall Methodism of 'The literal view of the Bible, resulting in what some would regard as extremist and untenable views, such as creationism as opposed to evolution, is to be found in Cornwall as elsewhere.'<sup>455</sup> This inevitably caused tension. Haile reports at a Ministerial Session of Synod 1995, that growing factionalism in the Methodist Church was 'about attitudes to Scripture.'<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 28.

<sup>449</sup> Brian Hoare and Ian Randall, *More Than a Methodist: The Life and Ministry of Donald English* (London: Paternoster Press, 2004).

<sup>450</sup> Methodist Conference, *Report of Marriage and Relationships* (2019).

<sup>451</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

<sup>452</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 202.

<sup>453</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 230.

<sup>454</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 251-2.

<sup>455</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 14.

<sup>456</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 15.



This theological change was not so much the overt introduction of new or contentious doctrines. The problem for Methodism, says David Bebbington, is the circuit system. . . . with its lack of continuity of both preachers and content, meant that it was rarely possible for a congregation to build up an ethos widely different from the denominational norm.<sup>457</sup> This will be discussed in a later chapter.

### **Theology and Society Together**

Although coming from three differing theological stables the Cornish statistician historian John Probert, the conservative Methodist Howard Snyder, and a modern Methodist theologian David Clough, have an overlap in their thinking. Probert writes of Cornish Methodism in his *Sociology of Cornish Methodism* and closes:

One way that is being strongly advocated as an answer to the churches' problems is that the church should become much more involved with the social problems of people. . . . This solution could well prove disastrous and turn the church into another Rotary organisation or a welfare institution. The church must not neglect people's physical need, but its ministry is basically to the souls of men, a function on which no other organisation can fully cope with.<sup>458</sup>

Snyder in *The Radical Wesley* says much the same concerning the Church. . . . soteriology stripped of ecclesiology cannot be fully biblical.<sup>459</sup> His concern is seeking social wholeness apart from the church. Both are concerned about those who `give themselves . . . to social, or political programmes in the name of the church but settle for little or no personal involvement with a local Christian community. They may be satisfied with radical action or radical rhetoric without radical community.<sup>460</sup> A balance is drawn in a Methodist context by David Clough writing in *Unmasking Methodist Theology* when he writes of `social holiness,' quoting the Deed of Union. `Ours is a responsibility `alongside evangelism (so that) by the Grace of God addressing the social needs of the community by human effort.'<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 221.

<sup>458</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 80.

<sup>459</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 5.

<sup>460</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 165.

<sup>461</sup> David Clough, *Theology Through Social and Political Action in Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 47.

Sadly, West Cornish Methodism seems to have become increasingly detached from the people and society to which it has been called to minister, which points to the thorny matter of continuing numerical decline.

### Numerical Decline

The shrinkage of Christianity is 'the inevitable by-product of major changes in the Western World' argues Ian Haile. He states his position succinctly when he says Christianity 'has become less and less significant as a belief system.'<sup>462</sup> Yet that cannot be the only reason in the context of Methodism.

#### Decline in West Cornwall

The statistician John Probert has done an excellent work in collating Cornish Methodist statistics both of Cornwall as a whole, and for this study, the specified area of West Cornwall. Relevant figures are given from the end of the nineteenth century so that by comparison there is some understanding of what took place in the twentieth century.

West Cornwall Methodism in 1890:

	<u>Number of seats</u>	<u>Evening attendance</u>	<u>Membership</u>
Redruth.	5,250	3,590	1,510
Proportion of seats used 70%			
Hayle.	5,310	3,480	1,412
Proportion of seats used 66%			
Camborne.	6,480	4,005	2,574
Proportion of seats used 59%			
St. Ives.	2,970	1,620	454
Proportion of seats used 54% <sup>463</sup>			

From the above it is interesting to note that evening congregations were much larger than membership. This attendance pattern was to reverse during the years of decline and is now the same in all mainline denominations.<sup>464</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>462</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 8.

<sup>463</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 63.

<sup>464</sup> Growing up in Bristol during the 1950s and 60s the evening congregation was still the largest by far. Hence the off-used maxim 'Saints in the morning, sinners at night.' The tradition was that the morning service was devotional and the evening evangelistic.

Century decline had become a 'fact' that could not be gainsaid, although largely ignored because of comparatively strong congregations. But in fact, comparison tells a sobering story. Among the Cornish Wesleyans there had been decline from 21,176 in 1902 to 16,820 by 1932.<sup>465</sup> And this trend was to accelerate nationally and locally as the century continued. David Hempton writes in regard to Britain as a whole that 'Methodist church membership barely held its own in the first third of the twentieth century, but declined more than 50%, from a total membership greater than nine hundred thousand in 1930 to around four hundred thousand by the end of the century.'<sup>466</sup>

As to the particular area of West Cornish Methodism under review, by the latter third of the twentieth century numerical loss had become catastrophic compared with a hundred years previously.

Redruth Wesley – 58%

Hayle – Unknown

Camborne Wesley – 35%

St Ives Wesley – 36%<sup>467</sup>

Ian Haile, as Chairman of the Cornwall District, received the circuit returns and his figures are therefore authoritative - yet they make unhappy reading. Membership in 1960 for the Cornwall District was 21,667 and declined to 18,843 by 1970, a 13% decrease in ten years. But even worse was to come.

In 1965 there were 25 Methodist circuits and by 2005 there were 20 circuits. Between 1965 and 2005 the numerical decreases are startling.

Membership 20,469 to 8,004

Churches 507 to 247

Ministers 73 to 47

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<sup>465</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 131.

<sup>466</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 184.

<sup>467</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 74.

Worship attendance from 1974 - 2005 shrank from 17,258 to 7,408.

Admittedly, these figures are complicated by some changes in the method of counting. For geographical reasons there are a few Methodist churches in the east of Cornwall that are in West Devon circuits, and are not included in these figures. But such an anomaly does not alter the trend. With a degree of 'special pleading' there might be a consolation that Cornish figures appeared no worse than anywhere else. There was some comfort when MARC Europe conducted a census on church attendance in the autumn of 1989. It revealed that on the day in question Methodists in Cornwall made up 4 in 9 of the counted worshippers compared with 1 in 9 nationally. But as Haile, with refreshing honesty concludes, 'By any measure, these past 40 years of Cornish Methodism reveal figures that cause great concern.'<sup>468</sup>

There are other things to be noted from the statistics above. Firstly, the extent of decline is somewhat masked by the fact that there were several chapel closures. The memberships from these had been transferred to the continuing churches irrespective as to whether they had in fact moved to the church in question. In other words, the full extent of loss of members is masked. And secondly, it will be noted that churches situated in seaside resorts do better than elsewhere. By 1971 St Ives had seen 18% Church closures, Hayle, 28%, Redruth and Camborne 23%. St. Ives, a key holiday destination, had fared better than the industrial towns of Hayle, Camborne and Redruth.

For towns like Redruth and Camborne the demography continually changed, with the last tin mine closing during the 1990's. They are now officially recognised as socially deprived communities. This has obviously had a detrimental effect on the churches. So, though the figures are alarming, there are some mitigating factors, yet no mitigating argument can camouflage the fact that numbers are going down dramatically.

### **The Wider Picture**

Of course, it must also be remembered that numerical decline is not unique to Methodism. But to reiterate, it is Methodism that is the focus here. David Hempton, writing specifically in the context of Methodism says, 'The argument is not so much

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<sup>468</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 21.

over the reality of the decline as over its timing and mechanisms.<sup>469</sup> He is pertinent to the West Cornwall context at several points. He writes of enlightenment and what he says is worth quoting at length:

Since the assumption was that religion was predicated on a need for consolation in the midst of powerlessness and poverty, it thrived in preindustrial societies where life was nasty, brutish, and short. With the coming of improved standards of living, the rise of a material culture, the development of great institutional security (primarily through state welfare), and the slow growth of enlightenment ideas of progress and popular scientism, religion began to lose its explanatory power. . . . The more economic and social conditions improved in the West, the less recourse its population had to the consolations of religion.<sup>470</sup>

Here is an accurate description of what was taking place in West Cornwall. There is no doubt that in the world centre of tin mining,<sup>471</sup> with its frequent disasters and strident lifestyle, Cornish Methodism provided its obvious consolations in both revival and the eschatological promises of evangelical faith.<sup>472</sup> But that has changed. Hempton continues his argument when he writes `Because of its predominantly religious view of the world (Methodism attendees) could not survive improvements on material culture, scientific progress, and growth in state power.<sup>473</sup> At this point Hempton does not mention secularisation by name but it needs to be considered.

### **Secularisation**

For a definition of secularisation W. S. Pickering is precise. He says it `implies a process whereby a society rejects or disregards religious beliefs, practices and symbols.<sup>474</sup> Pickering is correct to use the word `disregards' rather than `rejects' in the context of West Cornwall for here there would seem to be antipathy rather than opposition.

Three other writers tell something of what secularisation is and what it does. Callum Brown's argument stems from a book with a startling title, to the point of intended

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<sup>469</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 189.

<sup>470</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 189-90.

<sup>471</sup> An area 2-3 miles south east of Redruth is a World Heritage site to mark its centre for tin mining.

<sup>472</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>473</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 190.

<sup>474</sup> W. S. Pickering, "Secularisation" in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 593.

hyperbole, *The Death of Christian Britain*.<sup>475</sup> Nevertheless, it does have relevance. Brown says with his usual bluntness that 'the churches are in seemingly terminal decay . . .'.<sup>476</sup> There are occasions in West Cornwall when one wonders if what Brown says is in fact true. And this has come about says David Hempton, not 'because of some irresistible social process or processes, but because of real choices made by real people in real social situations.'<sup>477</sup> They have become disconnected from any sense of formal religion. People do not wish to attend these 'holy' places anymore. The church buildings to be found in almost every community in West Cornwall have become foreign territory to most. It is to this very point that Alec Ryrie writes correctly when he says that the 'old cultural dominance has gone and they (the churches) have not yet found a way to assert a role for themselves in the world.'<sup>478</sup> Later in this thesis the concept of *Missio Dei* will be discussed and the importance of God's mission to the world. And for the Cornish churches the world is the place where they are situated and the place to which they are called to minister. Secularisation says that people have lost any desire or interest in coming to church, hence the mandate of Christ to go out to where the people are.<sup>479</sup>

Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy* argues another factor for decline. What he writes is somewhat nebulous but not without an element of truth. He states that 'Spurred by the Reformation, there had been a divesting of the three most ancient and powerful concomitants of the sacred, MYSTERY, MIRACLE AND MAGIC.'<sup>480</sup> (caps orig.) As has been argued, such facets of the Cornish mind have now lost their power. Yet it seems that there is a search for 'something' that is apart from the institutional church. A *Sunday Times* article under the heading 'Angel's Wings Hold Us Close' begins, 'Established religions are falling out of favour in our individualistic age. But belief in celestial guardians is growing, with 1 in 10 people saying they have felt their presence.'

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<sup>475</sup> Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>476</sup> Brown, *Understanding Secularisation*, 196.

<sup>477</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 198.

<sup>478</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 466.

<sup>479</sup> Matt 28:19.

<sup>480</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of the Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 111.

In the same article the Sunday Times quotes a YouGov pole on British religious attitudes as being very religious 3% and fairly religious as 20%. These are disquieting figures for the historic confessional denominations. The article closes:

Disillusionment with churches hasn't stopped us having those moments of grief and loss, suffering and torment, loneliness and isolation, or terror and despair at existence itself. And when these strike, angels represent the aspiration in humans for something inexplicable to guard against our woes. The reason for their continuing popularity is that, despite the efforts of science, we have yet to find a substitute.<sup>481</sup>

Quite clearly this 'substitute' is not being found in the churches and chapels of West Cornwall in terms of collective worship.

Returning to Hempton, he argues other points. He states that as well as an uncodified spirituality, another cause of numerical declension is pluralism.<sup>482</sup> Again, this is not specifically applied to West Cornwall, but must include it. He writes, 'As an agent of pluralism, Methodism ultimately paid the price of pluralism.'<sup>483</sup> Cornish Methodism, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was, of course, pluralistic by definition in the formation of conflicting denominations, chapels and circuits. But there is still religious plurality in West Cornwall. New expressions of church, both charismatic and independent evangelical churches have sprung up. These include two strong independent Methodist churches. Their emphasis on experimental faith, spiritual phenomena, modernity in music, clothing and lifestyle evidently has an appeal to people including dissatisfied Methodists.<sup>484</sup>

Another of Hempton's arguments is not directly applicable to West Cornwall, yet is so by extension. He writes that 'urbanisation was a problem that Methodism could not overcome.'<sup>485</sup> In West Cornwall both town and country have come under serious pressure in a way that is different from the great conurbations. One such pressure is what has been described as 'the liberty of urban anonymity.'<sup>486</sup> But today anonymity is a self-guarded privilege for any who live anywhere. Church attendance or otherwise

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<sup>481</sup> Peter Stanford, "Angel's Wings Hold Us Close" in *The Sunday Times* (3 March 2019).

<sup>482</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 191.

<sup>483</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 191.

<sup>484</sup> The next chapter will include figures as to how many 'new' churches have been formed or closed in the last thirty years.

<sup>485</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 192.

<sup>486</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 192.

would hardly be a matter of interest. Certainly, as against the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Pit Manager attended his local Methodist Church on a Sunday morning, to check that his miners were in church too.<sup>487</sup> In a secular age church attendance or otherwise would hardly be a matter of comment.<sup>488</sup>

Having studied the effects and reasons for numerical shrinkage earlier in this chapter, it continued, if not apace, into the new century. The new millennium was an opportunity for worthy reflection by able Methodist authors, and these will be studied. The twenty-first century also brought monumental problems both from outside and within Methodism, that will need to be tabulated and addressed.

## **West Country Methodism in the Last Twenty Years**

### **Statistics**

Again, there is need to record the membership figures for Methodism both nationally and in the prescribed area of West Cornwall, and to draw out the implications of a reduced and aging membership who are struggling to maintain the present, as well as looking to an unknown future.

The latest figures for 2018, published June 1st, 2019 in the Spring *Cornwall District Synod Agenda* again make depressing reading.

The figures for Methodism nationally are gains 172,390 and losses 179,632 A reduction of 3.8%.

For Cornwall there are fifteen circuits. Membership figures for 2016 were 5,559. In 2018 they were 5,092. A reduction of 8.4%. These figures can be broken down to the three circuits that have been the particular focus of this study so far.

Camborne-Redruth 2016 – 2018, 689 to 620. A loss of 10.0%

West Cornwall<sup>489</sup> 2016 – 2018, 475 to 429. A loss of 10.4%

St Ives (Fore Street) 2016 – 2018, 90– 86. A loss of 4.4%

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<sup>487</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>488</sup> Secularisation will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

<sup>489</sup> Now including the St Ives Circuit.



Whereas there is little point in presenting the percentage loss for the individual churches, all of the churches in the West Cornwall Circuit registered a decline except one which remained stationary.<sup>490</sup>

Ian Haile, writes of the effect of continuous numerical decline:

In 2005 Cornish Methodism exists in a cultural context considerably different from that of 1965 due to changes which have contributed to its decline in numbers, prominence and role within the county. To some extent this has led some Methodists into a negative introspection, a feeling that all that can be done is to keep Methodism going until it grinds to a halt – short of a miraculous act of God in revival, an expectation spoken of less and less. This feeling is understandable. Those who have lived through the past forty years have known little other than decline.<sup>491</sup>

Stephen Dawes who preceded Ian Haile as Chairman of the District has painted an even bleaker outlook as he considers the future:

If I look into the future it seems to me quite obvious that as God raised up the Methodist Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to do a specific task, so now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century he is putting it down. The signs are clear to all who have eyes to see. It seems to me therefore, that we should not struggle to keep alive what God is letting die.<sup>492</sup>

Nevertheless, it will be argued that the role of the churches is yet an opportunity for the gospel in the places where they are stationed. But there will need to be changes. John Probert is correct when he comments `It is not enough to recapture the glories of the past.'<sup>493</sup> And perhaps they were not so glorious as imagined. Richard Lovelace writing of the church says, `The church during awakenings is often like an infant vigorously alive but with many areas of its future development still embryonic.'<sup>494</sup> Most Methodists in West Cornwall are too busy fighting for their very survival to imagine numerical growth. Or as Ian Haile points out, even to pray is `an expectation which is spoken of less and less.'<sup>495</sup>

### **Suggested Reasons for Continuing Numerical Decline**

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<sup>490</sup> The Methodist Church, *Cornwall District, Synod Agenda* (2019), 32.

<sup>491</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 230.

<sup>492</sup> Dawes, *District Chronicle* (2001), in John Horner, *Even in this Place* (Penzance: Patten Press, 2010), 81.

<sup>493</sup> Probert, *Sociology of Cornish Methodism*, 80.

<sup>494</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 80.

<sup>495</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 226.

West Cornwall is also reflecting national Methodist issues for decline. Writing succinctly, Martin Wellings lays his reasons for the shrinkage of Methodist membership in *Methodists and the Future*. He draws attention to what he describes as 'three strands of causation.'<sup>496</sup> The first is 'Spiritual Understanding.' Describing Methodism, he writes of 'a cooler spiritual temperature with diminishing commitment, leading to a gradual drift from church and faith.'<sup>497</sup> Methodism is not alone in this for all Christian movements suffer the 'losing one's first love' syndrome' as illustrated in the early church.<sup>498</sup>

The second strand for numerical loss that comes from Wellings is more debatable. He writes that 'Nonconformist allegiance was the major casualty, and Methodism, as the largest of the Free Churches, the greatest sufferer.'<sup>499</sup> Certainly Methodism may have lost the greatest number of adherents, but they have also lost the most as a proportion, compared with the other major denominations.

Wellings' third strand is by far the strongest, at least in West Cornwall. He uses Robin Gill for what he describes as a 'structural strand.'<sup>500</sup> Though writing of the turn of the late nineteenth century, Gill vividly describes today and is therefore almost prophetic. He writes of 'an over-capacity of seating, . . . As a result, the stock of churchgoers and ministers was divided between more and more debt-ridden buildings, creating an impression of failure which then fuelled demoralisation and numerical decline.'<sup>501</sup> A scattering of people, mainly in the back row is not congenial for people attending for the first time. Worshipers today would no doubt deny being demoralised, but there is certainly a lack of optimism.

It is argued by some Methodists in West Cornwall that a return to more overt evangelicalism would turn the tide of numerical decline. The figures above seem to deny this, for the West Cornwall Circuit *is* predominantly evangelical. The numerical value of one preferred theology over another is a matter of debate. The most recent national statistical evidence is by no means clear in making a case that to be

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<sup>496</sup> Martin Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective on the Future of Methodism" in Jane Craske and Marsh Clive, eds., *Methodism and the Future* (London: Cassell, 1999), 152.

<sup>497</sup> Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective", 152.

<sup>498</sup> Rev 3:14.

<sup>499</sup> Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective", 153.

<sup>500</sup> Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective", 153.

<sup>501</sup> Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective", 153.

evangelical has a numerical advantage. Last year Peter Brierly recorded 'The Methodist Churches are declining fast numerically (average of -3.7% per annum) and are seeing that numerical decline (but not as a percentage of the total) in all their main groups (Evangelical, Broad, Liberal and Low Church).'<sup>502</sup> And this is the same in all the historic mainline denominations.<sup>503</sup> In this area where closed Methodist churches litter almost every town and village, the sense of apparent defeat and irrelevance is manifest for all who have 'eyes to see,' whilst the doctrinal persuasion of these onetime chapels is unknown and seems now to be an irrelevance.

## Conclusion

In a history of Cornish Methodism Tom Shaw says something of fundamental importance to this thesis. He writes that Cornish Methodism 'cannot be understood apart from its history.'<sup>504</sup> From the previous chapters, we have seen and learnt from history that which is pertinent to the present and future.

Dating back to John Wesley, the structures which he initiated are now, for good or otherwise, set in stone. The times of new Methodist expressions and revival have bequeathed a surplus of chapel buildings and a wistfulness for imagined glory days. Continuing numerical decline has run parallel with the continuing loss of Methodism's strong influence in Cornish society. And an incipient theological liberalism has become a feature of Methodism, if not in West Cornwall.

Turning now to the life and witness of the local church, negativism will be balanced by suggestions as to the possibility of a blessed and fruitful future.

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<sup>502</sup> Peter Brierley, *Facts for Forward Planning*, Number 65, October 2019.

<sup>503</sup> Brierley, *Facts for Forward Planning*, Number 65.

<sup>504</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 135.

## Chapter 5: West Cornwall Methodism Today

### Introduction

The debate now is about the people called Methodists living in the far West of Cornwall concerning their life and witness. The veracity of what is written will be a continuing matter, for there is no clinching argument that solves the problems or enhances the hopes that feature for these local churches. The knowledge of the churches in West Cornwall is first-hand, and is more than a purely personal understanding. This is through pastoral contact with most of the churches on a weekly basis by being part of the Preaching Plan, and being a member of both the Circuit Meeting and the Circuit Leadership team. The contents of business meeting are confidential of course; but the general situation as understood by the writer is reflected and described here. This overview with which the thesis ends is a positive declaration of hope for the future, being partners with God in his unfolding work, thereby establishing a prepared and committed people for the challenges that lie ahead. It would be wrong to imagine that these chapters are one long negative. Nevertheless, particularly in this chapter, it will be argued that the concerns of the past are yet concerns even if dressed in differing clothes.

Conference and connexion inevitably play a significant role, and this will be discussed in this chapter. Such important issues as the Methodist Quadrilateral, theological diversity with consideration of Evangelicals in Methodism and scriptural holiness will feature. At some length the *God In Love Unites Us* debate from Conference, the outcome of which will have serious implications whatever the outcome, will also be examined. Lastly this chapter will also seek to argue and demonstrate that some of the structures of Methodism in such areas as Stationing, the Preaching Plan and the Financial Assessment, all of them important, have through inflexibility become a possible straitjacket in the life of the local church.

