



By Martyn Atkins

General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Britain

Discipleship...

...and the people called Methodists

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Introduction



This short book is about Christian discipleship from a Methodist perspective. It's a *personal* account and not an official statement. I write as a Methodist Christian for those who regard themselves Methodists, and the wider Christian family who cherish and own the 'Wesleyan tradition', but also for those many travellers in this ecumenical and post-denominational age who live out their Christian discipleship in the company of Methodists.

Deliberately set out in short sections, this book can be read by individuals or reflected upon in groups. Multiple stopping points with prompts for reflection and conversation are indicated in **boxes** along the way.

The nature of discipleship which emerges in these pages can be summarised like this:

*Methodist Christian discipleship is
rooted in and focussed on Jesus Christ,
resourced by the Spirit of God,
is both life-long and whole-life,
communal rather than solitary,
committed to transforming and serving 'the world',
locally, nationally and globally
and so is lived out on a 'big map',
all offered as worship to God as loving obedience.*

Essentially therefore, 'Methodist' discipleship is 'ordinary' Christian discipleship. We pray and meet in worship and seek to serve God like all other Christians. But like all branches of the Christian family there are particular emphases and tones which make Methodists what they are, and some of these are outlined in the following pages.



Scene setting – the last decade



This focus on Methodist Christian discipleship doesn't appear from nowhere. Quite the reverse, it's essentially Methodist because in its origins and roots, its heart and soul Methodism is a discipleship movement. But particularly over the last few years British Methodism has deliberately sought God's leading as to its identity and purpose as a new millennium dawned. Now about 260 years old, what did God want of us? In 2000 Methodists warmly owned a statement known as ***Our Calling***, adopting a phrase from a hymn by Charles Wesley, a founder of Methodism, 'to serve the present age, my calling to fulfil.' Brief and memorable, *Our Calling* was able to be stated on credit card sized formats. Methodists – as congregations and as individuals – were called of God to a life of *Worship, Learning and Caring, Service and Evangelism*.

By 2004 further prayer and discernment resulted in ***The Priorities of the Methodist Church*** being identified and owned. Methodism couldn't do every good thing it wanted to, or meet every need. Nor did it need to duplicate the diverse ministry of partner Churches. So what were the key things which expressed *Our Calling*? What did Methodists and Methodism simply *have* to be about? *The Priorities* included 'underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer'; 'Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor – in Britain and worldwide'; 'Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved'; 'Encouraging fresh ways of being Church' and 'Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible'.

Then in 2007 British Methodism took up the challenge of an initiative called ***Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission***. Described as 'vision meshed with reality' this challenged each and every Methodist circuit and local church to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in terms of shaping its life and structures in order to engage in mission 'on their patch' as effectively as they could. As a result Methodist churches, circuits and districts began to review their lives, mission and ministry. The sub-title has now become the title, and the spiritual-missional-organisational process which is ***Regrouping for Mission*** continues – as an act of obedient discipleship.

In 2009 a gathering of Methodist people took place called ***Holiness & Risk***. Many were local and national leaders, lay and ordained. They gathered to continue

to discern what God was saying to them as Methodist Christians in Britain, both as a Church and as individual disciples. But they also gathered to test out together what they felt God was already making clear; after all God had not been silent to that point. The statements below are the main aspirations, desires and intentions of that gathering, which consciously built upon *Our Calling, The Priorities and Regrouping for Mission*. They serve to 'flesh out' the nature of Methodist Christian discipleship listed earlier.

- We share a desire to be bolder and more courageous about being Methodist disciples in today's challenging contexts. 'Let's give up apologising for being Methodists!'
- The bolder witness we seek must be characterised by grace and humility rather than arrogance. This will arise from a greater acknowledged reliance upon and confidence in the love of God in Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit.
- There is a general awareness and grateful acceptance that God is not finished with us yet. But as a consequence of this, the challenge of continuing change and openness to change lie before us.
- We are increasingly ready to take 'Godly' and 'holy' risks, and give permission to each other to do so. This will inevitably involve some failure, which, in the context of the proper accountability of being Methodists must be permitted as a necessary part of Godly risk-taking.
- We recognise the need to create 'space' of various kinds in which listening to God, each other and our wider context can take place, for our common benefit and renewal.
- We are aware that the struggle to change our own Church culture further away from despair and increasingly towards God-given hope, and from often purposeless, goal-less processes towards purposeful kingdom thinking and action is going to be long and tough. But we are resolved to continue to engage in that struggle, believing it to be necessary, possible and God's desire for us.
- We are increasingly ready to 'remember our roots' and live more comfortably in them, allowing ourselves to let some things die while at the same time identifying and keeping the jewels or seeds of our tradition, and so 'remembering our future' as well as our past.
- We are willing to engage with the challenge of seeking a new narrative, those stories that articulate who we are and what we seek to be, and thereby increasingly shape our life as Methodist Christians. This story must not be

‘mere spin’ or ignore the challenges facing us – which are deep and real – but neither are we content to define ourselves predominantly in terms of decline, and a wistful appeal to a golden past.

- We are a story-rich Church and want to encourage each other to be ready storytellers. Not just the many good stories but also the stories of struggle and hurt, in order that the unfolding story of God’s faithfulness and leading, and the cost of discipleship is known among us more deeply.
- We are a people of hope rather than (mere) optimism, and we take seriously what it means to be hope-full Christian people at this time.
- We are clear that we are part of a worldwide Church, and desire still to live on a ‘big map’ in relation to our witness and sharing in the gospel, both within the ‘Methodist family’ and beyond it.
- We are equally clear that although we are a relatively small Church, we have a responsibility to continue to be engaged with our society at every possible level as we are able, and to speak prophetically, affirming and challenging as appropriate, with and to those who shape our lives and the life of our nations and the wider world.
- Very many of us feel called to an engaged, ‘hands on’ spirituality, desirous of transforming the world rather than separating from it.
- We continue to believe that although God has a future for our own Church, God’s kingdom purposes are joyfully shared with other Christians, and ultimately such purposes are more significant than our own survival.
- We are convicted that we are, at a deep level, a Church of lay and ordained Christians, encouraging and enabling each other to whole-life discipleship, and that our structures and fellowship must be increasingly reshaped to facilitate such discipleship.
- Though under challenges and questioning, we are not yet ready to give up being ‘in Connexion’ with each other, and resolve to continue seeking out new and vital ways in which this interrelation of our life as disciples of Christ is worked out.
- This commitment to discipleship – being better disciples of Christ and making disciples of Christ, who desire to pray and work to transform the world led by the Holy Spirit – is a key theme for our Church.

Reflect and discuss. To what extent do you ‘own’ these statements? Do they express your own discipleship? Is a commitment to *Our Calling, The Priorities* and *Regrouping for Mission* shaping your local circuit and church? If so, how