### Geography

In 2018 the Cornwall District reorganised the circuits of West Cornwall. Hayle had previously been moved to join the Redruth and Camborne Circuit. Since St Ives, where the writer was a non-stipendiary presbyter was no longer a viable circuit, it was merged

with Penzance under the name 'The West Cornwall Circuit.'<sup>505</sup> This has been a positive marriage and it is this circuit that will now become the centre of attention.

### Reasons for Hope

Before there is discussion on any perceived negatives in the relationship between the denomination and Cornish Methodists, it is important to remember and acknowledge that there are strong positives to be continually borne in mind. Firstly, it must be remembered that there are still fifteen Methodist circuits in Cornwall.<sup>506</sup> And secondly, that these circuits are made up of churches that have thus far weathered the storm of decline, and undoubtedly some that are experiencing encouragement. Their very existence speaks of commitment to the Kingdom of God and their local chapel. It is with these, and particularly the West Cornish that with dedication and vision there may be instilled renewed hope for a positive future. For this to happen there will not only be need for realistic self-examination by the local church and circuit, but also some flexibility on the part of the denominational structures.

### A Matter for Concern

By the time of the death of John Wesley, Methodism's distinguishing features were both formed and have been, in the main, preserved until today. That they have proved to be a mixed blessing, lacking in clarity, is confirmed by Christopher Shannahan. He writes of 'liberative *praxis*', (italics org.) which he argues are for 'all good Methodists.'<sup>507</sup> He writes of catholicity, connexionalism and a 'liberation-based understanding of Christ.'<sup>508</sup> Despite Shannahan's claim, these three reveal a fulcrum. Certainly, catholicity is a foundational tenet of Methodism.<sup>509</sup> It is confirmed by its global presence and the doctrinal creed found set out in its foundational Deed of Union.<sup>510</sup> Connexion will be discussed later but here Shannahan describes it as 'an idea whose time has come.'<sup>511</sup> He refers to 'Paul's notion of the church as a single

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<sup>505</sup> 'The First and Last Circuit' had been suggested! It was understood for the joke it was meant to be.

<sup>506</sup> The Methodist Church, *Cornwall and The Isles of Scilly District, Directory* (2019/2020).

<sup>507</sup> Christopher Shannahan, "Singing Songs of Freedom: Methodism as Liberative Praxis" in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 31.

<sup>508</sup> Shannahan, "Singing Songs of freedom", 31.

<sup>509</sup> Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>510</sup> Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice*, vol.2 203-237.

<sup>511</sup> Shannahan, "Singing Songs of freedom", 34.

body with many different but equal parts . . .<sup>512</sup> Yet it must be asked whether the name achieves what it claims to do. And again, as to liberation the gospel declares Christ as 'the liberator,' for the 'truth will set you free,'<sup>513</sup> but one is not sure whether Shannahan is equating the 'liberator' to liberation theology<sup>514</sup> in its quasi-political sense. Theologically, Methodism, as with all mainline denominations, is a mixed denomination, and, as here, the exegesis of a word or phrase is not always clear but will be discussed later so as to confirm Methodism in the mainstream of Christianity, yet hints at matters of uncertainty.

### **The Implication of Numerical Decline**

One salient fact has been demonstrated in the previous chapters and that is the loss of members and worshipers. It is imperative for Cornish churches to admit that they have a *particular* problem endangering their very future.

It is much to the credit of Methodism that it is prepared to both accept and face the reality of the problem, as indicated by Richard Andrew. When writing the opening chapter of an important book of essays entitled *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge*, he writes of the current concerns in Methodism. He quotes from *The Making of Ministry*, a discussion paper presented to the Methodist Conference of 1997. A question was asked, 'what does God require the church to be and do so as it enters the twenty-first century'? Andrew replies:

it is hardly surprising that such questions should be a central preoccupation at the present time. It is inevitable for a church in decline . . . the present situation of British Methodism has caused many people to be anxious about whether or not it will survive in any significant form in the future.<sup>515</sup>

Here is a snapshot of Methodism at the end of the twentieth century. Since then, sadly, one fundamental has not changed, for numerical decline has continued unabated. More than that, there are reasons to believe it might increase and this is for three reasons. Firstly, secularisation will continue and probably increase. Secondly, there is concern amongst the churches in regard to the *God In Love Unites Us* report. Unfortunately, some in West Cornwall have already prematurely resigned their

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<sup>512</sup> Shannahan, "Singing Songs of freedom", 34.

<sup>513</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>514</sup> Shannahan, "Singing Songs of freedom", 35-7.

<sup>515</sup> Richard Andrew, "An Improvised Catholicity: Theological Considerations for a Methodist Future" in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 15.

membership over the issue, prior to the decision of Conference. This is wrong for not only does it pre-empt Conference, it makes rational thought, discussion and expressions of concern impossible. And thirdly, there is an issue that has never been faced before. It is the realisation that after the enforced closure of places of worship by government edict, through concern of Covid, only two of eighteen churches are meeting on Sundays, some might find it impractical or impossible to open again.<sup>516</sup>

### **What Methodists Believe**

One of the concerns for West Cornwall congregations today is that there is little opportunity for them to hear or know anything concerning Methodist distinctives. The Minutes of Conference for 1933, after the Methodist Union of the previous year, states under 'Doctrine' that 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the holy Catholic Church, which is the body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic faith, and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic church.'<sup>517</sup> Sound as this is, it does not make Methodism distinctive from other mainline denominations and without some distinctiveness in belief and practice there is hardly any reason for Methodism to exist. Two doctrinal subjects will be discussed here as being Methodist distinctives, namely the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Scriptural Holiness.

An effort to codify Wesley's particular theology comes initially from an American stable and is called 'The Methodist (Wesleyan) Quadrilateral.' It says 'Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.'<sup>518</sup> The Methodist theologian Tom Greggs writes that 'the four classical Methodist sources of theology (the quadrilateral) are identified through an examination of Wesley's theology as interrelated warrants which do not exist independently but only in relationship to the other sources.'<sup>519</sup> Later he writes 'systematicity in Methodist theology by identifying

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<sup>516</sup> The effect of Covid will be discussed subsequently.

<sup>517</sup> "The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church held in London 1933" in Stephen Dawes, "Revelation in Methodist Practice and Belief" in Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones and Helen Wareing, eds., *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 112-3.

<sup>518</sup> Dawes, "Revelation in Methodist Practice", 112.

<sup>519</sup> Tom Greggs, "On The Nature, Task And Method Of Theology: A Very Methodist Account" in *International Journal Of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 20 Issue 3 (Oxford: Wiley Press, 2018), 310.

the systematicity is an attempt at expression of the God who is one.<sup>520</sup> John Vickers describes the Quadrilateral as *`Homo unius libri*, consisting of Scripture as primary, within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition and experience.<sup>521</sup> Significantly this latter statement gives precedence to scripture. Stephen Dawes, onetime Chairman of the Cornwall District and a theologian, says that *`the Quadrilateral has been the subject of increasing debate in three areas: first, whether or not it actually does represent Wesley's way of doing theology; second, about the relative weight to be given to the four `constituents' and, third, on what is meant by `experience'.*<sup>522</sup> Speaking of *`tradition' received from Wesley*, Thomas Langford says *`A sense of tradition is important, for without the firmness of tradition criticism has nothing to grasp, and without criticism tradition ceases to have consuming power'*<sup>523</sup> Langford is correct. If tradition is irrelevant for today, then Wesley and his doctrine if standing alone, unexamined, unexplained, and unapplied will inevitably have no relevance or power, let alone *`consuming power' for today.*

Nevertheless, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral<sup>524</sup> is a theological structure that both encapsulates something of Wesley's theology and does apply it to the present and if modernised, explained, and made applicable to the churches today it should make a difference. But yet again, as seen, the Quadrilateral does not receive total support. David Hempton, with typical forthrightness, says of the Quadrilateral that *`it spectacularly misses the point.'*<sup>525</sup> He feels that a:

forensic appeal to geometrical precision . . . is the least likely to capture its essence.<sup>526</sup> . . . Better is to see a *`moving vortex, fuelled by scripture and divine love, shaped by experience, reason, and tradition, and moving dynamically toward holiness or Christian perfection.'*<sup>527</sup>

It is doubtful if many would argue with this. Yet there is always the possibility that Hempton's *`moving vortex' may move away from what is essential.* Stephen Dawes must be considered correct up to a point, when he says *`the phrase is suspect*

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<sup>520</sup> Greggs, "On The Nature, Task And Method Of Theology", 310.

<sup>521</sup> Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 385.

<sup>522</sup> Dawes, *Unmasking Methodist Theology: Revelation in Methodism* (London: Continuum, 2004), 112.

<sup>523</sup> Langford, *Methodism Theology*, 95.

<sup>524</sup> Vickers, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral", in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 385.

<sup>525</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 57.

<sup>526</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 57.

<sup>527</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 57.



because it fails to reckon with the realities of interpretation.<sup>528</sup> But it must be pointed out that this would be true of every Creed or Statement of Faith ever composed and as Clive Marsh says when writing of the Quadrilateral ‘The problem therefore needs sharper focusing.’<sup>529</sup> This is provided by David Wilkinson being more positive when he writes that ‘It is an easy trap to look for a simple philosophical or theological system and ignore some of the biblical data or indeed our experience of God’s work in our lives.’<sup>530</sup> With respect to Stephen Dawes, this highlights the need to hold the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in a dynamic relationship.

Timothy Macquiban, writing as to the place of scripture in Methodist theology, draws attention to a report to Conference entitled *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*. This relies heavily on the interpretation of the Deed of Union (1932), and the weight it gives to the core doctrinal standards in Wesley’s *Notes of the New Testament* and his *Forty-Four Sermons*.<sup>531</sup> The Conference Report states that ‘the authoritative nature of scripture is tempered by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring fresh understandings through prayerful study and the use of the intellect. . . .’ Writing of the Deed of Covenant and Catechisms it continues that they are faithful to the ‘rule’ which recognises scripture as ‘the supreme rule of faith and practice’ but which allows individuals and Church . . . ‘to interpret scripture in a variety of different contexts and ways.’ The writer is perfectly candid as to the implications of this when he says:

In all these different areas of discussion about doctrine, a set of double standards in the use of the legacy from the Wesleys seem to be operative, being justified by Wesley’s thought and practice. At other times it seeks to ignore or set aside that which it now regards as appropriate for the eighteenth century but not for today.<sup>532</sup>

All of this rather undermines what Superintendent Alastair Bolt writes in the next chapter, whilst Shier-Jones makes it clear that Conference is the governing body for

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<sup>528</sup> Dawes, “Revelation in Methodist Practice”, 114.

<sup>529</sup> Clive Marsh, “Appealing to ‘Experience’: What Does It Mean?” in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 119.

<sup>530</sup> David Wilkinson, “The Activity of God in Methodist Perspective” in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 149.

<sup>531</sup> Methodist Conference 1998; *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, 644-68.

<sup>532</sup> Timothy S. A. Macquiban, “Dialogue with the Wesleys: Remembering Origins” in Marsh *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 22.

`doctrine, discipline and membership . . .'<sup>533</sup> It would be no surprise if Methodists in West Cornwall might be sceptical of Conference's oversight at the present.

It could easily be forgotten that Methodism was born with a particular and fundamental doctrine that set it apart from others. This doctrine is called `Scriptural Holiness.'<sup>534</sup> It will be asked what, if anything, this doctrine means to West Cornwall Methodists today.

### **Scriptural Holiness**

Scriptural Holiness is to be found in the very first paragraph of the Deed of Union. `It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land and by the proclamation of evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.'<sup>535</sup>

Scriptural Holiness incorporates various other names such as sanctification and perfectionism. The difficulty, as always, is what do these words mean? Has their meaning changed and how are they relevant for today?

In a detailed and demanding book *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Timothy Macquiban writes of six emphases of doctrine that constitute Wesley's theological foundations. They are personal salvation, assurance, freedom from sin (justification), involvement in fellowship (sanctification *sic*) and God's love for all (Arminianism).<sup>536</sup> And being Arminian, Margaret Jones says that this means believers have a strong personal responsibility, so that the `grace of God could go on reducing proneness to sin. (Holiness)<sup>537</sup> Wesley's much debated perfectionism is understood as spiritual growth in holiness, joy, peace and a sense of knowing oneself to be forgiven.<sup>538</sup> And `holiness' has been developed further by some. For Jane Craske it is a holiness which is not only personal but relates to others and includes the dimension of socio-political action. `We should be hearing it as an umbrella word for diversity, echoing all the diversity of a holy God.', she says.<sup>539</sup> So if Methodism in West Cornwall is to survive

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<sup>533</sup> Shier-Jones, "Being Methodical" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 37.

<sup>534</sup> See chapter one.

<sup>535</sup> The Methodist Church, *Purposes and Doctrine*, 4. *Doctrine*, CPD (London: The Methodist Church, 2019), 213.

<sup>536</sup> Macquiban, "Dialogue with the Wesleys", 18.

<sup>537</sup> Margaret Jones, "Growing in Grace and Holiness" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 158.

<sup>538</sup> Jones, "Growing in Grace" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 161.

<sup>539</sup> Jane Craske, "The Threads With Which We Weave: Towards a Holy Church" in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 178.

there needs to be something more than saying 'here we are' but rather this is 'what we are' 'why we are,' and 'what we do.' The challenge is not to articulate some dead theology or to fall back on a long-forgotten vocabulary, but to make a gospel truth practically relevant to people's lives in West Cornwall. Rupert Davies explains this well:

Modern Methodists have no Wesley . . . nor can they expect to have a Wesley . . . This is both a disadvantage and an advantage. . . the advantage far greater in that Methodists are no longer tied down to one man's interpretation of the Christian faith in all its particulars . . . If they are moved by the Spirit, go forward from Wesley into a greater understanding of God's purpose. . .<sup>540</sup>

The danger of 'moving forward' speaks of the possibility of leaving something behind. But the Trust Deed would appear to be unequivocal when it states 'The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and *still* (italics mine) holds are based upon divine revelation recorded on Holy Scripture.'<sup>541</sup> This is not baggage inherited from the past but foundational for Cornish Methodism now.

### **Theological Diversity**

Theology is a particular issue in West Cornwall because of its conservative nature both sociologically and theologically. When Michael Townsend writes of 'Our Tradition of Faith' that would be perceived as 'the essence and centre of Methodist foundational belief. . .'<sup>542</sup> And many become unsettled when that would seem not be the case. The statement for membership of the Methodist Church is clear. 'All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and in the world are welcome to become members of the Methodist Church.'<sup>543</sup> Following on from this, Frank Baker writes 'British Methodism is called to be faithful to its inheritance, to nurture its special gifts and to keep with humble tenacity the charge it has been given.'<sup>544</sup> Perhaps Charles Wesley (1707-1788) encapsulates these doctrinal emphases best in three short lines.

Our strength Thy grace;

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<sup>540</sup> Rupert Davies, *Methodism: Then and Now* (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 26.

<sup>541</sup> Methodist Church, *Purposes and Doctrine*, 213.

<sup>542</sup> Michael J. Townsend, *Our Tradition of Faith* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1980), 40.

<sup>543</sup> Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice*, Vol 2: 214.

<sup>544</sup> Frank Baker, *A Charge to Keep*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1947), 212.

Our rule, Thy word;

Our end, the glory of the Lord.<sup>545</sup>

This is more than a Methodist religious platitude, or a much-loved hymn, it is the theological foundation and ethos of what it means to be a Methodist – or a Christian for that matter.

But of course, it is not as simple as that, for there is inevitably a debate as to what theological words mean, and variance of belief and emphasis. The American Methodist theologian, Thomas Langford, states:

There is theological diversity among Methodists. At one end of the spectrum, we find serious questioning of the viability of inherited theological formulations, whilst at the other there is a reaffirmation of the classical tradition . . . a concern to communicate Christian faith to the contemporary world . . . for this very reason, it looks less to the past and more to the future.<sup>546</sup>

This must be correct, yet it is not without its obvious dangers if it is felt that securing the future means sacrificing the past. That is a concern. Timothy Macquiban as previously mentioned is brave to point out the inconsistencies of an appeal to Wesley's doctrine.<sup>547</sup> It is not right to 'ignore or set aside' that which is felt to be unpalatable for today.

Johnathan Dean writing in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, says that 'since Methodist Union in 1932, there has been a marked discomfort about the usefulness of Methodism's traditional doctrines and practices, even within the Church itself.'<sup>548</sup> This is true, and it is clear that the wider body of Methodists are aware of it, for this has been the case for a long time.

There is a pragmatic problem when there is a mixture of theological emphasis within a circuit. The West Cornwall circuit was aware of this when there was need to appoint a Superintendent to replace a conservative evangelical predecessor. The procedure is that a Profile is sent to the Stationing Committee and then to interested parties who are seeking new appointments. The West Cornwall profile firstly described the circuit as to geography and size, and secondly as to its 'stated policy about mission and ministry,' As to these there is clarity. 'The Circuit policy is to grow the church through

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<sup>545</sup> Charles Wesley, "Captain of Israel's Host" in *The Methodist Hymn Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1933), no. 608.

<sup>546</sup> Langford, *Methodism Theology*, 79.

<sup>547</sup> Macquiban, "Dialogue with the Wesleys", 22.

<sup>548</sup> Jonathan Dean, "*Spontaneity, Tradition and Renewal*" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 221.

vibrant evangelical worship, Bible based preaching, . . . to enable more people to commit themselves to Jesus Christ and become mature disciples. . . . The foremost need of circuit is for Biblically based leadership . . .’ As to the search, the circuit is `looking for a presbyter with circuit experience who will preach the Gospel and teach the Bible faithfully.’<sup>549</sup> This is hardly the terminology of a broad church.

## **A Broad Church**

There is a definition of a broad church in *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think*, which states, `representing theological diversity within a framework of Christian unity.’<sup>550</sup> That is undoubtedly describing the ideal, but is it correct? The ongoing debate of *God In Love Unites Us*<sup>551</sup> has caused serious concern for West Cornwall Methodists. In the debate, each viewpoint quotes scripture. This could hardly be described as unity.

The authors or compilers of *What Circuit Ministers Really Think* admit that with 74% of the ministers invited to take part responding, it is not a definitive account of what ministers believe.<sup>552</sup> Yet what it does report is quite startling in its theological diversity. For instance, one in twenty Methodist ministers who replied are not able to express their belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully human, whilst 25% did not believe in the virgin birth. The same percentage could not express agreement with the traditional interpretation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>553</sup> This is something rather different to West Cornwall theological convictions. The same book states that 34% as against 66% hold a strong conviction as to the inspiration of scripture. Yet the centrality of scripture and its exegesis is central to what might well be the most divisive issue for a generation.

## **God in Love Unites Us**

History might well record that the most significant matter to cause theological tension between the Methodist Conference and West Cornwall Methodists thus far is a report to Conference. This is the outworking of the Methodist *Report of the Marriage and*

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<sup>549</sup> Methodist Church, *Purposes and Doctrine*, 213.

<sup>550</sup> John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2016), 99.

<sup>551</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Loves Unites Us*.

<sup>552</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

<sup>553</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 101.

*Relationships* Task Group 2019 for study and prayerful discussion.<sup>554</sup> Here is an in-house matter of considerable importance for the well-being of the Methodist Church.

Human Sexuality is not a new topic for Methodism, nor should it be. This is what Angela Shier-Jones writes on an earlier report to Conference on the matter. 'The 1979 Report on Human Sexuality listed no less than six witnesses, each of which needed to be interpreted in the light of the others in order to reach a Christian approach to the subject.'<sup>555</sup> These witnesses are the Bible, reason, the traditional teaching of the church, the personal and corporate experience of modern Christians, the understanding provided by the human sciences, and what might be called the spirit of the age.<sup>556</sup> The evangelically minded West Cornwall Methodists, whilst not distancing themselves from such a list, would presume that they were not given equal weight, especially between the Bible and the 'spirit of the age.' Yet it must be conceded that Shier-Jones is probably correct when she writes 'There has been a sea-change in attitude both within and outside the church.'<sup>557</sup> But from my own observation the reply coming from many in Cornwall is that this does not make it any more acceptable.

The previous chapter mentioned earlier visits by Conference in the area of human relationships. Of particular concern was the 1993 report *A Christian Understanding of Family, the Single Person and Marriage*.<sup>558</sup> Yet the *Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group*, submitted to Conference in 2019,<sup>559</sup> has created a reaction more vocal and more serious as to its consequences. What is the actual point of contention? Namely this. The lengthy document brought to Conference says as its last point:

The Methodist Church opposes discrimination on the basis of **sexuality**, (bold org.) gender or race. Accordingly, if a couple is seeking to be married in a Methodist place of worship no objection to the performance by a particular minister, probationer, officer or member of any duty in respect of their proposed marriage shall be entertained on such a ground.<sup>560</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

<sup>555</sup> Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2005), 174.

<sup>556</sup> Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress*, 174.

<sup>557</sup> Angela Shier-Jones in G. Thompson Brake, *Policy and Politics in British Methodism: 1932-1982* (London: Edsall, 1984), 81.

<sup>558</sup> The Methodist Church, *Derby Declarations, Methodist Conference* (1993).

<sup>559</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

<sup>560</sup> Methodist Church, *God in Love Unites Us*.

The debate of this report by Districts, circuits, and churches has been radically interrupted by the Covid epidemic, yet it is going to have far-reaching implications for the relationship between Conference and West Cornwall Methodists.

So, what has been the West Cornwall Methodist response thus far?

As often happens in a debate that involves scripture, part of the problem is that people whose thinking is radically different will often use the same vocabulary and quote the same supposed proof-texts. There is the frequent use of such words as `truth' and `love.' Barbara Glasson, at the time of writing, President of the Methodist Conference, wrote an erudite article in the *Times'* Credo column which illustrates the point of conflict on the subject. She writes:

To say something is complicated – not binary but multifaceted – is to rejoice in a wonderful strength. We are strong when we seek truth rather than certainty, love instead of judgement, relationship and community over dogmatic isolation. This truth applies to all aspects of life and relationships – not least those that are political, social, ethical or religious.<sup>561</sup>

The Superintendent of the West Cornwall circuit, Alastair Bolt, also speaks of truth, whilst strongly making the opposite point! Bolt's tone and conclusion sound very different to that of Barbara Glasson. He writes of the report that `It reveals a total shift away from the mainstream evangelical tradition, . . . away from the broad foundation of biblical holiness upon which Methodism was founded.' He concludes `the report quotes John Wesley's call for tolerance as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, but this is precisely what this report threatens to do.'<sup>562</sup> Bolt's report has been read, digested and accepted by the West Cornwall circuit, being written by a trusted and respected Superintendent. *Methodist Evangelicals Together* (MET) held a well-attended public conference in Penzance on November the 16<sup>th</sup> 2019 where the overwhelming reaction to *God In Love Unites Us* from the approximately eighty people present was negative.

At a West Cornwall Circuit Meeting on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020 discussion and voting took place at the requirement of the Cornwall District. Two motions were sent to the Cornwall District from the West Cornwall circuit.

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<sup>561</sup> Barbara Glasson, "Credo" in *The Times* (5 October 2019).

<sup>562</sup> Alastair Bolt, "Some implications of accepting the 2019 Methodist Conference Report, *God In Love Unites Us*, commending same-sex marriage" (October 2019).

1. The West Cornwall Circuit Meeting calls the Conferences attention to the short period of consultation provided for this Circuit and its eighteen churches to discuss and respond to the report 'God in love unites us.' We believe that the original and conventional timeframe of two years for such momentous issues should have been adhered to. Not only will the curtailed procedure lead to poor decisions, the impression is given that the Conference is rushing this potential divisive legislation through, and that just when Connexional unity is of the essence, people in our chapels feel disenfranchised and alienated from the Conference.
2. The West Cornwall Circuit Meeting calls on the Conference to reject the provisional legislation before it, allowing same-sex marriage to occur on Methodist trust property.

It does so on the grounds that the biblical analysis of both Greek and Hebrew texts in the report is woefully inadequate and flawed. This has resulted in the report's laudable aims of love and inclusion leading to a compromise of the Gospel. Furthermore, as part of a Connexional church we reject the validity of 'opt-outs' when it comes to ethics.<sup>563</sup>

These two motions were passed with an overwhelming majority,<sup>564</sup> and forwarded to Stephen Wild, the Chair of the Cornwall District.

David Clark, writing under the heading 'Methodism as a community of character', states that the Methodist doctrinal emphasis on 'holiness' needs to be the hallmark of Methodism as a connexion.<sup>565</sup> That is correct but what he means by 'holiness' is not clear. He states in *The Liberation of the Church* 'If we are going to survive as a church the emphasis has simply got to be on what unites us and not what divides us.'<sup>566</sup> This hardly seems to be a criterion for the same-sex marriage debate that is taking place in Conference. Most in West Cornwall Methodist leadership, as witnessed in the Circuit Leadership Team, would feel this was the death knell of 'what unites us' and also 'holiness' for that matter.

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<sup>563</sup> Two motions proposed at West Cornwall Circuit Meeting 26<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2020. (Writer in attendance at meeting.)

<sup>564</sup> The voting figures are in the possession of the writer but are not in the public domain.

<sup>565</sup> David Clark, *The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, management and governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Methodist Conference 2005 (Christian Communities and Networks 1984) in Turner, John *Exploring Methodism* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998), 86.

<sup>566</sup> David Clark, *The Liberation of the Church*, 86.



Yet in truth the bottom line of this painful debate is that any theological argument in Methodism can claim scripture or John Wesley for authority. Timothy Macquiban, and what he says has been seen as important, when arguing that Methodism is strong on denominational discipline as to following Wesley's structures, yet is much more flexible when his theology seems contrary to modern sensitivities.<sup>567</sup> So it is that this debate must be handled with care, for the Report treats contrary views with a degree of malleability as being sensitive to sensitive consciences. It would have been hoped by the writers of the Report that built-in flexibility should be sufficient to protect the denomination from attack and resignation by those negative to the proposed action of Conference in allowing single sex couples to be married in church. 10/9 of the report stipulates (4) that no same-sex marriage may take place on Methodist premises without the permission of the trustees. (5) that a minister who is prevented from officiating for reasons of conscience shall refer the couple to an authorised colleague. And (6), if one through conscience refuses to officiate at a marriage the District Chair should be notified.

So, seeing there is no compulsion to do what many West Cornwall Methodists would consider to be wrong, where is the problem? The answer is again sensitive consciences. Some will find it difficult, if not impossible, to be party to such a practice taking place in Methodist churches when some consider it to be fundamentally wrong, even if only by extension.

One recalls from the years of being Chair of the Evangelical Alliance that the separatist and fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism would have nothing to do with the EA because of what was described as 'guilt by association.' Or to give its parochial term, quoted to me in private, 'I can't hold your hand because I don't know whose hand you're holding.' I found such thinking pernicious. But the problem here is rather more complex, for one is not talking of a voluntary association but a legal 'connexion' with a body that is legislating for action that is considered by many West Cornwall Methodists to be unbiblical.

### **Methodist Evangelicals**

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<sup>567</sup> Macquiban, "Dialogue with the Wesleys", 23.

The *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* is confident that there is a place for evangelicals within a pluralistic denomination such as Modern Methodism:

Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism have an assured place in a denomination that now prizes pluralism, but it remains to be seen whether they will retain, or regain, the ability to express and transmit their evangelicalism in a distinctive and recognisably Methodist idiom.

In West Cornwall some of the churches are members of the *Evangelical Alliance* and *Methodist Evangelicals Together*, and they are reassured knowing that the Methodist Church's doctrinal standards state that the Methodist Church is committed 'to proclaiming the doctrines of the evangelical faith.'<sup>568</sup> Which begs the question 'what does evangelical mean in this context'? David Carter writes that the doctrinal standards have 'been carefully phrased to avoid becoming a theological straitjacket' and concludes 'The range of permitted diversity has become much wider in the twentieth century.'<sup>569</sup> This is obvious and for some evangelicals painfully so.

But there is variance even in evangelical understanding. David Bebbington defines 'evangelical faith' as *Conversionism, being Evangelistic, Biblicism and Crucicentrism* (a stress on the death of Christ on the cross).<sup>570</sup> Increasingly there is growing breadth as to the precise meaning of these four points, particularly the last concerning penal substitutionary atonement.<sup>571</sup> But there is still concern from some who find evangelicals to be uncomfortable bedfellows, as seen from Ian Haile above, in the area of Scripture and Creationism.

The question is how evangelicalism, one of various theological streams in Methodism, can retain its place in the denomination and not fall foul of their inherent tendency to separate. It is interesting that, from my experience, Charismatics have less tendency to resign over theological niceties than mainline evangelicals.

Following on from this It would be interesting to ask if the charismatic movement has had an influence on the West Cornwall Methodists. *What Ministers Believe* records that 64% are in general terms found to be sympathetic, with a higher degree of

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<sup>568</sup> David J. Carter, "Doctrinal Standards" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 97.

<sup>569</sup> Carter, "Doctrinal Standards", 97.

<sup>570</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 1-19.

<sup>571</sup> Derek Tidball, David Holborn and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008).

negativism towards charismatic phenomena.<sup>572</sup> Without available proof one would anticipate that a charismatic-type influence is increasing, yet only one of the West Cornwall circuit churches would describe themselves as 'Charismatic.'

### **Methodism and the Wider Church**

It is clear that ecumenism is not high on the list of West Cornish Methodist concerns, for they are an insular people. They live within their own constituency with, no doubt, respect for their other denominational neighbours.

Writing of ecumenism, Thomas Langford says '. . . it (Methodism) has come to understand itself as a stream which having branched from the broad river of ecumenical Christianity, is now flowing back to re-join it.'<sup>573</sup> One must presume that Langford is using 'ecumenical' in its meaning of 'universal' or 'as belonging to the whole Christian Church.'<sup>574</sup> Methodism has never been less than that. It cannot flow back to something it has never left. If Langford is using it in the sense of a movement for church unity, then the word 'ecumenical' here is forced.

An ecumenical hindrance from time past has been overcome by West Cornwall Methodists – namely, the ordination of women. Grace Davie says 'those Christian groups whose religious professionals are normally termed 'minister' rather than 'priests' do not seem to have found the inclusion of women in their professional ministries all that problematic.'<sup>575</sup> She continues, 'resistance to change comes from two quarters: the Christian communities that put the strongest emphasis on either scripture or tradition.'<sup>576</sup> The West Cornwall Methodists have had women ministers since 2008, when Liz Green joined the circuit team and is remembered with much affection. Just one church refuses women preachers, arguing from its conservative understanding of scripture. This demonstrates Langford's description of Methodist Theology as being 'eclectic',<sup>577</sup> even in the West Cornwall Circuit.

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<sup>572</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 111-2.

<sup>573</sup> Langford, *Methodist Theology*, 96.

<sup>574</sup> William Geddie ed., *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (London: Chambers, 1970), 335.

<sup>575</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 180.

<sup>576</sup> Davie, *Religion in Britain*, 180.

<sup>577</sup> Langford, *Methodist Theology*, 27.

## Methodist Structures – Practical and Spiritual

*The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church (CPD)*<sup>578</sup> are two books that tabulate everything pertinent to the denomination and consist, at the time of writing, of 841 densely printed pages. Conference and Connexion are tabulated as to function and discipline and as to circuit level are constantly used for reference. At this time of unease, Conference and Connexion have come again to the forefront of West Cornwall thinking as being integral.

### Conference

The two aspects of the work of Conference as being practical and spiritual are stated clearly. The annual Methodist Conference is 'the governing body of the Methodist Church, the church's supreme legislative body. It is responsible for the oversight of the church's life and for the definition and interpretation of its doctrine.'<sup>579</sup> Methodism needs structures to exist, enacted by Conference through its various managing Boards and Committees. And as with other denominations there can be a perceived dichotomy between the structures with their rules and regulations (operative) and spiritual (pastoral) and there has ever been the possibility of tension between the two. Evidence is provided by an academic book pertinently entitled "*Heart Religion*" in the in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements.<sup>580</sup> It contains a fascinating chapter entitled 'Camp Meeting Subculture: Holiness Power Versus Corporate Connectionalism.' Gregory Schneider, writing of the North American Methodist scene, tells of the tensions between spirituality and denomination or, as some might imagine, the establishment. He quotes an editorial published in 1900 which pointed out that 'the Holiness Movement had become a separate subculture, a people with a way of thinking, feeling and acting that was at odds with that of their ostensible fellow believers in the pews of the Methodist Churches.'<sup>581</sup> This is a fundamental and continuing perception as 'epitomised in the contrast between testimony meetings and

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<sup>578</sup> The Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (London, Methodist Publishing, 2019).

<sup>579</sup> Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice*, 216.

<sup>580</sup> A. Gregory Schneider, *Camp Meeting Subculture: Holiness Power Versus Corporate Connectionalism* in Richard B. Steele "*Heart Religion*" in the in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements (London: The Scarecrow Press, 2001), 145.

<sup>581</sup> Schneider, *Camp Meeting Subculture*, 145.

committee meetings.<sup>582</sup> Of course, such thinking is true of all denominations. For the people 'out there doing the work' there is a degree of suspicion of those 'up there' at headquarters. The 'spiritual' have little time for church structures.

But spirituality of course has nothing to do with the machinery of running an organisation. In this context Turner, writing of the renewal of Protestantism, gives a helpful definition. 'Spirituality, is the study of the whole range of the intercourse between human beings and God'<sup>583</sup> The tension between Methodist structures such as Conference and spirituality may be inevitable but not necessarily justified. Both in a denomination and local churches necessary structures have to be maintained and maintained by people whose spiritual journey and gifting is private and cannot be judged. The ultimate purpose of structure in Christian organisations is to provide a place where the Holy Spirit can work, and the Kingdom of God in all its aspects can be furthered. Nevertheless, this history of Methodism in West Cornwall has recorded many times of suspicion and resentment of Conference even to the point of schism, as with today.<sup>584</sup>

So it is that the tension between Conference and West Cornwall Methodism is still evident. This problem between Headquarters and District is hinted at by James Bates and Colin Smith when they write of Conference in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. They describe Conference as having 'an emphasis on church structure' with a caveat, 'so long as this is done in terms of consultation, connectedness and accountability.'<sup>585</sup>

It is in regard to these sorts of matters which have led to rapidly increased concern about Conference from West Cornwall. Has there been the 'consultation, connectedness and accountability' from Conference, of which Bates and Smith write concerning *God In Love Unites Us*? The answer is at best equivocal. If it had not been for the tragedy of Covid, just one year had been allowed for consultation, leaving West Country Methodists feeling not so much unconnected as out of fellowship with Conference on this matter.<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> Schneider, *Camp Meeting Subculture*, 146.

<sup>583</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 83.

<sup>584</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>585</sup> Jane Bates and Colin Smith, "Controversy Essential: Theology in Popular Methodism" in Marsh *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 16.

<sup>586</sup> Methodist Church, *God in love Unites Us*.

This is a point of tension wider than the sensitive West Cornish. Bates and Smith write under the chapter heading of *Controversy Essential: Theology in Popular Methodism*:

Principles of connexionalism have been explored in the frequent desire of Methodists for their view to be counted. Concern has been expressed as whether connexional officers can speak for the whole Church and whether Conference decisions are owned by the local Church. There have been clear tensions between perceived local needs and connexional policy.<sup>587</sup>

And sadly, these tensions are growing in Cornwall and need to be examined. In a chapter called *Disparities Between Theology* Anthony Reddie writes of 'the collective over the individual' and says 'to what extent does the conferring element, particularly in terms of the Conference, remain nothing more than an empty rhetorical device'<sup>588</sup> He continues 'It is this lack of clarity about the theological issues that underpin Methodist polity which lead to the seemingly intractable and perennial concerns that arise at the Conference'<sup>589</sup> These are concerns amplified by connexion, which means, by implication, that every Methodist is 'roped in.'

### **Connexion - at a Time of Tension**

This is a lengthy section on connexion. The reason is that what connexion is and what it claims to do is fundamental to Methodism and also epitomises some of the points of tension within the denomination and West Cornwall Methodists in particular. Some definitions spiral off into flights of theological fancy, some others fail to realise that connexion, unless speaking of fellowship, mutual trust and concern denies its name.

Connexion *per se*, though hardly a structure of Methodism, is probably its most cherished distinctive and has become a euphemism for the denomination. This is not just connexion within a local Circuit seen here as important, but rather connexion within the whole denomination, perhaps a reflection from the Anglican Wesley.<sup>590</sup> But in fact Susan Howdle says that the word 'connexion' was to reflect his relationship with his members, societies and preachers for 'All of them were in connexion primarily with him and then with each other.'<sup>591</sup> This is a constructive and pastoral use of the

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<sup>587</sup> Bates "Controversy Essential", 16.

<sup>588</sup> Reddie, "Dispelling Myths", 172.

<sup>589</sup> Reddie, "Dispelling Myths", 174.

<sup>590</sup> The head of the Cornish district is often affectionately referred to as the Methodist Bishop of Cornwall.

<sup>591</sup> Howdle, "Connexionalism", 77.

word that needs to be maintained. David Carter seems to get carried away when he writes of connexion saying:

each society saw its intensity of communal experience of the renewing and transforming grace of God as a manifestation of the one Church of Pentecost . . . an experience that they knew to be replicated in all Methodist societies since the Methodists were 'one people the world over.'<sup>592</sup>

More than that he says connexion speaks of 'the *koinonia* of the church across time... a common sense of eschatological expectancy.'<sup>593</sup> But from such exalted rhetoric Carter does bring himself back to earth and reality. He says 'Both the steep decline in membership from the 1960s and the administrative reconstructing of Methodism in the 1970s led to more questioning of connexionalism.'<sup>594</sup> And if that was true then it is more so today.

### **Connexion: What Does it Mean?**

For emphasis, the first thing to state is that, as against the theological machinations of some, connexion in this context has in essence no theological definition. The Constitutional Practice and Discipline (CPD) of the Methodist Church states that connexion and church can be used interchangeably.<sup>595</sup> It is 'those connected to some person or group' and are 'structural expressions at all levels of church life . . .'<sup>596</sup> The historian David Hempton writing of connexion in the nineteenth century says 'At its best connexionalism was an ecclesiastical system of mutual care and support, and at its worst it was a ramshackle system of financial evasion and irresponsibility.'<sup>597</sup> Richard Woolley writes that 'connexionalism may mean little in practise.'<sup>598</sup> This is confirmed by *What Circuit Ministers Really Think*, which says it is 'difficult to express exactly what connexion means,' and implies that 'Methodism has become too centralised'<sup>599</sup> This is confirmed by Andrew Hindmarsh writing in the same book 'Despite the emphasis on the connexion within the Methodist tradition, it is radically

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<sup>592</sup> David Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome: A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 18-19.

<sup>593</sup> Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome*, 20.

<sup>594</sup> Carter, *Love Bade Me Welcome*, 127.

<sup>595</sup> Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice*, vol. 2.

<sup>596</sup> Howdle, "Connexionalism", 77.

<sup>597</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 118-9.

<sup>598</sup> Richard Woolley, "Evangelism, Post-Evangelicalism and the Future of British Methodism" in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 51.

<sup>599</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 231.

decentralized in many ways.<sup>600</sup> So it must be asked why West Country Methodists are worrying so much about it.

One reason, as will be seen, is that some commentators argue for higher views of connexion, many of them inflated. David Clark quotes from a report to Conference 2005:

Connexionalism is the Methodist way of being church . . . cherish connexionalism as part of the tradition and gift which they (Methodists) have inherited . . . (It) describes a way of relating in which individual groups . . . local churches; districts; denominational institutions . . . do not exist by and for themselves but with others and for others. . . . They are interdependent and discover their true identity and develop their full potential only in and through mutual relationships . . . by sharing in holiness and witness, worship and mission.<sup>601</sup>

There might be more hope than realisation here. Nevertheless, Clark articulates a worthy ambition. Paradoxically a crisis, springing from Conference, has brought the local churches in West Cornwall closer together.

Philip Drake in a chapter entitled *Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness* makes a gentle theological case for connexion which is almost tenable. He writes of a 'theology of interdependence,' and quotes the Apostle Paul. 'He himself (Christ) is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church.'<sup>602</sup> Drake is correct that connexion is a concept of something rather different from a group of churches such as those who describe themselves as a *Fellowship of Independent Churches* (FIEC). The 'fellowship of independence' must be almost an oxymoron! That is not Methodism, nor should it be. Nor, as with the Baptist Churches in membership with the Baptist Union, who, though independent, come together in association. Connexion should mean something more than that. Drake's definition is more pragmatic when he writes of 'unity in diversity'<sup>603</sup> but is still debatable. This is a difficult and demanding phrase, for connexion can reveal diversity as well as unity.

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<sup>600</sup> Andrew Hindmarsh, "Supports or Shackles? Methodist Structures in the Twenty-First Century" in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 80.

<sup>601</sup> The Methodist Church, *The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2005) in Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*, 183-4.

<sup>602</sup> Philip Drake, "Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness", in Marsh *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 137-8.

<sup>603</sup> Drake, "Joining the Dots", in Marsh *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 137-8.



### Connexion: Areas of Difficulty

Of the definitions of connexion that strain credibility there are many that can only be touched upon. The problem is that they rather draw attention to those areas where the denomination has fallen short of the rhetoric. David Clark believes that connexion should be marked by holiness. Quoting from *The Nature of Oversight* he says that holiness needs to be the hallmark of Methodism as a connexion.<sup>604</sup> What that means is not clear.

Gregory Schneider is in like vein under the heading of *Holiness Power versus Corporate Connexionalism*. His analogy is strained when he writes of an 'Army in detachments, under independent authorities, would be feeble and ineffective in comparison with the same army moved by one supreme authority, having unity of purpose and action.'<sup>605</sup> Certainly Methodism must have one 'authority' but the solidarity he describes goes beyond reality. Schneider backs away from exalted metaphors when he writes 'for those at the lower end of the various organisational hierarchies, incorporation created a feeling of spiritual confinement and spiritual fragmentation.'<sup>606</sup> But the word 'incorporation' goes beyond reality. In an open and unminuted session of the West Cornwall Circuit some felt helpless to have any meaningful input into 'the system', and had no sense that they are spiritually connected with what is going on at headquarters.<sup>607</sup> The history chapters seem to imply that divergence has ever been the case in Cornwall.

But connexion implies a responsibility two ways. Negativism towards national structures does not mean that connexion has no meaning locally. Among the churches, connexion is strained at ground level when individual chapels or churches seek to 'do their own thing.' Ian Haile, one time chair of the Cornish District writing of charismatic-type growth among the churches in Cornwall, says 'The danger of the freer style is the loss of the Methodist tradition of connexionalism with the consequent growth of congregationalism.'<sup>608</sup> Stress comes from some who have little fellowship with any except with themselves.

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<sup>604</sup> Methodist Church, *The Nature of Oversight*.

<sup>605</sup> Schneider, "Heart Religion", 147.

<sup>606</sup> Schneider, "Heart Religion", 147.

<sup>607</sup> The writer was present at the meeting. These comments were made in group discussions.

<sup>608</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 22-23.

Another difficulty is that British Methodism seems to be tied by bureaucracy. John Turner writes ‘To some outside it, no church seems to have more rules and regulations or more obsessive forward planning than Methodism.’,<sup>609</sup> as demonstrated by a cursory look at the Methodist Church’s CPD. For Turner this is a real concern. He writes ‘The acid test of all the changes . . . will be whether the connexional style, which differentiated Methodism from the ‘gathered church’ of the Free Churches, can be maintained. If this disintegrates, Methodism, as usually understood, will have disappeared.’<sup>610</sup> He is right. Methodism should become more malleable when handling its structures without losing its treasured sense of mutuality.

Anthony Reddie, when writing of the connexional structure of Methodism, comes to the heart of the matter and deserves to be quoted at length:

The collective over the individual is an important feature of Methodism ecclesiology. To juxtapose these elements alongside the inherent tensions and fault-lines . . . is to ask a difficult question of contemporary Methodists. But to what extent does the conferring element, particularly in terms of Conference, remain nothing more than an empty rhetorical device propped up and supported solely by rigid traditionalists and historical sentimentalists? To what extent does the seeming divide between a theology articulated from the ‘centre’ or from ‘the top’ no longer resonate with or reflect the ongoing concerns of Methodists in the local churches?<sup>611</sup>

Here he asks significant questions that frustratingly are almost impossible to answer. In *Unmasking Methodist Theology* there is a chapter from David Peel writing under the heading ‘A United Reformed Church Perspective.’ From his standpoint of being a ‘sympathetic observer’ of Methodism he asks this question, ‘does practice match theory in the claims for the Methodist principle of connexion?’<sup>612</sup> It is a question that hangs in the air unanswered.

David Clark suggests various ‘tasks’ that ‘connexional and district leaders might address for a way forward.’<sup>613</sup> These include ‘*quality time*’ to reflect on various initiatives that have been taken; the need to clarify a ‘*theology of mission*’ at

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<sup>609</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 23.

<sup>610</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 27.

<sup>611</sup> Anthony G. Reddie “Dispelling Myths and Discerning Old Truths” in Marsh *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 173-4.

<sup>612</sup> David R. Peel, “Uniting in Response - A United Reformed Church Perspective” in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 197.

<sup>613</sup> David Clark, *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism* (Bakewell: Church in the Market Place Publications, 2010), 257-8.

connexional level followed by a strategy for mission. He continues that there is need to communicate to the churches '*the importance of connexionalism.*' He argues that there is need for continuing reflection on '*the future of the church in Britain*' and lastly, the need for leaders '*conferring*' so as to share a vision and to demonstrate how that vision is important.'<sup>614</sup> Yet, as with connexion, some visions are easier to articulate than to implement

Observation confirms an impression that may or may not be true elsewhere. For West Cornwall, connexion seems to be understood and practiced up to district level but not beyond. Denominational discussion and reports however worthy, do not seem to percolate down. Sadly, the result of this is that the very word 'connexion' in its national sense is seen increasingly as a problem more than a help, something to be avoided.

But connexion, in a nontheological sense, which is how it was always meant to be, should have a positive aspect for West Cornwall Methodists. For these faithfully going about their own mission and work they are not alone. They are connected in fulfilling denominational requirements and finding mutual support at times of concern. It means fraternity amongst people of like mind who are grateful for the leadership of a trusted superintendent, and a warm affection for Steven Wild, the Chair of District. This is an umbrella concept inherited from the beginning. This is indeed of value and something necessarily stronger than either Congregationalism or Baptist Association.

#### **Four Problems**

It is impossible, neither is there need, to examine all the various aspects of Methodism that constitute its structure and practice for the local church. Nevertheless, four topics have been chosen, being issues that to an extent cause concern or problems within the churches of West Cornwall. These are Stationing, the Plan, Preaching and the Financial Assessment.

In Methodism, local churches do not invite their own ministers. CPD sets out at length the procedure for the call of a presbyter or deacon.<sup>615</sup> The West Cornwall circuit has three staff members, namely the Superintendent, a presbyter, and a deacon. Each looks after a third of the churches in the circuit, arranged by geography. The outcome

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<sup>614</sup> Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*, 257-8.

<sup>615</sup> Methodist Church, *Constitutional Practice*, vol.2, 323.

of the Covid pandemic might mean that one of the staff members will have to be forfeited for financial reasons.

Even in the early nineteenth century the stationing process was held with a degree of suspicion. One minister complained `We are afraid of (Jabez) Bunting. He will send us to bad circuits.'<sup>616</sup> The book *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* expresses the views of today's ministers on several of the issues involved in stationing.<sup>617</sup> But the concern here is not from the standpoint of the minister but from the congregations that constitute the Circuit.

It is unlikely that an individual church will hear a new minister preach before his or her first Sunday in September. This is unlike other mainline denominations where the calling church has a close input into the stationing process. One of the key points pursued by them is that there should be doctrinal affinity between minister and church. And having `given a call' that church feels a responsibility for the support of the ministry, both financially and otherwise. In Methodism the presbyter is stationed by the machinations of Conference, District Chair and Circuit, often successfully but not always. It must also be admitted that other tradition's system for calling a minister prove not always to be successful!

Amongst the various complex considerations of calling a minister is the matter of doctrinal diversity. A new minister must endeavour to meet the requirements of the circuit.<sup>618</sup> Haley and Frances explain the problem. `The ministers bring to the circuit their own distinctive theological emphasis, but the circuit churches already have their own.' The question is then asked, `should the Methodist Church make appointments based on consistency or diversity of theological approach.'<sup>619</sup> It could be argued that Conference uses stationing to stop churches or Circuits becoming too independent in their theological stance and therefore maintain diversity within the connexion. Whatever, the local church with a particular theological standpoint has the possibility of being disappointed or frustrated.

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<sup>616</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 34.

<sup>617</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 167-224.

<sup>618</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 97-161.

<sup>619</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 155.

Regarding the Preaching Plan concerns are not new because the appointed preacher can but reveal the theological stable from which he or she comes. Haley and Francis say theological difference is of importance to some 51% of ministers, bearing in mind the theological emphasis of the circuit.<sup>620</sup> This rather highlights the potential complexities of theological pluralism or diversity. Certainly, much thought and prayer go into the stationing process for a circuit like West Cornwall, but differences are inevitable.<sup>621</sup> Brian Beck describes 'an attempt to balance the needs of individual circuits with an overall connexional strategy in the deployment of ministers.'<sup>622</sup> This must be a hard task but not impossible. The West Cornwall circuit has within the last weeks gone through the stationing process successfully. Even in West Cornwall there is a theological mix with one or two churches who would not describe themselves as evangelical. There may well be problems,<sup>623</sup> but not always.

Haley and Francis have tabulated a third of ministers believed that people left, or did not join, Methodist churches because of theological inconsistency.<sup>624</sup> The latter is a particular feature in West Cornwall for inevitably, people moving into the area from 'up country', often for retirement, look for chapels that reflect the theological emphasis from whence they have come, especially evangelicals (in the writer's experience). The writer was for seven years minister of a Methodist church in St Ives where up to 40% of the regular congregation were not members, out of hesitancy to join what they perceived to be the pluralist position of Methodism.

Much of the problem of The Plan is caused by the number of chapel pulpits that have to be filled each Sunday. In West Cornwall there are many more pulpits than either ministers or recognised lay preachers can fill. Inevitably there is lack of continuity in pulpit ministry and also a mixture of ability. It must be remembered that, because ministers have pastoral charge over several churches, lay preachers are taking a considerable proportion of the services. This is confirmed by a Circuit Leaders meeting held in West Cornwall, when the Superintendent said it was difficult to find qualified

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<sup>620</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 157.

<sup>621</sup> Brian E. Beck, "Stationing Committee" in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*, 334.

<sup>622</sup> Beck, "Stationing Committee", 334.

<sup>623</sup> In one church in West Cornwall someone stormed out of a communion service at the mention of the blood of Christ, even though the Methodist Service Book was being used.

<sup>624</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 163.

and able preachers.<sup>625</sup> This problem is not going to build the churches either spiritually or numerically. Added to this, because of a frequent lack of gifting, empathetic worship is at a premium with the tendency for people to look for it elsewhere, often to new churches.

Two sources have been used to approximate the number of new congregations in West Cornwall, coupled with closures during the last thirty years. One is a previous chair of district, the other a prominent West Cornwall layman in frequent touch with these churches. They have ascertained approximately 35 new churches consisting of some 1425 – 1535 adherents of which 10 are now defunct. They range from Methodist, and Independent Methodists, through Community, Charismatic, Oasis and Reformed churches.<sup>626</sup>

John Wesley always pursued his sense of mission to preach salvation and holiness. This was, he believed, the foundational task of the church, and the church was authentic when it pursued it.<sup>627</sup> It would appear that 46% of Methodist ministers think, perhaps out of modesty, that they are good preachers. But when these same ministers believe that only 23% of *local* preachers are competent, it demonstrates a problem that is both significant and worrying.<sup>628</sup> The Preaching Plan is usually available to the congregation. This is often pinned to the church notice board and inevitably it facilitates some to pick or choose the preachers most congenial to their taste.

Each Methodist Church in a circuit must meet a financial assessment set by the circuit. It is an essential responsibility in which each member is rightly expected to take part. But in Methodism this is not according to their ability or largess. Currently in West Cornwall, for a church of 35 members the annual assessment is £15927 or £7.85 per member a week. The assessment is the first responsibility before all else. CPD states:

The first charge on the general church fund shall be the sums required of the Local Church by the assessment of the Circuit Meeting, which shall be paid into

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<sup>625</sup> Said in the presence of the writer.

<sup>626</sup> Ian Haile, *The Alternative Church in Cornwall* (MA. Thesis in Applied Theology, Westminster College, Oxford).

<sup>627</sup> Bates, "Controversy Essential", 16.

<sup>628</sup> Haley, *British Methodism*, 91.

the circuit fund quarterly eight working days before the beginning of the quarter to which they relate.<sup>629</sup>

For several of the chapels in West Cornwall this has become a crippling burden which can become all-consuming, especially for senior citizens who make up most of the congregation. Some churches are helped in meeting their levy by renting out their premises for various activities. This is a double benefit for it also makes a contact with the local community. At least one chapel in West Cornwall has allowed their premises to be used as the village hall with the upkeep of the premises met entirely by the community. But for most this is not an option. Such is the insistence that the assessment has to be met that it has become a constant battle and a depressing requirement rather than a spontaneous love gift. The pressure is multiplied by action against a church defaulting in its payments. This can be aggravated by the fact that some of the regular, dedicated members of the congregation, feel no responsibility to the Methodist denomination. Their giving is sometimes earmarked for other expenditure such as the upkeep of the chapel in decoration and repair, or by giving to Christian causes outside the church altogether. This inevitably causes the requirement to rest heavily on the shoulders of the remaining congregation. Finance has become a concern almost beyond all other and is detrimental to the church's life and ministry.<sup>630</sup>

It can be argued that the Assessment is one of the greatest hindrances to a chapel's positive future. Rather than focusing on the call to reach out, with its many opportunities, nearly every effort seems to be directed to finance. Victory for a church is meeting the annual assessment. This seems to cast a shadow, hindering the ability to look outward with vision, hope and expectation. And now there has come an extra pressure of some magnitude. And that is Covid.

Two quotes from *The Daily Telegraph* both describe the need and suggest a solution perfectly, even though in an Anglican context. Under the heading '**Act now to save the village church,' Welby urged, over fears of financial 'collapse'**' (bold orig.), Gabriella Swerling, the paper's religious correspondence writes:

Rural churches are struggling to draw the same level of congregation numbers and funds as their urban counterparts, with the pandemic exacerbating pre-

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<sup>629</sup> Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice*, vol.2, 536.

<sup>630</sup> The writer has been a minister of a local Methodist Church and has faced this pressure as being dominant.

existing problems, such as diminished-plate donations. . . .’ One member of the Church Synod is quoted as saying ‘The Parish Share has become a huge burden and it needs to be scrapped or reduced. We need localism, not managerialism . . . If there isn’t reform, the Church in rural areas will go out, not with a bang but a whimper.’<sup>631</sup>

Exchange Conference for Circuit and Assessment for Parish Share, and the passage above describes the Methodist situation almost perfectly.

Yet again a hard-hitting Editorial in the same paper on the same day describes the importance of little country churches which is pertinent comment for West Cornwall Methodism. Speaking of the leadership of the Church of England it says ‘It needs to pay more attention to parishes which, without fuss, week after week, do the good work of maintaining Christian witness in the countryside.’<sup>632</sup> Sometimes the Assessment seems to mitigate this.

### **Pastoral Care**

The demands of pastoring several churches today make individual support and counselling almost impossible. This is because of the pressures of time and distance, coupled with the inevitable lack of personal knowledge as to the needs and aspirations of many within the local congregation. Alongside this a minister, except in privileged circumstances, can hardly exercise consecutive, relevant Biblical teaching, rooted in the needs of the local congregation.

### **Conclusion: Acknowledging the Problem**

This chapter has drawn attention to several things which would seem to make it easier not to be a Methodist. But that is not true. In West Cornwall the heritage of Methodism still has its place in the minds of the indigenous Cornish people. Open chapels are still to be found in most communities. They are the spiritual home of committed people who could be a springboard for a positive future. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Yet there is so much to examine in this chapter, for no single issue is without question and debate. Decline in West Cornwall Methodism, as recorded above, is like global

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<sup>631</sup> Gabriella Swerling, “Act Now to Save the Village Church, Welby Urged, Over Fears of Financial ‘Collapse’” in *The Daily Telegraph* (Saturday 31 October 2020).

<sup>632</sup> Swerling, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2020.



warming. One year might be cooler or warmer than the last but the trend studied over time is obvious. The churches are numerically shrinking. The notable exceptions to numerical loss, such as certain individual churches, do not alter the general trend. But again like global warming, decline can only be confronted when the problem is acknowledged. Steps to be taken are often costly and long-term. One such step is the increased necessity for more malleability concerning Methodist structures.

The following chapter concerns the mission of the local church. Through such concepts as *Missio Dei*, the areas of their ministry will be described as partnership with God. This, it is hoped, will remove a sense of despair through lack of human and spiritual resources so as to look to God with renewed confidence for the future.

## Chapter 6: Partners with God in His Mission.

### Introduction

Here I am making a normative and theological response as we turn to West Cornwall Methodist's life and witness. Beginning with a negative we will discuss the loss of members and congregations. Then turning to the positive we will look at *Missio Dei*, Volkstum and partnership in the gospel.

Throughout the two following chapters painful questions will be asked, thereby resisting the temptation to dream of an idealised outcome with everything in place. The last 150 years of numerical decline cannot be reversed at a stroke. This is not to forget that for the aging congregations of West Cornwall the loss of members through death is inevitable.

As to facing numerical loss there are schemes to bring people through the front door. But these are of little value while people are haemorrhaging through the back door. Leslie Francis and Philip Richter suggest reasons for this situation. An obvious first response should ask why this is happening. The groundwork for addressing this problem has been made by an important book with the pertinent title *Gone but not forgotten*.<sup>633</sup> In a chapter entitled 'A Retreat from Commitment' Francis and Richter tell the stories of people including a Solicitor, a Roman Catholic Priest and a Methodist Lay Preacher, who, amongst several others, have drifted away from the church. They suggest that 'In some cases commitment may not have declined: it may not have been there in the first place.'<sup>634</sup> They close the chapter 'Leaving and Returning' with this sobering sentence 'In a very real sense the churches have been careless in letting such individuals drift away.'<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> Leslie J. Francis and Philip Richter, *Gone but Not Forgotten?* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007).

<sup>634</sup> Francis and Richter, *Gone but not Forgotten*, 13.

<sup>635</sup> Francis and Richter, *Gone but not Forgotten*, 141.

In an on-line review-article of the sister book *Gone for Good?* by Tracey Messenger, it is suggested that the loss of one-time worshipers should be of foremost concern to all churches. Drawing from Francis and Richter she cites fifteen reasons for this loss which range from belief to unbelief, life transitions, issues of general dissatisfaction with church leadership, styles of leadership, or theological difference. Others reasons cited include a sense of church becoming irrelevant to lifestyle, or that church was not sufficiently rewarding.<sup>636</sup> This might well be a feature of the churches in post Covid where people have lost the habit of Sunday worship.

Turning towards the positive, there is need to look outward for opportunities and responsibilities that the local churches may have to reach others. This responsibility is to fulfil their gospel mandate in the surrounding communities of which they are a part. Whether this will help to bring the coveted numerical growth is secondary to the churches knowing that they have been preserved for a reason, so as to be and do what is God's purpose for his Church in the world, namely that the churches should be proactive with the gospel of which Jesus says 'go' rather than 'come,' in the context of evangelism.<sup>637</sup>

Three authors have been of particular help in this exercise namely David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*,<sup>638</sup> John G. Flett, *The Witness of God*,<sup>639</sup> and from a Methodist stable Martyn Atkins, in *Changing Church for a Changing World*.<sup>640</sup> In looking to Missio Dei it will confirm that there is divine help to fulfil the commission that the West Cornish Methodist churches have received. The German word Volkstum has introduced a line of argument that is informative as to how and with whom mission is to take place in a West Cornish culture.

### **West Cornwall Methodists - and Missio Dei**

Methodism was founded by John Wesley with Arminian underpinnings. This is a denial of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and irresistible grace which David Bosch helpfully describes as the antithesis of Arminianism. At the time of Wesley, Calvinism

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<sup>636</sup> Tracey Messenger, *Gone for Good?* (Church House Publishing: 2008).

<sup>637</sup> Mark 16:15

<sup>638</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

<sup>639</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*.

<sup>640</sup> Atkins, *Changing Church*.

as understood from the Puritans, had come to be `understood in extremely rigid terms.’<sup>641</sup> The logic of its argument is baldly this, that `Christians should leave it to God to save whom he wishes to save, according to his own pleasure. Belief in predestination described as such can paralyse the will to Mission,’<sup>642</sup> whereas `John Wesley . . . talked about Christ’s love for the forgiven sinner which “sweetly constrains him to love every child of man.”’<sup>643</sup> David Clough writes:

These theological doctrines have a direct impact on the way the Church engages with the world. On the Calvinist view, the actions of human beings become living faithfully as the elect of God. On the Arminian view, everything is at stake in the mission of the Church: all can be saved, and so the Church has a responsibility to be active in doing all it can for those outside the Church.<sup>644</sup>

And if this seems a dated, sterile theological debate, then Clough continues *by* stating that a problem for Methodists is that for many, their activity is often taken up with meeting some of the requirements of Methodism as against exercising their mission. God’s mission, which is *missio Dei*, is the focus of this chapter.

Julyan Drew quotes Lake and Serjeant who in an undated committee meeting entitled *Recording and Conserving Cornish Chapels* state that the `accelerating programme of closure and sales is inevitable’ and that `it is neither feasible nor desirable to preserve all existing chapels.’<sup>645</sup> But what is needed is something very different. It is a fresh understanding of a twofold participation in Mission. Firstly, the local church fulfilling its calling and secondly, God about his saving grace. This is where *Missio Dei* is of singular importance for it is a counterbalance to long-term disappointment which can be illustrated.

### **Missio Dei and Encouragement**

John Horner, at the time Methodist Superintendent minister in Penzance, wrote a book describing the decline in West Cornwall.<sup>646</sup> At the close of *Even in This Place* Horner

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<sup>641</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 258.

<sup>642</sup> For a modern and moderate rendering of Calvinism see Bryan Burton, “Presbyterianism” in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 466-72.

<sup>643</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 258.

<sup>644</sup> David Clough, “Theology Through Social and Political Action” in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 46.

<sup>645</sup> Drew Julyan, *Methodism in West Penwith - A Heritage at Risk* (Newlyn: Private Publication, 2018).

<sup>646</sup> Horner, *What Mean These Stones?* (Penzance, Headland, 2015), 6.

pertinently quotes Stephen Dawes, former chairman of the Cornwall District of the Methodist Church, who wrote the following in his *District Chronicle*, Summer, 2001:

If I look into the future it seems to me quite obvious that as God raised up the Methodist Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to do a specific task, so now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century he is putting it down. The signs of that are clear to all who have eyes to see. It seems to me therefore, that we should not struggle to keep alive what God is letting die.<sup>647</sup>

Dawes is correct at this point. Inevitably some churches do die as much in West Cornwall as anywhere else. As a Circuit Steward I am aware of three churches in St Ives that are on the brink of closure. But for the churches resolved to continue, however negative the circumstance of a handful of members and continuing financial stringency, then *Missio Dei* speaks of hope into the most desperate of situations. And it must be remembered that the West Cornwall circuit still constitutes eighteen chapels at the time of writing. Some are in the same straightened circumstance of those contemplating closure, yet are determined to continue. *Missio Dei* calls people to look to God rather than focusing on the strident problems of the present.

### **What is the Place and Purpose of God's Mission?**

For West Cornwall, the words mission or evangelism stir up several prescribed thoughts and expectations, mainly drawn from a collective memory of the past. To avoid this there will be need for a paradigm shift to make them an effective vehicle for sharing the Good News today. The gospel has not changed, but its presentation has.

David Bosch is helpful in tabulating the breadth of how mission is variously understood. But he is foundational when he writes of 'Mission founded on Scripture.' (Matt 28:18-20) He continues with several concepts of the meaning of the word 'mission' recorded in a Christian context but like him the emphasis here is on *Missio Dei*.

### **Missio Dei and the Church**

It needs to be asked what 'the Church' actually is in the context of its ministry. The two central New Testament words for 'church' are *koinonia* and *ekklesia*. Not only do they describe what the church is, but, significant for this section, they describe the

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<sup>647</sup> Dawes, *District Chronicle*, 81.

church's place and function in the divine economy. The hope is that the hard-pressed churches of West Cornwall Methodism might share a vision of what it means to be 'church' and then prepare themselves for how that vision might begin to be realised. And, unlike the instinctive reaction of many, this will not be through effort alone, but through a realisation that they are part of God's Mission.

So in these two Greek words, *koinonia* and *ekklesia*, it can be discovered what it means to be church, and they will be examined from a particular perspective. *Koinonia*, speaks of 'fellowship,' but not just something to be enjoyed for itself by the gathered church, drinking doubtful coffee after morning worship. It speaks rather of the fellowship of corporate action. In this thesis *koinonia* is a more active word than 'fraternity,' or the German 'gemeinschaft'. It is, as Richard Clutterbuck correctly understands it, as meaning 'maintaining the apostolic tradition.'<sup>648</sup> This is not a 'maintaining' which sounds passive but moving forward with God in establishing His Kingdom. Tim Macquiban's definition is valuable when he writes of 'the Trinity-in-*koinonia*.' Here he is helping to establish the recurring theme of *Missio Dei*, speaking of the redemptive activity of God.<sup>649</sup> An African theologian, Valentin Dedji, confirms this emphasis of *koinonia* from scripture.<sup>650</sup> Drawing from Acts 2:42 he says that 'to be "in Christ" requires us to be in fellowship (*koinonia*) and community with one another.' But it does not end there, for it is worked out in the exercise of spiritual gifts (2:43), practical and costly compassion 'to any who had need,' establishing the goodwill of the community, (2:47) with their numbers growing 'from those being saved.' (2:47) This is the *koinonia* that would be powerful for West Cornwall Methodists, as being an apostolic people, grounded in truth, worked out in practical compassion amongst the people, and experiencing gradual growth from conversion. This might sound as an impossible ideal from the standpoint of the church today. But here it is the church *and* God that makes the difference.

The second word is *ekklesia* which, as with *koinonia*, also describes the churches' place and part in the Mission of God. Countless studies have been made on the word *ekklesia* but as explained this is not the sole task here, but rather to establish an argument. Peter Ward writing in the preface of *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and*

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<sup>648</sup> Richard Clutterbuck, "Theology as Interaction" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 64.

<sup>649</sup> Macquiban, "Dialogue with the Wesleys", 20.

<sup>650</sup> Valentin Dedji, "Methodism: An African Perspective" in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 214-5.

*Ethnography* demonstrates the point. He writes concerning the ‘body of Christ,’ saying that ecclesiology ‘is full of assertions about the social and communal nature of the church.’<sup>651</sup> But Ward goes further when writing in the context of ethnography, that the picture of ‘the body’ can be developed to refer to the various social connections and disconnections that characterize a particular community’s life.<sup>652</sup> So to continue ‘the body’ metaphor, the churches of West Cornwall must be spiritually fed and exercised so as to be built-up and prepared for their various roles in God’s Mission. Richard Osmer adds to this. He writes from Eph. 4:4 concerning the ‘one hope of our calling,’ saying that Paul shares his ‘one hope’ with the whole church, understanding that each part of the church is ‘called out’ (*ekklesia*) into the Mission of God.<sup>653</sup> John Webster says much the same. ‘The intellectual apprehension of the being of the church requires us to explicate it as an element in the conventional economy of God’s goodness towards creatures; this, in turn, requires a theology of divine Missions . . .’<sup>654</sup> This is so important that Webster then quotes John Calvin as to God’s activity saying ‘so powerful is participation in the church, that it keeps us in the society of God.’<sup>655</sup> If this is true for all churches, then it is equally true for the Methodist churches that constitute the West Cornwall Circuit.

Many Christians might think these concepts are beyond either understanding or practice. But *ekklesia* and God’s mission for every member can be demonstrated in a common pastoral situation as it touches upon secularisation.

### **The Church, Missio Dei and Secularisation**

The majority of the indigenous population of St Ives were, in time past, either members of the seven Methodist churches in and around the town, or in some form of contact with them. But things have changed. Until recently, as a Methodist minister in St Ives and conducting funerals for local people, one quickly discerned that among some of the congregation there was either bland indifference, or overt antagonism to what was taking place. This could be ascertained from the body language that was displayed, the refusal to open an Order of Service or hymn book, and from a hostile demeanour

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<sup>651</sup> Pete Ward, ed. *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 5.

<sup>652</sup> Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 5.

<sup>653</sup> Richard R. Osmer, “The Church ‘Taking Form’ in Mission” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 227-30.

<sup>654</sup> John Webster, “In the Society of God” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 200.

<sup>655</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion book* (4.1.3) in John Webster, “In The Society of God: Some Principles of Ecclesiology” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 200.

and negative expression. On the sad occasion of a funeral some have entered the community of the church and found it uncomfortable or unacceptable. Yet the *ekklesia* also assembled for the same funeral, by its welcome, love and support for the bereaved was using vital ministry from people otherwise hesitant to take a more upfront role. They were being, in Osmer's words a 'contrast society.'<sup>656</sup> That is true evangelism when the fellowship, (*koinonia*), is seen in the people of God reaching out (*ekklesia*), to embrace others with whom they have come into contact. This ministry can take place not only *in* the local community but by being part *of* the community. The church has to see itself as part of the wider society, the people among whom they live ordinary, practical and Godly lives where they live. This is the body of Christ being about God's Mission at a time of increased secularisation.

Ian Haile writes with acute knowledge of the Cornish context. He is not addressing academia or the Church at large, but the society of which he is a part and the churches for which he has been responsible. Haile's definition of secularisation, though saying nothing new, is none the less significant for he has specific situations in mind. He says that secularisation refers to 'ways of thinking and of living which are governed largely by material needs and wants without reference to, or reliance on, religious beliefs or spiritual concerns.'<sup>657</sup> He continues by applying his definition to the effect that it has had on the churches in Cornwall. For him, the tools of secularisation are those things that, by no means all negative, can become the focus of Christian and non-Christian alike, thereby deflecting from the spiritual. The things he mentions include such things as the internet, on-line games, gender issues, global warming, and dietary considerations such as veganism.<sup>658</sup> All of these, and more, offer opportunity for people's focussed interest, and might euphemistically be called 'religious.' This might be true in the sense of having a collective empathy, yet nevertheless have very little to do with personal faith. Ian Haile continues 'In this . . . era the social, cultural and intellectual aspects of Western Society values, world views and ideologies are no longer rooted in a social environment which is Christian based.'<sup>659</sup> He pertinently quotes Peter Owen-Jones who, when giving a broadcast lecture, said 'Christianity in

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<sup>656</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 191.

<sup>657</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 8.

<sup>658</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 8.

<sup>659</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 8.



the West has become a minority belief in a secular world'.<sup>660</sup> That is true. Haile would endorse Bryan Wilson's definition of secularisation when he writes that it is 'the declining social significance of religion.'<sup>661</sup>

For the majority they will never hear a sermon, and some have almost an antipathy to someone in a clerical collar. It is into this arena that the *ekklesia*, the body of Christ is called to minister. And if this sounds rather intimidating, there is an advantage here. Missio Dei will probably begin with people who, profiting from, and enjoying many features of the modern age, have another dimension to their lives, namely Christ. Aware of it or not, they are part of Missio Dei.

### **The Dichotomy Between Missio Dei and Secularisation**

There is a reason why there is a tension between Missio Dei and secularisation. Both are concepts that have been used in this chapter. Secularisation is apparent all around us, whilst this great concept of Missio Dei is patently more difficult to define and recognise. Secularisation would appear to dominate. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is described by one reviewer as a work of stupendous breadth and erudition.<sup>662</sup> It confirms the point that secularisation is wider than any definition and is 'making minimum sense of our world.'<sup>663</sup>

They want to make a point of stressing the irremediable nature of division, lack of centre, the perpetual absence of fulness; which is at best a necessary dream, something we may have to suppose to make minimum sense of our world, but which is always elsewhere, and which couldn't in principle ever be found.<sup>664</sup>

This is almost self-evident. Mission Dei and secularisation are not a "necessary dream," yet they are contrary influences at work in the world. Secularisation may be 'elsewhere' yet the effect of secularisation would seem to be evident – if not seen. Apparently even this is not true of Missio Dei.

Callum Brown's book title *The Death of Christian Britain* would seem to describe the antithesis of Missio Dei. West Cornish Methodists facing the full blast of

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<sup>660</sup> Peter Owen-Jones, *The Battle for Britain's Soul* (Programme 3, BBC TV series, October 2005).

<sup>661</sup> B. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 14 in Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 4-5.

<sup>662</sup> John Patrick Diggins, 'New York Times Book Review' in Charles Taylor, *A Secular age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), back cover.

<sup>663</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London; Harvard University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>664</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10.

secularisation, coupled with years of numerical decline, might wonder in truth what they can see of God's Mission. The contrast between secularisation and Missio Dei would seem to be stark. Brown writes of the decline which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and has been recorded in detail here. 'For most scholars, Christian religion in Britain . . . has been in almost constant decay . . .'<sup>665</sup> This is confirmed by the history of West Cornwall Methodism written in this thesis. David Hempton is quoting Callum Brown when he says that Britons regarded themselves as decidedly Christian until the 1960s, 'when new media, new gender roles, and the moral revolution dramatically ended people's conception that they lived Christian lives.'<sup>666</sup> Hempton speaks of a 'moral revolution', and by 'moral revolution' he is speaking primarily of the loss of people thinking themselves as Christian in any formal sense.<sup>667</sup> Again, he argues cogently that 'collective memories once interrupted are almost impossible to reconnect.'<sup>668</sup> There are of course many other reasons but this is testified to by the redundant Methodist buildings scattered around the geographical area of this thesis. Callum Brown writes that '. . . personal faith is now in "the New Age" of minor cults, personal development and consumer choice.'<sup>669</sup> So what of Missio Dei?

But this is where faith comes in as regard to the promise of Missio Dei. It stems from the Creation, yet the prophet Isaiah describes it as also being 'a new thing.'<sup>670</sup> As confirmed by scripture, experience and testimony, God is still at his work, and it is a redemptive work with which West Cornish Methodists must identify and be party to, for its promise and purpose.

### **Missio Dei and the Present**

However, the realist might ask where the fruit of this 'mission' is to be found. Callum Brown writes of a 'world' that has gone,' presuming that it ever existed! He continues 'Religion was strong when it held the community together in a single vision of the world, . . . which interpreted 'this world' for the people and offered harmonious social

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<sup>665</sup> Brown, *Understanding Secularisation*, 10.

<sup>666</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 196.

<sup>667</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 196.

<sup>668</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 198.

<sup>669</sup> Brown, *Understanding Secularisation*, 196.

<sup>670</sup> Isaiah 43:18-19.

relations based on a harmonious religious monopoly.<sup>671</sup> I am sceptical that such a `world' ever existed.

History most certainly records what God has done in the past. But *Missio Dei* does not look to the past. It argues that the ministry of the Church is for God's world as it is now. Though on first reading Stephen Neil, writing as an ecumenist seems too simplistic, his point is powerful and confirming. Secularisation he says is `The process in any case is irreversible; Christians should welcome it, as one of the many manifestations of the working of God's Spirit, and should recognise that, whether we like it or not, this is the world in which in the future the Gospel will be preached.'<sup>672</sup> To the accusation that this `secular world' is likely to prove recalcitrant to the preaching of the Gospel, he turns it into a positive when he says that this same world is a gospel opportunity. So there needs to be a reassessment as to where God's Mission is to take place in the divine economy and for the local West Cornwall Methodist church it is the place where they are to be found.

Sadly, even when the Gospel is preached in West Cornwall churches – as it most certainly is – there are painfully few to hear it. So it is that Herbert Butterfield says something significant and positive for a chapter on *Missio Dei*:

I think that the spread of secularism offers Christianity not only its greatest test but also its greatest opportunity that it has ever had in history . . . There is a providence in the historical process which makes it more profitable to be guided by one's faith and one's hopes than by one's fears.<sup>673</sup>

And how is this to be brought about in West Cornwall?

There is a two-fold and painful challenge as to how the message will be heard by those outside the local Methodist Church – or any other church for that matter. Firstly, to look to oneself, psyche, and lifestyle, so that one might begin to understand others with the hope of finding common ground. Then secondly, to remember that to the observer, Methodist churches in West Cornwall are just one community amongst other secular communities, yet hopefully with certain necessary distinctives. There is the responsibility to live the message that is preached, for otherwise the surrounding area

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<sup>671</sup> Brown, *Secularisation*, 7.

<sup>672</sup> Stephen Neill, *The Church and Christian Union* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 177.

<sup>673</sup> Herbert Butterfield, in C. T. McIntire, ed., *Writings on Christianity and History* (London: OUP, 1979), 251; 260.

will be disillusioned. The message, the good news, will not be heard unless it is first seen. And there is academic support for this argument.

Paul Fiddes writes of the fellowship of the Godhead in the Trinity the *koinonia*, (italics org.) and its implication for the church:

If we think of the relationship movement in God that is like the Father sending out a Son, expressed from without beginning in an “eternal generation,” and subsequently sent on Mission into the created world, then this shapes all the movements in the church as it gives itself generously for the life of society around; the key thought will be “as the Father has sent me, so send I you.” (John 20:21).<sup>674</sup>

And David Clark is writing of Methodism when he says ‘The legacy of communal holiness makes the point of significance in this, that holiness needs to be manifest throughout Methodism’<sup>675</sup> and one must add for emphasis that this includes individual Christians living amongst their friends and neighbours.

### **Missio Dei and Community**

The community of the local Cornish church, which might wrongly be despaired of for its weakness, is in fact described by Missio Dei as being in the words of the Apostle Paul ‘partners in the gospel.’<sup>676</sup> It is being partners in God’s Mission to the surrounding community with which the church is privileged to live and serve. Today, food banks, the care of the elderly, pastoral support at times of bereavement are just some of the needs that local churches could address in establishing ‘connexion,’ thereby laying down foundations for future contact.

In a slightly different context, James Gustafson is quoted by Bonnie Miller-McLemore as making the same important point. He describes the church as a ‘community of moral discourse.’<sup>677</sup> And for discourse there needs to be a least two parties. Here is the crux of the argument, for apart from academic language, the Methodist churches dotted around the villages and small towns of West Cornwall rightly understand

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<sup>674</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?” in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 16-17.

<sup>675</sup> David Clark, *The Liberation of the Church* (National Centre for Christian Communities and Networks, 1984), 44.

<sup>676</sup> Philippians 1:3-6.

<sup>677</sup> James Gustafson, *The Church As Moral Decision Maker* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970) in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering A Discipline* (Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012), 86-87.

themselves to be the ‘gathered’ people of God. But they are also part of another gathering, sometimes forgotten, namely the place where they live.

The presiding minister in the vestry prior to the service is used to the mantra of prayer from the duty Steward who says wistfully ‘where two or three are gathered in My Name.’ Rightly, there is mention of some of the needs of the fellowship for prayer. This is often in a prepared sheet for the minister’s use in the pulpit. Helpful though this undoubtedly is, it rarely has cognisance of the world outside. It is usual that the one responsible for petitionary prayers makes no mention of some national problem, international disaster or local crisis. Bonnie Miller-McLemore confirms this very point when she quotes Don Browning who says ‘pastoral care has become “impaled” upon the divisions between “private and public” in its focus on personal problems, and often ‘without sensitivity to ... larger social ethical questions.’<sup>678</sup> McLemore rightly says ‘Restricting pastoral care as assistance to individuals in crisis fails to socialise believers to particular understandings of the church ...’<sup>679</sup> Scripture is clear on the point. The chapels of West Cornwall that fall into introspection fail the Lord’s injunction to be salt and light in the world.<sup>680</sup> This is practical theology. For just such a reason Jesus told his disciples to ‘go into the world.’<sup>681</sup> Bonny McLemore says that for Browning pastoral care occurs as part of the church’s ‘dialogical Mission’ related to both faith and society.<sup>682</sup> One other theologian wraps up the argument. Andrew Root, writing in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* says:

‘In a Christopraxis practical theology, ministry is *not solely* (italics orig.) attention to church practices, but also attention to these very “in-church” practices through a Missional impulse that searches for God’s ministry as it comes to humanity in the world.’<sup>683</sup>

This is both challenge and hope for the churches of West Cornwall.

A study of the weekly programme of some of the churches in West Cornwall causes one to understand just how introverted they have become, particularly those on the

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<sup>678</sup> Don S. Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) in Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 86.

<sup>679</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 86.

<sup>680</sup> Matt 5:13-16.

<sup>681</sup> Matt 28:19.

<sup>682</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 87.

<sup>683</sup> Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 97.

conservative evangelical wing. Prior to Covid, one Methodist church in St Ives had two services on a Sunday. Monday night - Prayer Meeting in Church, Tuesday – Preaching Service in church, Wednesday – bi-weekly House Groups, Thursday – Male Voice Choir Practice. The introversion, and religiosity has become extreme. In this context Osmer says ‘theology cannot focus exclusively on clergy functions or church ministries.’<sup>684</sup> And this provides continuity between the past and the future. Writing of the English period in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Lovelace speaks of a ‘new level of organisation among evangelicals for the transforming of the church and the confrontation and leavening of the surrounding culture.’<sup>685</sup> That must be a template for all churches everywhere and in this context for West Cornish Methodists today. What must be overcome is the distant, and often deficient, memory of the past without consciousness of the present sphere of the local churches’ ministry.

### **Missio Dei: Seeking to Know Where God is at Work**

John Flett not only defines Missio Dei but continues to challenge and offer encouragement. Flett says ‘if Mission is the Christian community enlisting in God’s revolutionary acting in the world, it first becomes necessary to identify where God is acting . . .’<sup>686</sup> This is not quite so easy to do as it is to say, especially in the present climate.

For the churches, as with many other groups and organisations, Covid has left questions as to what the future will bring. Many elderly church members are frightened of coming to church, others have got out of the habit whilst, inevitably, some have died.. The minutes of the 1952 Willingen Conference might seem more like a tease than a challenge when it reports ‘the Missionary duty was not one of saving souls but one of sensitivity and total response of the Church to what the triune God has done and is doing in the world.’<sup>687</sup> For the local church there is comfort and hope concerning the privilege of being part of God’s activity. It is not preaching *at*, but rather being one *with* the community that lives in the same village as the Methodist church and is facing many of the same problems as everyone else.

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<sup>684</sup> Osmer, “The Church”, in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, 229.

<sup>685</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 48.

<sup>686</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 53.

<sup>687</sup> Minutes of the Study Conference (Toronto: January 7-8 1952) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 141.

## Missio Dei and Challenges

Richard Osmer points to a way forward for Cornish Methodists when he argues that there is help in 'Missio Dei.' He writes that God's mission 'is God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, (and) God's involvement in and with the world.' It is the 'nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.'<sup>688</sup> Unlike the instinctive feeling drawn from a long Cornish ecclesiastical chapel-centred memory, it is argued that mission does not begin with some structured evangelistic initiative or 'campaign', but rather the renewed church living its life and instinctively doing its work. This is of immense help. But just as Missio Dei should encourage the church, so too should the community of which it is a part be an encouragement. The locus of the church must widen its horizon from the four walls that have enclosed the various chapels for so long. The churches have been preserved for just such a time as this both spiritually and tangibly, so as to enable contact, love and support to the community. And it will be argued that this is not without precedent.

From the wider evangelical perspective instances of Christians with a community dimension are extensively documented. Richard Lovelace, writing of early 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism, argues that evangelism *did (italics mine)* have the dual role of evangelism and social concern:

Associated with the verbal presentation of the gospel in this work were tangible demonstrations of physical compassion . . . There was no dichotomy perceived between evangelism and social concern, and no disparity between interest in these forms of Mission abroad and willingness to implement them at home.<sup>689</sup>

Nevertheless, finding specific instances from Cornish Methodism of this 'physical compassion' are difficult to find. What does seem to be emerging is that the effect of evangelism was on society *per se* rather than particular initiatives or individuals:

The effects of Cornish Methodism in making the drunkard sober, the idle industrious, the profligate moral, and in inducing men to provide decently and

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<sup>688</sup> Osmer, "The Church", 229.

<sup>689</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 149-50.

comfortably for their families, and to give a suitable education to their children, can be attested by thousands of witnesses.<sup>690</sup>

Perhaps not to the same extent as described by John Gilbert, something of this must be a template for today.

Two national TV programmes called 'Cornwall with Simon Reeve' covered the social hardship experienced in Cornwall. Simon Reeve interviewed, Mr Gardner, the head of a Food Bank in Camborne. It transpired that Mr Gardner's wife had recently died and the funeral was the very next day. Nevertheless, he felt that he should continue to work with the team helping to supply 14,000 free meals per month to the socially deprived people of the town. This interview caused a national response. Simon Reeve interviewed on TV the following day spoke of being near to tears at the time. A subsequent article on-line reports Mr Gardner as saying 'Every morning I wake up and I say my prayers. "Please Lord help me to make a difference to someone today."' This is not *Missio Dei*, but it is Mr Gardner being a partner in *Mission Dei*.

The life of West Cornish Methodists cannot just consist of being proud of holding some particular theological emphasis or for keeping the doors of the chapel open. And here can be tabulated one of the reasons for numerical decline, for Howard Snyder in the *Radical Wesley* touches on this very issue. He speaks of the 'jarring clash between the unique genius of the church as the community of God's people and the tranquilised, traditionalised, institutionalised, and often secularised reality that goes under the name of the "Christian Church."<sup>691</sup>

In the light of this extraordinary analysis, Snyder tabulates differing reactions, all of them to be found in West Cornwall. He speaks, as with Richter and Francis previously, of those who give up hope and abandon the church. Others, and this is a paraphrase of what Snyder writes, give themselves to social and political programmes in the name of the church, yet with little involvement with the local Christian community. As seen in the previous chapter others form new Christian communities, in an attempt for faithfulness to an ideal New Testament church.<sup>692</sup> There is a danger here, for in so doing they are meeting at a centralised place away from their previous places of worship and their local community. This relocation mitigates against the unique

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<sup>690</sup>John William Gilbert in T. R. Harris, *Methodism and the Cornish Miner* (Truro: CMHS, 1960).

<sup>691</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 109.

<sup>692</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 110.



privilege and responsibility for the continuing Methodist churches who have been in their various towns or villages for as long as anyone can remember.

### **Missio Dei and the Precedent of History**

There is no dichotomy between Missio Dei and historic Methodism. Donald English, a convinced evangelical and a previous head of the Methodist Home Mission Division, brought a report to Conference in 1988 entitled *Sharing in God's Mission*. In the third section of the Report Timothy Macquiban demonstrates that for John Wesley social caring, the struggle for justice, educational and prison work was 'typical of the social righteousness he sought.'<sup>693</sup> Again Martyn Atkins in *Discipleship . . . and the people called Methodists* writes of a 'false divide.' He describes Christian Mission and ministry as 'both-and rather than either-or . . . Methodist discipleship has therefore always meshed together . . . witnessing clearly to Christ at work and home through lives and lips.'<sup>694</sup>

In Cornwall there would be agreement with David Clark in his chapter *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism* when he writes:

The legacy of communal holiness needs to be manifest throughout Methodism. If the local church is not an exemplary community of character, what has Methodism to offer to a 'broken society'? If the medium is to be the message, circuits and districts need to manifest what it means to be communities of character.<sup>695</sup>

Perhaps this might be the most effective witness to the Gospel that can be made in the present Cornish context.

Albert Outler, a distinguished American Methodist theologian, says 'polarities between evangelism, Christian nurture, Missions and social action'<sup>696</sup> would be what Wesley

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<sup>693</sup> Macquiban, "Dialogue with the Wesleys", 25.

<sup>694</sup> Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship and the People Called Methodists* (Peterborough: The Methodist Church, 2010), 38-39.

<sup>695</sup> Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*, 183.

<sup>696</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 353.

would least approve of today. Richard Lovelace presents the case for the churches' Mission to the world having a spiritual dimension in a way that is almost definitive:

Evangelicals cannot recover their own wholeness and vitality or prevent the loss of their own offspring to humanism or liberalism until they recover their social dynamic. Christians concerned for social action, both Evangelical and non-Evangelical, cannot reach their goals without general spiritual renewal. The general awakening of the church to its full maturity within history will not occur without the conjunction of piety and justice in its laity and its leadership.<sup>697</sup>

Another senior Methodist American academic, Richard Heitzenrater sums up the various strands of mission in the world. He writes in order for the church to:

exercise the presence of God, as Wesley suggested, we must be open to the word of the Spirit in our midst. We must also see ourselves as channels of God's grace (divine presence and power) active in the world. As a Church as well as a movement, Methodism has always been most effective, and will continue to be most effective, when it realizes that its goal is to help realize the Great Commandment in human existence: to love God and love neighbour.<sup>698</sup>

Rather than the concern for society being a purely human initiative it needs a people focussing on the love of God and being, perhaps often unconsciously, a spiritual presence in the community.

### **Missio Dei and Volkstum**

The discovery of Volkstum has been a matter of some excitement for the writer. It is a mainline German concept, little known here, but being of particular significance for God's mission in Cornwall.

Siegfried Knak in correspondence with Barth says:

we are committing a capital crime if we educate the African to be the imitator of the European, instead of helping him to develop his distinctive characteristic.<sup>699</sup> Mission cannot impose a culture. God speaks through a culture's structures and the preservation of this distinctiveness is a holy duty.' It is not a matter of building bridges . . .<sup>700</sup>

What Knak is saying in our context is that the task of Missio Dei is not to make people Methodists. Neither is it to inflict on seekers the foreign and even fearful necessity of coming to a church building. Nor is it to ask people to sit through sermons of which

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<sup>697</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 400.

<sup>698</sup> Heitzenrater, "The People Called Methodists" in Curran, *Methodist Present Potential*, 184.

<sup>699</sup> Knak to Barth, *The Witness of God*, 115.

<sup>700</sup> Knak to Barth, *The Witness of God*, 115.

they have little understanding or interest. But rather, to be in contact with people in their unique everyday lives.

It has been argued from observation that the majority of members of the West Cornwall Methodist churches are indigenously Cornish. Those, who for a variety of reasons have come from up-country, seek the type of Christian expression akin to the churches from which they came and seem hesitant to closely identify with local Methodism *per se*. In the church where the writer was minister, the members were Cornish, and the attendees were not. Without being able to prove the point, one must conclude that the Cornish who live in the holiday areas and where second homes proliferate, are a distinctive people group. They have a unique culture or Volk.<sup>701</sup> They need to be reached as such. And for this, the Methodists are the ones best equipped because of their history in the community and their geographical location. For the 'New Churches' with many young people, the music taste and worship style make it natural and attractive, compared with the traditional hymns and worship forms of the elderly Methodist congregations in their draughty chapels. But according to Knak 'God speaks through a culture's structures and the preservation of this distinctiveness is a holy duty.'<sup>702</sup>

Another illustration of Volk comes from further afield. As onetime Chair of the Evangelical Alliance it was quickly seen (after initial reluctance to accept what seemed a reverse form of discrimination) that the 'black led' churches were not an aberration but a necessity for their unique culture and expression of worship.

So Volkstum teaches some painful lessons. It is not initially bringing people to church, and certainly not trying to take church to the people. One remembers Tent Missions being held in Bristol during the 1950s. The tent was set up on a bombsite in which a full Sunday type service was held and a special evangelist preached. Whereas the church congregation was challenged to support, no-one else ever came. Even modern initiatives such as *Alpha* seem unempathetic to the Cornish mind. *Alpha* has come from 'up-country', modelled on the sophistication of Brompton, West London.

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<sup>701</sup> See chapter one.

<sup>702</sup> Knak to Barth, *The Witness of God*, 115.

The history chapters of this thesis record that the Cornish Methodists were, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1950s, numerically a strong and effective tool for the furtherance of the gospel amongst their own people. But things are different now. *Missio Dei* and Volk are brought together when it is understood these same people today need to hear the Good News from those who speak their language and live their lifestyle. And this will most probably start in the community, rather than in church. But there is also a danger to *Missio Dei* that Flett draws out.

### **Painful Questions**

Two particular dangers are suggested by Flett. The first is that God's Mission can become a catchall concept without focus or meaning. And secondly, that secularisation has so dissipated the evidence of God's mission that the sceptic might well ask 'where is it'? Flett quotes Johannes Aagaard as saying 'Missio Dei resulted in a very formalistic Missiology. Mission tends more and more to become an empty term, which can be filled out by anything.'<sup>703</sup> Aagaard is pertinent when he continues that 'Without any determining criteria, everything the human does can become "identified with the historical *Missio* of God, unqualifiedly and indiscriminately. In this way all secular activities can get the divine sanction . . ."' This, says Matthew Jacques, is what occurred during the 1960s with the coordination of *Missio Dei* and communism, secularisation, humanization, and so on. Reference to the Trinity simply reinforced the key culture narratives of the period.<sup>704</sup> This must be avoided here when speaking of *Missio Dei*.

In regard to Mission, the Cornish villages are now it would seem as much ignorant of the gospel as any community in some distant land. Flett again argues, tending towards hyperbole, that 'no spiritual effect can result from the moribund state of Christendom, since as Wiedenmann suggests "this neo-heathen secularism was worse than the old heathenism."<sup>705</sup> But it is not hyperbole when Flett subsequently writes that the 'civilizing process created walls against Missionary endeavour, because it introduced

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<sup>703</sup> Johannes Aagaard, "Church - What is Your Mission? – Today," Update 3, no.3/4 (1979) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 48-49.

<sup>704</sup> Matthew Jacques, *Zeitschrift fur Mission* 28, no.3 (2002) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 49.

<sup>705</sup> Ludwig Wiedenmann, *Mission und Eschatologie* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1965) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 95.

secularisation that had become inoculated against the Gospel in the way the indigenous religion had not.<sup>706</sup>

Flett quotes Knak effectively and is worth quoting at length:

Mission cannot impose a culture: it must assist the flourishing of native culture. God speaks through a culture's social structures, and the preservation of this distinctiveness is a holy duty. It is not a matter "building bridges, where only the miracle of divine grace has its right." Only God is the one who speaks into the human condition. One must, nevertheless, ground Mission in the pre-existing social structures because it is not possible for the gospel to be understood by "the heathens without the possibility of a harmony between the revelation of Christ, which newly approaches him, and the revelation, which had already sought him."<sup>707</sup>

Flett has a pertinent sense of danger which might be demonstrated in some worthy aspects of church activity, exercised under the presumption of *Missio Dei*. There is a sharp and perhaps painful balance reached by Peter Beyerhaus and Bruno Gutmann, 'Spiritual ties became secularized through the application of material values', and Beyerhaus continues 'money becomes a substitute for brother and neighbour, dehumanizing and dissolving all mutual obligations.'<sup>708</sup> Gutmann speaks of 'our soulless civilisation emasculating illusion of the independent individual soul.'<sup>709</sup>

This leads to difficult and painful questions with the possibility of a credulity gap. Have those West Cornwall Methodists who run a successful Farmer's Market in the Church Hall become secularised by the receiving of money, in an activity without a specifically gospel dimension? Or have the Mr Gardner's of this world, who during this Covid time, delivered food to the elderly and shut-ins, or organized a food bank, been part of the triune God in his Mission? The answer can only be yes and no. Certainly, their work is to be highly commended, certainly they have demonstrated a Christlike spirit, and certainly they have demonstrated their place in the community. But at the bottom-line God's Mission is something more than that. Many others, with no claim other than laudable practical humanity, have been doing the same, and sometimes more. At some point it must be remembered that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save

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<sup>706</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 95.

<sup>707</sup> Siegfried Knak, *Die Mission und die Theologie* in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 115.

<sup>708</sup> Peter Beyerhaus quoted by Ernst Jaschke in *Bruno Gutmann 1867-1966* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 117.

<sup>709</sup> Bruno Gutmann, *Gemeindeaufbau aus dem Evangelium* (Leipzig: Evanelische Mission, 1925) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 99.

sinners,<sup>710</sup> and that the church has been called to be `ambassadors for Christ.<sup>711</sup> That is, unless one takes a hyper-liberal view such as Paul Aring who argues that the world requires no Missionary activity `in order to become what it already is since Easter, the reconciled world of God.<sup>712</sup> But that is not the case. The church is not proclaiming a *fait accompli* but a gospel opportunity through the ongoing Mission of God.

There is a reason why there is a tension between *Missio Dei* and the aforementioned secularisation. Both are concepts that have been used in this chapter. Secularisation is apparently demonstrably to be seen all around us, whilst this great concept of *Missio Dei* is patently more difficult to define and recognise. Secularisation seems to dominate. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is described by one reviewer as a work of stupendous breadth and erudition.<sup>713</sup> It confirms the point that secularisation is wider than any definition and is `making minimum sense of our world.<sup>714</sup>

They want to make a point of stressing the irremediable nature of division, lack of centre, the perpetual absence of fulness; which is at best a necessary dream, something we may have to suppose to make minimum sense of our world, but which is always elsewhere, and which couldn't in principle ever be found.<sup>715</sup>

That is almost self-evident. *Missio Dei* and secularisation are not a `necessary dream,' yet they are contrary influences at work in the world. Secularisation may be `elsewhere' yet the effect of secularisation would seem to be evident – if not physically seen. Fundamental to `seeing' *Mission Dei* involves spiritual perception and faith.

### **Conclusion: Partnership with the Godhead in This Gospel Ministry**

This chapter has taken three academic-sounding concepts, namely *Missio Dei*, secularisation and Volk, to describe the activity of the triune God in his redemptive work with its accompanying pressures. The church is to be in partnership with the Godhead in this gospel ministry. The final chapter will argue that it is vital for the local

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<sup>710</sup> 1 Tim 1:15.

<sup>711</sup> 2 Cor 5:20.

<sup>712</sup> Paul Gerhard Aring, *Kirche als Ereignis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1971) in Flett, *The Witness of God*, 60.

<sup>713</sup> John Patrick Diggins, "New York Times Book Review" in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), back cover.

<sup>714</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10.

<sup>715</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10.

churches themselves to be prepared and open for this ministry, so as fulfil their divine commission.

## Chapter 7: Towards a Holy Church

### Looking Back

It must be admitted that as a Baptist minister I inevitably see things in West Cornwall Methodism from a different perspective than lifelong Methodists. From my standpoint I have been conscious of some concerns as well as encouragements. Throughout this thesis there have been recurring facets of Methodism applicable to West Cornwall which are important to revisit before moving on. And the first of these is foundational to Methodism, namely holiness.

It will be remembered that John Wesley believed his purpose was ‘to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.’<sup>716</sup> To the degree that this has been achieved is debatable. As with all Christian endeavour it can best be described as a work in progress. Christopher Shannahan writing of holiness in *Methodism and the Future* hones down its meaning to this sentence ‘that the future of the church in Britain lies in the simple proclamation: Jesus has come to set us free . . .’<sup>717</sup> There is a problem here. How is the holiness of freedom of which Shannahan writes defined? It has been demonstrated in the God in Love Unites Us debate that theology can be used to establish diametrically opposed points of view by using the same biblical words to further different conclusions.<sup>718</sup> Perhaps there is a bias in us all to consider our own definitions of theological words as being the right ones. My opinions are tempered by Stephen Neil who writes honestly of the need to understand others from what one understands of oneself. He says ‘Accepting himself fully and unconditionally as a modern, secular man, he attempts to ascertain what the Gospel can mean to him in this situation before he attempts to preach it to others.’<sup>719</sup>

Therefore, I am hesitant to ‘preach to others’ without first making application to myself. ‘What does holiness mean to me?’ But it cannot be just for me, rather it is for the wellbeing of the church. Each chapel however small needs to be conscious of the need to become a community of corporate holiness. Howard Snyder understands this.

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<sup>716</sup> William J. Abraham, *Methodism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>717</sup> Christopher Shannahan, *Methodism and the Future* (London, Cassell, 1999), 38.

<sup>718</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>719</sup> Neill, *Church and Christian Union*, 178.



‘Mind-blowing as it sounds, holiness means sharing the very character of God – communion with the Trinity . . . Christians are to be specialists in building community to the glory of God.’<sup>720</sup> Margaret Jones in a challenging section on holiness writes of this corporate aspect of holiness:

‘Purity of heart does not develop in some “spiritual” vacuum; it is formed and expressed in the interactions of living. “Love of neighbour” is not a mere dependent consequence of “love of God”: it is the means by which God’s love becomes part of human life; a means of grace, the very stuff of faith.’<sup>721</sup>

Missio Dei states that the future is not the responsibility of anyone alone, for all are partners with the triune God in his gospel work. And this leads on to the Circuit, another recurring subject.

I have expressed the serious concerns that I have with the circuit system important though it be in providing for regular pulpit ministry and mutual/corporate identification. It does not enable continuity for teaching or preaching the key Methodist doctrines such as holiness. Richard Woolley understands this. ‘Congregations need facilitated learning, drawing upon the resources and knowledge available to them, with less emphasis upon ‘preaching’ and more upon a shared exploration of the Bible.’<sup>722</sup> Tom Greggs takes Woolley further, in fact all of us when he writes:

‘For Methodist theology, the very of existence of theology is best located in theological topography under the theological locus of sanctification, and more narrowly of the de facto sanctification, the Spirit effects in the lives of believers in space and time as they are freed freely to love God with their minds.’<sup>723</sup>

Later Greggs quotes John Webster as to teaching, which when received and understood makes a tangible difference in the life of the believer. ‘It is certainly true, as John Webster has put it, that: “Divine revelation is not manifestation *tout court*: (with no addition or qualification) it is teaching which intends reception and effects learning.”’<sup>724</sup> Yet sadly, in West Country Methodism I can see no vehicle other than the occasional Home Group where such teaching is made available or explained for the benefit of all.

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<sup>720</sup> Howard Snyder, *Holiness of Heart and Life in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingon Press, 2007), 74.

<sup>721</sup> Margaret Jones, *Growing in Grace and Holiness in Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum 2004), 165.

<sup>722</sup> Richard Woolley in Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 51.

<sup>723</sup> Greggs, "On The Nature, Task And Method Of Theology", 312.

<sup>724</sup> Greggs, "On The Nature, Task And Method Of Theology", 312.

Against this I have come to appreciate several aspects of circuit. The concern for, and identification with, other sister churches is important and is a needed contrast to independency or congregationalism. Churches should not be 'independent.' The conundrum, which I fully recognise, is that the many small churches in West Cornwall could not under any circumstance afford a minister of their own and need to have pastoral oversight and ministry shared with others. This the circuit system allows. But I am still mindful that this will not enable 'facilitated learning.' This is the core problem, for consistent teaching might be West Country Methodism's greatest need – particularly at the moment. Not just the great doctrines of the faith but as a practical protection against current pressure. One thing that had not even been heard of at the outset of this study was Covid, a problem faced by all churches, not only Methodists, as seen in quotes from the National Press.

Firstly, this headline: The Church to cut paid clergy as a fifth of flock wanders off. 'The damage inflicted on the Church of England by the pandemic is revealed in a leaked internal document which warns that up to 20 percent of its regular worshipers may never return.'<sup>725</sup> An Anglican spokesman replies 'We are not abandoning the parochial system ... we want a Christian presence in every community.'<sup>726</sup> West Cornwall Methodism duplicates both that presence and sadly its possible outworking. There is wonder as to whether two ministers and a deacon can continue to be supported in the West Cornwall circuit through lack of funds.

Then this headline appeared, again in The Times newspaper. Church Shepherds have lost their Flocks. It was the heading quoted above that captured attention, more than the highly negative article by A. N. Wilson directed toward the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols.<sup>727</sup> It contains two quotes of acute relevance to this thesis. Firstly Stephen Bullivant, a Catholic sociologist, from his book *Mass Exodus* to the effect 'that the decline in church attendance is probably irreversible. Church going is as much a matter of habit as it is of conviction.'<sup>727</sup> Secondly and again Bullivant, who thinks that after this year, in

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<sup>725</sup> Nicholas Hellen and Caroline Wheeler, "Church to Cut Paid Clergy as a Fifth of Flock Wanders Off" in *The Sunday Times* (January 31 2021).

<sup>726</sup> Hellen and Wheeler, *The Sunday Times*.

<sup>727</sup> A. N. Wilson, "Church Shepherds have Lost their Flocks" in *The Times* (25 December 2020).

which many churches have closed, `that the numbers of those attending will nosedive. Maybe the habit of churchgoing in northern Europe is doomed.<sup>728</sup> If this is only partly true then it is certainly partly true of West Cornwall Methodism concerning the possibility of a reinvigorated Covid.<sup>729</sup> It must be conceded that, if only in this, Wilson is probably correct as to irreversible numerical decline. Many regular members or worshipers who will not have been to church for over a year might have gained a habit of `church' online or no church at all. Whilst others will have lost the habit of collective worship altogether. The definitions of `church' in chapter five argued that the church is corporate, the family of God. This is demonstrated in the next quote.

For the Love of God: Can the Church Get Its Flock Back?<sup>730</sup> is another contentious headline in the national press regarding lockdown. `Gathering to worship is what fuels the fire of faith. Without worship, you'll run on empty.,'<sup>731</sup> says Michael Nazir-Ali, the onetime Bishop of Rochester who writes *Does the Church have a future?*<sup>732</sup> The bishop, whilst speaking of the needs of the situation, then leads us towards the positive part of this chapter when he writes `Church closures, and the present limited opening, have emptied both pews and collection plates. In such circumstances, it is necessary for any organisation to concentrate on its core tasks.'<sup>733</sup>

Unfortunately, Covid has changed everything, and nobody knows what its long-term effects will be. Preaching Sunday by Sunday into the third lockdown, some places of worship are seeing less than half of their normal attendance. Can there be a positive from this? Frank Baker writing of Methodism immediately after the Second World War said `There is no doubt that a knowledge of the past can afford both inspiration and guidance for the opportunities of the future.'<sup>734</sup> It is a hope and prayer that history will record that eventually West Country Methodists became stronger through their resolve not to be defeated by a virulent virus.

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<sup>728</sup> Hellen and Wheeler, *The Sunday Times*.

<sup>729</sup> The chapter was written prior the lifting of restrictions.

<sup>730</sup> Harry Mount, "For The Love of God, Can the Church Get Its Flock Back?" in *The Telegraph Magazine* (9 January 2021).

<sup>731</sup> Michael Nazir-Ali, "Does The Church Have a Future?" in *The Daily Telegraph* (9 February 2021).

<sup>732</sup> Nazir-Ali, "Does the Church Have a Future?".

<sup>733</sup> Nazir-Ali, "Does the Church Have a Future?".

<sup>734</sup> Baker, *A Charge to Keep*, 212.

There is another positive. Stress and inadequacy reveal more clearly where there are situations to be addressed and areas where remedial action needs to be taken. Alastair Bolt says much the same when writing as Superintendent of the Circuit. `When we get back to physical gatherings in physical buildings, we might look again at how well our services work.'<sup>735</sup>

Elaine Graham in her book *Transforming Practice*,<sup>736</sup> is acutely relevant. She asks us to:

proceed with caution, especially in interpreting the available information on declining church attendance and waning institutional influence . . . . Notwithstanding . . . this (is) clearly a period of readjustment in religious affiliation, with sharp changes occurring in patterns of formal observance . . .<sup>737</sup>

And what these `sharp changes' might be for Cornish Methodism and the use of the chapels buildings only time will tell.

The buildings where Methodists meet are mentioned in nearly every chapter. It is true that the multiplicity of chapels, caused through various denominational expressions of Methodism, resulted in a surfeit of church buildings in almost every community.<sup>738</sup> But now the pruning of these superfluous structures has already taken place – almost. It should be emphasised that, particularly in rural areas, the very existence of a church building that is open can be important for the whole community. It adds to the fabric of the local society itself and is a testimony to gospel values for the whole area. Because of the limited number of public buildings, many from the surrounding area will be regularly on church premises for one reason or another such as a dance group, Farmers' Market, or a local choir. This of itself does not make them Christians, yet it can be a factor in bringing them into the ambit of the gospel by making the church building a familiar place. When the building is closed this element is lost with its added implication of failure and irrelevance. The local Methodist chapel may have had a place in the community for hundreds of years, along with the local Village Hall, shop, school, and pub. All of these are intrinsic for the making of a village or town, giving it character

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<sup>735</sup> Alastair Bolt in Tony Jasper, ed., *Staving Off Shipwreck: WCMC in Lockdown and Beyond* (Penzance: WCMC, 2020), 5.

<sup>736</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 78.

<sup>737</sup> Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 78.

<sup>738</sup> See chapter two.

and focus. Surprisingly, and sadly, this is no longer the case, for now the local shop/Post Office and pub might well have closed, increasingly making villages lonely places.

No doubt one of the effects of Covid will be to put pressure on some churches not to reopen their building and that might be inevitable. But for the majority that do, it can be argued that each must understand that they have been preserved for a purpose. The building is the springboard to bringing a Christian focus to an area and making it a valued provision, and (it has to be said) for hiring fees that can make the difference to paying the Assessment or not.

Sadly, the often vast chapels of West Cornwall, greatly loved, are a weekly reminder of the heritage that impedes the present. Tom Shaw eloquently describes an idealised picture of Cornish Methodism in its heyday when he writes of the:

“respectable” Victorian congregations, the crowds at revival times filling the chapels to overflowing; the miners singing Wesley’s hymns many fathoms “below grass”; the choirs of instrumentalists . . .; the chapel builders who with their own hands helped to raise the small sanctuaries all over Cornwall; the original little companies who went to church on Sundays and welcomed the Methodist preachers to their homes during the weeks; the miners and fishermen who flocked to hear John Wesley.<sup>739</sup>

It is possible that the glorious past becomes a millstone rather than an encouragement. A profitable and blessed future will probably bear little resemblance to what has been so eloquently described by Shaw. And of course, it is likely that the Methodist church will not be the sole Christian witness in the community. Each has an Anglican parish church, plus Christians from other traditions. Where this is true there should be mutual support for each other, working together when that is possible. Holiness is not confined to one denomination.

### **Looking Forward**

Despite various pressures, the churches should endeavour to prepare for positive days ahead. Alastair Bolt writing for the Circuit magazine says `In the New Normal, the spiritual realities we have rediscovered whilst being dispersed, must not be lost from our services when once again the physical closeness of friends, chapel buildings

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<sup>739</sup> Shaw, *Cornish Methodism*, 135-6.

and traditions crowd in upon us, drowning out a dependence on the Holy Spirit.<sup>740</sup> These words capture the positive themes of the closing part of this chapter.

### **Focus – Preparation for Mission**

The purpose now is that the churches might be prepared physically and spiritually for being partners with God. Suspicion of ‘the new’ might frighten some, but there is a needed precedent. David Hempton, writing of John Wesley’s practice of ministry says something of significance for this chapter:

The Methodist Message was subtly altered by the social spaces which it expressed, as different aspects of it were emphasised, as different aspects of it were employed according to personality, function, and context. The context is a tricky part of the story, for since so much Methodist history has been written within either national or regional historic traditions, thereby mitigating against comparison, the assumption is often made that Methodism is much the same kind of plant wherever it takes root. But Methodism changed and was changed by contexts.<sup>741</sup>

This *modus operandi* of John Wesley establishes a clear precedent for new contexts and methods. There has never been a newer context than the hoped-for post Covid. In West Cornwall ‘regional historic traditions’ still exist and perhaps some need to be challenged.

Yet finding significant insights to encourage and inspire these same churches have been difficult. There has been frustration in reading excellent books on the future of Methodism with such titles as *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism*,<sup>742</sup> The initial hope of the usefulness of these books was unfulfilled in West Cornwall, being in the main unapplicable to the West Cornwall Methodist situation of painfully small churches, plus their tradition of independency of both mind and practice.

The Bible does not have much to say about ‘souls’ but it does have a great deal to say about people. This is not to deny or denigrate memories of revivals and great congregations, but things are different now. Today there is no captive audience for the gospel. But there are still people. The churches will need to earn the right to be heard. It must be admitted that traditional church practice is not in itself going to reverse the downward trend, and change can be difficult and even resented. The question will be

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<sup>740</sup> Bolt in Jasper, *Staving Off Shipwreck*, 6.

<sup>741</sup> Hempton, *Methodism: Empire*, 80.

<sup>742</sup> Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*.

asked as to how a church begins to move from looking inward to the fellowship with its strengths and weakness, to looking outward to where the people live and for whom, as the local church, they have a responsibility.

It is argued here that the focus of the church should not be survival but rather taking the opportunity to be partners in God's mission. Donald English has some significant things to say about this. He writes:

In such a setting personal piety, sacramental life, theological reflection, the club mentality and even radical solutions can easily become boltholes from reality. They turn us in on ourselves and away from the rest of the world.' . . . `Survival has been difficult enough and it was not that we did not wish others to join us. Neither did we lack methods of evangelism. What was missing was the firm confidence that the gospel of Jesus Christ was God's good news for all the world in every age and place.<sup>743</sup>

Sadly, and this is a fact, not a criticism, `firm confidence' is at a low ebb at the moment.

### **Missio Dei and the Local Church – A Problem**

Another book entitled *Changing Church for a Changing world: Fresh ways of Being Church in a Methodist context*<sup>744</sup> seems an unlikely source of help in West Cornwall because of the words `changing' and `fresh' in the title. These words are hardly suitable in describing the majority of West Cornwall Methodists. But the church must be brave enough to look to itself realistically. In this regard Martyn Atkins is of great help:

Where then does mission-shaped thinking about church, properly begin? It begins with God, with theology, reflection upon and talk about God. Just as we cannot look at our own eyes without a mirror for reflection, so the church is able to see itself for what it is without seeing itself via something else. Mission-shaped thinking suggests that the `something else' is the God of mission. And not just any god, but the God revealed in the Christian Scriptures, God experienced in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>745</sup>

And if that sounds daunting then John Taylor in *The Go-Between God* roots it simply in the local fellowship when he writes `The Holy Trinity has put together a rescue

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<sup>743</sup> Donald English, *Evangelism Now* (London: Methodist Church Home Mission Division, 1987), 12.

<sup>744</sup> Atkins, *Changing Church*.

<sup>745</sup> Atkins, *Changing Church*, 23.

package.<sup>746</sup> And again from Paul Stevens 'The Church does not *have* a mission; it *is* the mission' (italics original).<sup>747</sup>

Again Martyn Atkins is important:

It is no accident that the Pentecost event marks not only the 'birthday' of the Church but also the 'birthday' of Christian mission. Church defined by the *Missio Dei* never finds its true centre by focusing inwards on itself. Whenever preoccupation with its own survival takes centre stage the Church has lost sight of its *raison d'être* and ceased living harmoniously with its life force.<sup>748</sup>

The local church needs to look upwards and then outwards.

### **Building the Church and Growing Holiness for Outreach**

The Abstract of this thesis speaks of missiology, a word defined in the introduction. Other related words are 'evangeliche' and 'evangelical.' They are used 'to identify a group of Christians within the church who share a common outlook in theology or practice',<sup>749</sup> says Richard Woolley. But in this chapter, it is another word from the same root, namely evangelism that is the focus. It is a word that is out of fashion, and for this there might be a reason. There is yet the memory in the mainline churches of the 1990s which had been called a 'Decade of Evangelism.' Whatever the value of that decade, the membership of the Christian Church in Britain (in whatever ways that it is measured) continued to decline.<sup>750</sup> But as Jane Craske says 'It has become normal to talk about 'mission.'" She continues to argue that 'rather than maintenance,' the emphasis must be about 'getting out there.' Perhaps a little artificially in this context Craske captures an aspect of this chapter when she goes on to speak of holiness.<sup>751</sup> For Craske 'Holiness is not a state to be achieved; it is activity, direction, and process.'<sup>752</sup> Richard Andrew says of Methodism in the past that '... its first and most decisive identification was an enterprise of Christian mission, witness, and nurture.'<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>746</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972) in Atkins, *Changing Church*, 25.

<sup>747</sup> Paul R. Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity, Work and Ministry in a Biblical Perspective* (London: Paternoster Press, 1999) in Atkins, *Changing Church*, 26.

<sup>748</sup> Atkins, *Changing Church*, 26.

<sup>749</sup> Woolley, *Future of British Methodism*, 41.

<sup>750</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 175.

<sup>751</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 175.

<sup>752</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 179.

<sup>753</sup> Andrew, "An Improvised Catholicity", 20.



And whilst the caveats of lack of size, if not leadership, are typical of most of the West Cornwall churches, they must understand that their place in society is the opportunity to see beyond their cherished walls to the outside. And for that, three other words are needed.

### **The Church**

Perhaps the three most important words for the several struggling Methodist churches of West Cornwall are 'hope,' 'purpose' and 'reality.' Hope, as servants of the God of hope.<sup>754</sup> Purpose, which is God's plan for the church,<sup>755</sup> and reality as to the needs of the hour. Often the need is felt to be the closure of duplicate buildings. It is important to remember that Robert Currie has pointed out that closing churches has never been an agent for growth.<sup>756</sup> The church building is not to be despised.

### **The Church Living Its Life**

Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, is correct when he writes 'The nation has lost its connection to Christianity.'<sup>757</sup> The Methodist Church in Cornwall must share at least some responsibility for this, particularly because of the dominant place it once had in the community – as demonstrated in chapter two. But it is wider than that. David Clark candidly writes ' . . . the Methodist Church in Britain now stands at a uniquely critical stage in its history. It is a time that requires adaptability and a readiness to change at every level. Until the last decade or so, Methodism could turn something of a blind eye to declining numbers and aging congregations . . . '<sup>758</sup> Today Cornwall Methodists hardly have the resources for structural change, but they do have the opportunity and responsibility to be instruments in God's mission. The need is to believe it experimentally for, as James Dunn argues, many of today's churches suffer from a time-warp. He says that 'Arguably the pattern of the immensely successful late Victorian and Edwardian chapel culture . . . became frozen.'<sup>759</sup> This can lead to a

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<sup>754</sup> Rom 15:13.

<sup>755</sup> 2 Tim 1:9.

<sup>756</sup> Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 301.

<sup>757</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "There Are Days When I'd Rather Not Be Doing This" in *The Sunday Telegraph* (5 July 2020).

<sup>758</sup> Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*, 257.

<sup>759</sup> James Dunn, in *Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Changing World* (London: Trustees For Methodist Church Purposes 2007), 32.

traditionalism that has become set in concrete as to the right way to conduct `church.` This can be simply illustrated from the annual Carol Service, the most numerically supported service in the church calendar.

Alison Gunderson, administrator of the West Cornwall circuit, in her `Circuit Update` to the churches writes:

`In particular think about Christmas services, and what you would like or feel able to do this year. (2020) This year we will not be on autopilot, just doing what always has been done. But we will still celebrate Jesus's birth, even if a little differently, and perhaps that very difference will help us realise afresh the amazing gift of God.'<sup>760</sup>

And there might be other cherished traditions that will also need reassessment.

Richard Andrew writes of the current concerns in Methodism. He quotes from *The Making of Ministry*, a discussion paper presented to the Methodist Conference of 1997. A question was asked, `What does God require the church to be and do as it enters the twenty-first century?' Andrew replies:

it is hardly surprising that such questions should be a central preoccupation at the present time. It is inevitable for a church in decline . . . the present situation of British Methodism has caused many people to be anxious about whether or not it will survive in any significant form in the future.<sup>761</sup>

This chapter does not countenance non-survival, rather it is about being prepared for something new.

### **Building the Church – Overcoming Frustration**

In West Cornwall it is possible to be so daunted by various declensions that it is made into a type of positive. Howard Snyder demonstrates this danger. It is a sort of pride that `in spite of periods of decline, opposition or weakness, these "are to be seen as the glory of the church."<sup>762</sup> The danger is taking pride in the past at the expense of the future. For many the justifiable pride is that the doors have been kept open. But there is also guilt. Guilt for small congregations can engender a sense of inadequacy

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<sup>760</sup> Alison Gunderson, *West Cornwall Circuit Update* (Penzance: 14 October, 2020).

<sup>761</sup> Andrew, "An Improvised Catholicity", 15.

<sup>762</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 131.

and failure. And this can be felt personally. Paul Goodliff, who was the Baptist Union Head of the Department of Ministry, spoke of all churches not just Baptists, when he wrote that they should be released from being communities that reinforce shame, but rather seek to empower them to `become places where men and women find healing from shame and where they grow in their self-esteem and sense of worth. . . .'<sup>763</sup> Nothing written here will conjure up a gifted worship leader, organist, or guitar player to enhance weekly worship services. What can be provided is the sort of ministry that Goodliff describes. This will point to the renewal of the churches in their assessment of themselves and begin to build vision and purpose for a constructive and meaningful future.

An example of a cause of frustration could be demonstrated from reading James Dunn.<sup>764</sup> Suggestions he includes are `offering ways for all ages to learn about the faith.' But most of the churches are comprised of older members. The book speaks of `traditional churches` need for worship and preaching that have depth and relevance. It would hardly be possible to find more `traditional churches' than in West Cornwall, yet in nearly all of them there is no worship leader, often no musician at all and singing is with an insensitive music machine. Preaching by definition has no continuity and there is a different voice each week. Lastly, in *Changing Church* there is encouragement to invite people into `life-changing discipleship and service',<sup>765</sup> whereas, in West Cornwall, discipleship and service have been overtaken by the need to focus on maintenance. One could anticipate an element of cynicism from such a description when reading of `a traditional church, re-modelled, opened up, user friendly with worship which is vibrant and relevant to those attending.'<sup>766</sup>

But there *is* something positive and important here. Dunn uses a key phrase when he speaks of `pioneering ministries.'<sup>767</sup> This is where the Methodist Diaconate should become important. The West Cornwall circuit has a Deacon as a fulltime member of staff who is doing splendid work. The problem is that he is looking after several churches more as a pastor. It is difficult to see how he is different from a Presbyterian.

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<sup>763</sup> Paul Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 126.

<sup>764</sup> Dunn, *Changing Church*.

<sup>765</sup> Dunn, *Changing Church*, 86-87.

<sup>766</sup> Dunn, *Changing Church*, 86-87.

<sup>767</sup> Dunn, *Changing Church*, 87.

For this very reason he has indicated that he wishes to find another situation where his diaconal gifting can be exercised.

A book with the title *Reshaping the mission of Methodism: A diaconal church approach*<sup>768</sup> has much to say of relevance. It speaks of initiatives and projects that would challenge the conservative minds of the local Cornish chapel scene. One Methodist Church has done pioneering work in this area, establishing a community centre with 'drop in' facilities that are widely used. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how the need for such ministries will be widely recognised and financed. And the question will be asked by some 'where does the gospel fit in?'

James Dunn is positive when he says that 'the New Testament canon demands that Christianity is continually refreshed by a return to sources, but expresses itself differently in different contexts.' But he adds this important caveat, 'Innovation is no more assured of support than it is of success. Change is essential and inevitable, but it is seldom easy!' <sup>769</sup>

### **Toward Church-Based Evangelism**

The Apostle's Creed speaks of 'The Holy Catholic Church.' It follows that the Universal Church is to be found in any one place. And that must be the logic of the local church to fulfil the gospel mandate to the world, and that part of the world that encircles any church. Here are two examples of when that was not realised. Firstly, when I became senior minister of Duke Street Baptist Church in West London, it had had a line of famous ministers. To my concern, I discovered that the church was known around the world, but not known around the corner. This was partly through its peripatetic congregation travelling from long distances. But Richmond did not seem to know that the church was there. It was necessary to change the focus of the church's outreach. The second illustration comes from West Cornwall itself. During Billy Graham's *Mission England* in the early 1980s, several coaches from West Cornwall were hired to take people to Bristol, some one hundred and ninety miles away. The *raison d'être* for this costly and demanding initiative was that people might hear the gospel from a trusted evangelist, in a context that was both safe and familiar in content and style.

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<sup>768</sup> Clark, *Reshaping the Mission*.

<sup>769</sup> Dunn, *Changing Church*, 32.

Yet Bristol, both geographically and socially is a world away from West Cornwall. But it was a good day out! So, in the life of a local church what is witness to the community? Practical Theology can help to answer the question.

Richard Osmer's first appeal is to 'a loving God, a God who speaks of the churches' involvement in and around the world.'<sup>770</sup> So the locality of a church is the area for its mission. Richard Osmer describes the local church 'as a covenant community that crosses over to the needs of others.'<sup>771</sup> In other words and to use the prerogative of Christ, it is for the neighbour.<sup>772</sup> Having received 'the gift of God's self-giving love . . . they in return offer this love to others' says Osmer, 'it is one community witnessing to the other community of which it is a part.'<sup>773</sup> And in West Cornwall these will mostly be small communities. But that should be an opportunity rather than a hinderance, for small communities get to know each other, its common life, and its common needs. Richard Woolley makes the point when he writes:

the future must involve small congregations based upon friendship and mutual support; it must involve a commitment to the Bible, to making a difference within society, to sharing the faith with others and maintain a distinctive belief in the unique life and ministry of Jesus Christ and trying to discover what exactly it means today.<sup>774</sup>

A small consolation is that when Christ commissioned his disciples to go 'into all the world,'<sup>775</sup> it was probably given to a number of people similar to the Methodists of West Cornwall. The test is not numbers, but rather those who constitute the family of God. Tom Greggs also confirms the point and is important to quote at length:

'. . . locating the Church with assurance has become an increasingly easy task. We are no longer as concerned about those who attend out of societal and cultural expectation, and congregations largely consist of those who wish to identify with the active community of faith. The increasingly counter-cultural nature of the decision to attend church both demarcates the Church and its members and makes the Church community a visible, identifiable and distinguishable one in contradistinction to the world.'<sup>776</sup>

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<sup>770</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 195.

<sup>771</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 195.

<sup>772</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>773</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 195.

<sup>774</sup> Woolley, *Methodism and the Future*, 52-53.

<sup>775</sup> Mark 16:15.

<sup>776</sup> Tom Greggs, "A Strangely Warmed Heart in a Strange and Complex World: on Assurance and Generous Worldliness in Gittoes," in Julie Gittoes, Brutus Green and James Hard, *Generous Ecclesiology: Church, World and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 120.

So it is that for the last two years a Methodist church in St Ives though numerically small but committed has taken part in the civic September Festival. With conversation and generous food, people have been brought into the circle of the church. The church has been a neighbour to the town and its presence as a living church has been confirmed. Yet worthy as this initiative has been, there is something more than opening the church premises to the public. It is good to invite people to come to a church building, yet the command of Christ is not to 'come,' it is to 'go.'<sup>777</sup> The inherited church buildings tell of the time that people did 'come' in great numbers. But Richard Andrew writes correctly that 'British Methodism needs to grasp the significance of its dangerous memories'.<sup>778</sup>

Swinton and Mowat, whilst analysing the Scottish Church Census of 2002 with its story of rapid decline in church attendance, speak of an increase in what loosely could be called 'spirituality'.<sup>779</sup> Quoting Grace Davie, they say 'People want to *believe* (italics original) in things spiritual, but no longer wish to belong to traditional religious institutions.'<sup>780</sup> Charles Taylor, writing of secularisation through two hundred years, argues that 'the very locus of the religious or the spiritual in social life has shifted.' He then asks a question which he answers himself, 'How did this come about?'<sup>781</sup> His answer is 'facets of secularity',<sup>782</sup> which he describes as the retreat of religion in public life, the demise of belief and practice . . .,<sup>783</sup> But this is not the death of God as argued by Nietzsche,<sup>784</sup> and of which A. N. Wilson's in his book *God's Funeral* writes, 'is only considered mentioning in parentheses.'<sup>785</sup> Certainly the death of Christianity has not yet taken place – even if a visit to West Cornwall might give the impression that it is seriously ill.

So, if the locus of religion and particularly of practice has shifted, what does that say to Cornish Methodists and their mission? I have argued previously that church buildings still have an important role to play. It is the place where our 'friends and

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<sup>777</sup> Matt 28:19.

<sup>778</sup> Andrew, "An Improvised Catholicity", 23.

<sup>779</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 158.

<sup>780</sup> Davie, *Religion in Britain* in Swinton, *Practical Theology*, 158.

<sup>781</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>782</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>783</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>784</sup> A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: John Murray, 1999), 29.

<sup>785</sup> Wilson, *God's Funeral*, 29.

kindred dwell.<sup>786</sup> But mission is likely going to take place outside of the church building. It will be centred on a God who is not confined to buildings.

### **God-Centred Evangelism**

In a chapter called *An Evangelistic Faith*, Rachel Deigh quotes Neil Richardson who makes a contrast between 'God-centred evangelism' with church-centred evangelism. This mission will be unchanged as to its message, but probably radically different in its presentation. Pertinent for this argument, she elaborates on traditional church-centred evangelism. She writes of the 'evangelise or perish kind of evangelism with its starting point of anxiety for the future of the church and a drive to recruit new members.'<sup>787</sup> It has been argued already that such an emphasis eventually brings guilt and corporate depression when proved to be ineffective. The local church is for worship, teaching and mutual encouragement for the family of God. It is where holiness is fed.

### **Personal Memories**

A personal memory could be useful here. In the early days of the Charismatic Movement, I used to meet some of their leaders on the Board of the Evangelical Alliance. I was teased by them regarding the cost of maintaining large church premises. Subsequently they bought empty cinemas, bingo halls, redundant churches, and disused industrial sites for their corporate meetings. When, with a touch of glee, I asked them why the change of policy, there came the reply "we needed a home." But whether that 'home' is the focal point for mission is another matter.

West Cornish Methodists love their chapels and have made great sacrifices to keep them open. It is these very same chapels that are to be the springboard for the ministry they have been preserved to serve. Rachel Deigh addresses this very responsibility in her chapter on 'Evangelistic Faith.' What she says is no less important for being obvious. She is worth quoting in full:

In order to realize its present potential, the Methodist Church will need to discover a genuine compassion for all people, especially those who are not yet

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<sup>786</sup> William Bullock, "We Love the Place Oh God" in *Methodist Hymn Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1933), no. 677.

<sup>787</sup> Rachel Deigh, "An Evangelistic Faith", Luke Curran and Angela Shier-Jones, eds., *Methodist Present Potential* (London: Epworth, 2009), 9.

Christian – which motivates all that the church does: to seek first the Kingdom of God rather than the future of the Church: To rediscover the place of the Church in the good news it proclaims: to embrace evangelism across the whole life of the church, to be the heart of all that the Church is and does, learning what it means for the church to be an agent of evangelism and to discover that it has more than one tool in its evangelism tool kit and therefore develop a broader approach to evangelism which sees it as a process and not a one-off event or activity.<sup>788</sup>

What is in mind here is general unstructured conversation. George Hunter supports this by saying ‘without conversation, people can hear sermons for years and still not get it.’<sup>789</sup> What has proved constructive for one church in St Ives is that women gathered as a small group of friends at a local coffee house to chat. With no structure, no agenda and by no means always ‘religious,’ in time the confidence gained has opened-up to things spiritual. In the same way in Richmond men met in a pub close to the railway station after work in the City. And to the complaint that this sort of unstructured evangelism will not grow numbers at church, then it must be understood that much of mission is in ‘the interest of a larger vision yet to come.’ This is not to argue that numbers at church do not matter, but they are not *all* that matters. And for those who consider such an approach as too vague, time consuming and underactive there is significant support coming from Elaine Graham.

In her book *Transforming Practice*, she writes of ‘pastoral response and transformative *praxis* (*italics org.*) in the interests of a larger vision yet to come.’<sup>790</sup> In other words, such conversations should not be an effort to mould people to conform to previously cherished faith norms, but rather to introduce a life-changing practice, in preparation for a greater future. There was a time when not only Methodists, but also many traditional evangelicals would expect certain presumed criteria to be followed on becoming a Christian such as church twice on a Sunday, smart clothes, no alcohol, or dancing. The ‘tradition of the elders’ was endless. The churches should not be seeking to make Christians in their own image.

Against this, there are still the more conventional forms of evangelism where the Church is a springboard to mission. An example can be given of what a small church can do. St Erth Methodist Church is meeting in a building over a 150 years old with a

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<sup>788</sup> Deigh, “An Evangelistic Faith” in Curran, *Methodist Present Potential*, 22.

<sup>789</sup> George Hunter III, *Radical Outreach* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 194.

<sup>790</sup> Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 202.



gallery on all four sides, and the fabric of the chapel needs constant repair. There is, at the time of writing, a regular congregation of 15-20.<sup>791</sup> They, with the Parish Church, have placed a New Testament in every home in the village. They have run an Alpha Course, again with the Parish Church. A Farmer's Market is held on the premises every Saturday. Each year a Christmas Tree Festival is supported by every school and organisation in the village and the brass band accompanies the singing for the large congregation. The membership is known and respected in the community. It is a fellowship which is anything but depressed. They feel themselves to be part of God's mission. But sadly, this is not true of every Methodist church in West Cornwall.

### **When Church Goes Wrong**

Howard Snyder in an amazing sentence, writes of the:

jarring clash between the unique genius of the church as the community of God's people and the tranquilised, traditionalized, institutionalised . . . reality that goes under the name of the "Christian Church."<sup>792</sup>

Of course, what he says is by no means applicable only to Cornish Methodist churches - but they are the people under consideration here. Sadly, people can become disillusioned with 'church.' Here is a paraphrase of how Snyder continues. He speaks of those who give up hope and abandon the church. Others give themselves to social and political programmes in the name of the church, yet with little involvement with the local Christian community or with what the local church stands for. As seen above, others form new Christian communities in an attempt to be faithful to their imagined picture of the ideal New Testament church.<sup>793</sup> Snyder writes of those places where denominational structures such as Methodism are viewed ambivalently, or totally rejected and new churches are formed.<sup>794</sup> Such churches often flourish for a while, yet because of some controversy as to leader, structure and personality, wither and die.

Ian Haile in his MA thesis has a balanced chapter on 'The effect of charismatic renewal in the (Cornish) St. Mary Circuit.' He closes by quoting Graham Cray, a partner with David Watson, one of the early charismatic leaders. 'The problem of all renewal

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<sup>791</sup> In the first draught of this chapter the figure was 12-16.

<sup>792</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 109.

<sup>793</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 110.

<sup>794</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 110.

movements is that if they are not welcomed with open arms, they will run off to one side and slightly over-emphasise the things they have to contribute. And yet they need the balancing of the maturity and experience of the rest of the church.<sup>795</sup>

To meet such challenges to long held practice and norms the churches need to be spiritually strong. To break away from the traditional church building as the centre of its outreach demands courage. And for that there needs to be firm foundations in the faith, and openness to the Spirit of God.

### **The Renewed Church and Scriptural Holiness**

Renewal is the Bible word *anakainosis*.<sup>796</sup> It speaks of the reinvigorating effect of Christian commitment, conduct and mind as being a spiritual principle. Derek Tidball in the context of this thesis says that renewal ‘has a positive attitude to the world and an acute social conscience.’<sup>797</sup> It is this twin thrust that is so much needed in West Cornwall. Lovelace’s definition of the word renewal is a ‘broad-scale movement of the Holy Spirit’s work in renewing spiritual vitality in the church.’ and ‘fostering its expansion in mission and evangelism.’<sup>798</sup> I understand ‘mission’ here to mean every aspect of a church’s work in the community, both specifically spiritual or otherwise, yet it is that spiritual aspect that is the matter here.

The words ‘Scriptural Holiness,’ coming from the heart of Methodism when applied to the church, receive a token nod of approval as sounding authoritative, but perhaps the level of practical understanding is uncertain. Hesitantly another word is chosen here. It is spirituality rather than scriptural holiness. This is not to describe individual members, but rather the church itself. It is not an effort to measure the levels of spirituality in the chapels of West Cornwall. That would be pretentious. It is a hope that the members of a church can be open to and move forward at the prompting of the Spirit.

In West Cornwall the times of revival are seen by many as the zenith of both the Holy Spirit’s activity and the spiritual appetite of the people. In fact, the revivals touched but

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<sup>795</sup> Graham Cray in Ian Haile “The Alternative Church in Cornwall, A study of new Alternative Churches” (M.A. Thesis in Applied Theology Westminster College, Oxford, 1990).

<sup>796</sup> Rom 12:2, Col 3:10-11, Cor. 4:16, Eph 4:23.

<sup>797</sup> Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?*, 22.

<sup>798</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 21-22.

a proportion of society, and in the main, a comparatively small area of West Cornwall. Even then, the spiritual zenith (if it was such), had inevitably dissipated by the end of the nineteenth century. Speaking of that time Hugh McCleod commentated on attitudes typical of today when he writes `What was needed was to keep yourself to yourself, a safe job, a respectable anonymity . . .'.<sup>799</sup> Spirituality or holiness had become private. There may be a concern amongst some that talk of the Holy Spirit might have charismatic overtones or lead to spiritual pride. But here `spiritual' is the meeting point for all religious aspirations. These are considered, if not overtly expressed, to be a spontaneous work of God apart from denomination or church. It is the outworking of the preached word applied, an enhanced appetite, and an expressed hope that by the Spirit the members of the church might discover or rediscover themselves to be the joyous people of God.

With obvious exceptions, the local church in West Cornwall, often through no fault of their own, can be a rather dour, depressing place. Often there seems little joy. Alistair McFadyen speaking of joy says `The economy of our joys, and what we most enjoy indicates our fundamental dynamic life-orientation, the way in which we live for and before others, the world and God. Joy invigorates and directs our concrete living.'<sup>800</sup> It is this `joyful' invigoration that is sometimes lacking. So, what can be done?

Snyder is of help when he draws from what he describes as the `radical' Wesley. He writes `that a renewing movement exists as an *ecclesiola*.'<sup>801</sup> In all churches people are at different points in their spiritual journey and that is an opportunity rather than a problem for spiritual growth. For him *ecclesiola* is not a church within a church which leads to elitism, but rather those who provide leadership, encourage the development of gifting and then go on to disciple those growing in the faith.

Jane Craske and Clive Marsh write a postscript entitled `Ten Years On' in *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge*.<sup>802</sup> Whilst they are hesitant of an umbrella word like spirituality they yet feel its need as a pre-requisite to mission:

Without much more radical assessment of how traditional theological language is used . . . Mission will make little headway. What is needed is a reassessment

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<sup>799</sup> McLeod, *Class and Religion*, 146.

<sup>800</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 213.

<sup>801</sup> Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 112.

<sup>802</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 209.

of the practical structures needed for a living Christian faith. How can Methodism recover its responsibility to help ordinary people to structure their Christian spirituality in a manner appropriate for society as it is now, while shifting away from that over-used, ill-defined, and currently over-individualised word “spirituality”?<sup>803</sup>

What ‘spirituality’ meant to John Wesley is to be found in *John and Charles Wesley, Selected Writings and Hymns*, and is applicable today, both for the individual and the Methodist churches in West Cornwall. Frank Whaling in a lengthy introduction says ‘Spirituality for the Wesleys was not confined to the prayer life of the individual. Fellowship . . . they built up a unique system that connected individual Christians with thousands of others through their societies...’ How Whaling continues supports this thesis. He says ‘The Wesleys did not confine spirituality to life *in* the Church, whether communal or individual. It had to do with the whole of life including secular pursuits and wider society. Love for God and love for man were linked. Arminian concern for all men included their material as well as their spiritual needs.’<sup>804</sup>

Richard Lovelace follows the same theme:

‘Christians concerned for effective ministry, be they evangelical or non-evangelical, cannot reach their goals without spiritual renewal. The general awakening of the church to its full maturity within history will not occur without the conjunction of piety and justice in its laity and its leadership.’<sup>805</sup>

The work of renewal begins in the local church, leading to recognition of its purpose in the Kingdom of God. Lovelace states it exactly when he hopes for outreach in ‘a style which is more credible and more dignified and restores evangelism to its proper place within the constellation of factors involved in total church renewal.’<sup>806</sup>

### **West Cornwall Methodism and the Future**

In this section an effort is being made to look to the future and discover what of encouragement or warning can be found for the local Methodist churches. In the book

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<sup>803</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 152.

<sup>804</sup> Frank Whaling, Introduction, *John and Charles Wesley, Selected Writings and Hymns* (London, SPCK, 1981), 63.

<sup>805</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 400.

<sup>806</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 252.

*Methodist Present Potential: The realistic Hopes for the Future*, the back cover speaks of:

a frankness and honesty that borders, at times, on the revolutionary, in discussing the life and faith of the Church the writers have inherited. Their aim is to make explicit the potential that the contributors believe is still to be found in the Methodist Church, and to state clearly what should be done if the Church is to have a future.<sup>807</sup>

And for this thesis the task that 'should be done' falls on the spiritual rather than church structures. There is an endorsement for Curran's book when it says that 'British Methodism . . . continues to underplay its important theological emphases of grace and Christian perfection.' And it warms to the effort saying that the 'worth of the individual soul and personal responsibility, key emphases of the (Methodist) tradition, are just as important today as they were in Wesley's time.'<sup>808</sup>

John Turner, writing in 1998 makes several connected points that can be related to West Cornwall churches and are worthy of particular attention. He writes of preserving a distinctive style in worship and preaching.<sup>809</sup> In fact I do not know what the 'distinctive style' means for it is hindered by lack of continuity caused by different faces in the pulpit each week. But that is not to deny the need. One Methodist church in West Cornwall has two morning services. The early service has an able band, modern music, is children friendly, and with regular preaching from the able minister who is also Superintendent of the circuit. Being held at 09.30 he can preach regularly, follow biblical series, and still be able to take services elsewhere in the circuit. But this is a luxury totally unavailable to the other churches. The second service is a traditional Methodist service with a mixture of preaching and worship styles. Significantly the first service has outgrown the second. A helpful feature is that there is coffee and tea between the two services so that, in theory at least, the two congregations can meet.

As to Turner's mention of worship style there are again problems. In the other churches of the circuit, visiting preachers are anxious to choose hymns and songs that people know. This leads to little adventure in choice and frequent repetition. Yet even with limited resources worship can be well prepared and relevant for the worship part

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<sup>807</sup> Curran, *Methodist Present Potential*, xii.

<sup>808</sup> Heitzenrater, "The People Called Methodists", 166.

<sup>809</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 89-96.

of the service, and such preparation is of major importance. One author is certainly correct when he writes 'What is needed is not only flexibility and experience in forms of worship but also a more searching analysis of what public prayer and worship should express.'<sup>810</sup>

And again, there is John Turner's hope or vision of 'developing theological education at all levels of church life.'<sup>811</sup> One presumes he means theology for the youngest to the oldest, and relevant for each at their various places on the pilgrim road. This means that for the youngest there will be something more than the ubiquitous pictures on the wall. And for the older the need for what Lovelace describes as the 'theology of hope'.<sup>812</sup> This is a theology of applying foundational truth so as to face the reality of the pressures of life. Richard Osmer quotes Fredrich Schleiermacher saying 'that just as society needs doctors and lawyers, it also needs clergy, for religion makes an important contribution to the lives of individuals and to the common good.'<sup>813</sup> In other words teaching that is pertinent to where people are and addressing what they need.

So it is that John Turner speaks of teaching basic doctrines so that people may know why they believe and what they believe.<sup>814</sup> This is the bottom line to Turner's desire for 'nurturing the faith',<sup>815</sup> and is of fundamental importance for the people of West Cornwall. But sadly, it also raises unanswered questions as to how and where this is to be done with such limited resources. For two years, one church in St Ives met to study Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. This was well attended but not repeated.

Turner continues 'Methodism faces a double task: On the one hand, to foster a theologically articulate ordained ministry of men and women (and lay people too) who are 'folk theologians', helping the people of God to meet the realities of life with an informal and alert faith.'<sup>816</sup> Wonderful. But once again one must ask if such a ministry is possible. Training is available for lay preachers at District level, but these faithful men and women are in no position to conduct such a ministry. A Church in St Ives

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<sup>810</sup> H. D. Rack, *The future of John Wesley's Methodism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 77.

<sup>811</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 89-96.

<sup>812</sup> Lovelace, *Spiritual Life*, 404.

<sup>813</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 232.

<sup>814</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 47.

<sup>815</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 92-93.

<sup>816</sup> Turner, *Modern Methodism*, 92-93.

published their own preaching plan which was forwarded to the preachers, but few followed it. Even the lectionary was ignored because 'God had told them to preach something else.' Sadly, since Turner was writing in 1998, there has been little advance in these areas.

### **The Hope for the Future**

In February 1988, the Cornwall District of the Methodist Church submitted a document 'A Way Forward'<sup>817</sup> to each circuit. Reports were to include Worship, Fellowship, Pastoral Care, Mission, Service, Training and Administration. The outworking of this initiative is unknown and now unremembered. All these essential subjects are worthy, even significant, but nothing seems to change. Nevertheless, at the time, as with this chapter, the witness of the church was seen as central.

And now because of Covid the future is again the moot concern. Some of the churches are still not open for Sunday worship.<sup>818</sup> The future is far from clear. Superintendent Alastair Bolt in *Staving Off Shipwreck* writes 'as a church we are already moving from a period where we were told what to do (or not what to do), into a period where we shall have to decide.'<sup>819</sup> And for some there will be painful decisions to make.

In *Methodism and the Future*, Marsh and Craske, in a postscript respond to their own question 'Where is British Methodism to go?' They describe four options, namely that Methodism continues as it is and fizzles out; continues as an independent church with a 'clearer focus'; re-joins the Church of England, or becomes a part of a fully ecumenical Church in England.<sup>820</sup> Since 1999, when the book was published, the Ecumenical Movement has not progressed despite the heady rhetoric of Churches Together. Re-joining the Church of England is a possibility but would engender little excitement in West Cornwall. As to a 'clear focus' the outcome of the Same Sex Marriage in Church debate, delayed by Conference to 2021, is anything but clear. There is the likelihood that in West Cornwall, if implemented, several resignations of members if not churches will take place. And now there is the real possibility of loss of

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<sup>817</sup> Haile, *Cornish Methodism*, 110-11.

<sup>818</sup> As at May 2021.

<sup>819</sup> Bolt in Jasper, *Staving Off Shipwreck*, 3.

<sup>820</sup> Craske, *Methodism and the Future*, 194-5.

members not only through death but some not returning to church, adding to financial stringency.

### **Conclusion**

In *Methodism and the Future* Martin Wellings writes ` History does not offer glib answers to hard questions. It can provide tools for understanding the forces that have shaped the present, and it can suggest resources with which we may face the challenges of the future.'<sup>821</sup> He is correct. And neither can words, however well defined or explained, make any difference in themselves for they need action. Conscious as many are of the deeds and problems facing West Cornwall Methodists in regard to finance, numerical decline or concerns as to the possibility theological compromise they are to realise that they have been preserved for a purpose that is seen in being partners with God in his mission.

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<sup>821</sup> Wellings, "A Historian's Perspective", 156.



## Chapter 8: Impressions and Conclusion

### Concerns and Encouragements

*Unmasking Methodist Theology* has a chapter from David Peel, a United Reformed Minister, writing a response to the book. He says that what he `missed most was a recognition that the Methodist Church, like all the other mainline churches, is in crisis.<sup>822</sup> I disagree. Likewise, this thesis has recorded several instances of grave concern from various authors, Presidents of Conference , Superintendents of Districts and ministers. Methodism knows that it has a problem. And perhaps for me the greatest concern is lack of malleability.

It has been recorded in this thesis that Methodism abounds with structure and statistics. Clive Marsh, with a touch of sarcasm writes that the ‘The millennium edition of the “CPD” required no less than 225,966 words - to tell us what?’<sup>823</sup> It is the spiritual that is essential, for Methodism. So, I do strongly agree with David Peel when he continues `we must listen for a Word of Judgement about our life and witness, but also entering an age when through God’s grace we can relearn what it means to be a faithful church.’<sup>824</sup> That in precis tells the whole.

For West Cornwall Methodists from John Wesley’s foundational ministry, through division, revival, and strident growth, until they had taken their place at the very core of Cornish society, has been recorded. It tells how various initiatives for Methodist unity took place. The thesis has demonstrated that from the mid twentieth century complacency set in, which, coupled to strident and publicised social attitudes caused distance between the church and local population in West Cornwall. Increasing secular norms began to cause disinterest, even alienation between the chapels and the indigenous people. When added to secularisation this is linked to general, long-term numerical decline that will not be recovered.

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<sup>822</sup> Peel, “Uniting in Response”, 192.

<sup>823</sup> Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, 29.

<sup>824</sup> Peel, “Uniting in Response”, 193.

For the local churches today not just frustrations but hindrances are still a factor. Fundamentally there needs to be freedom for the implementation of vision. Hindrances include such matters as the Assessment, stationing, the preaching plan, lack of a consecutive teaching ministry and the need for hands-on pastoral support. Running through the narrative are concerns often centred on Conference and connexion which continue to surface today, including matters of serious concern for the evangelically orientated West Cornwall Methodists.

Yet overriding all of this, from the faithful people of West Cornwall Methodism I have found great encouragement. There is hope in *Missio Dei* for it puts the emphasis upon God rather than the church. The discovery of Volkstum has given a renewed desire for a ministry and outreach that is shaped by and directed to the indigenous Cornish people. Such a ministry is possible. I have been impressed by the evidence of Methodist's loyalty to its denomination. I am thrilled by Methodism's heritage in Cornwall, by the inherited hymnology and again, and above all, the faithfulness of its people in difficult times.

## **Conclusion**

Writing in *The Times* under the heading *Methodism is declining, but the Gospel is here to stay*, Gareth Powell, Secretary of the Methodist Conference quotes Rev Loraine Mellor's presidential address saying with honesty 'I know I am part, at present, of a declining church, but I am not part of a complacency to convince ourselves that the figures do not matter or do not reflect reality ...' Gareth Powell goes on to write of two traps which he describes as 'despair and inaction,' and continues that such would be 'longing nostalgically for an imagined past or just waiting for something to turn up.' With acute relevance and bravado, he declares that 'statistics do matter and that churches reduced to a remnant may be no longer able to maintain their work . . .' Subsequently he writes that there is a need 'to remember the reaffirmed statement of Our Calling – discipleship, worship, learning, and caring service to others, and evangelism.' And as to the future he writes of 'change being underway. Which though painful can (become) opportunities.' He closes constructively 'We must take seriously our responsibility for being an evangelistic community of love . . . which leads people

to Christ' and is 'Listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>825</sup> This article touches on many themes of this thesis which I have argued need to become incarnate in the life and witness of West Cornish Methodists. And essentially that is not to seek growth and prosperity for their own future, which of course would be a reason for deep gratitude, but rather to be partners with God in his mission.

The Apostle Paul in well known yet relevant words to the Thessalonians writes in an echo of *Missio Dei*. He prays that the church might be worthy of *his* calling so that by *his* power he may fulfil every purpose of *yours* prompted by *your* faith.<sup>826</sup> (italics mine).

Michael Townsend in his book *Our Tradition of Faith* states this sense of the fundamental as against secondary, even legitimate ambition when he writes ' . . . British Methodism is called to be faithful to its inheritance, to nurture its special gifts and to keep with humble tenacity the charge it has been given.'<sup>827</sup> Here, history, purpose and faithfulness are encompassed in a short sentence.

As a comparative newcomer to Methodism, I feel that having begun this thesis with John Wesley we should end with him. Martyn Atkins closes his book on Discipleship with a quote which is of acute relevance:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist. . . . 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 the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they set out.<sup>828</sup>

**Words: 69,832**

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<sup>825</sup> Gareth J. Powell, "Credo" in *The Times* (Saturday 23 February 2018).

<sup>826</sup> 2 Thess. 1:11

<sup>827</sup> Michael J. Townsend, *Our Tradition of Faith* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1980), 96.

<sup>828</sup> John Wesley, "Thoughts upon Methodism" (London: 1786) in Atkins, *People Called Methodists*, 56.



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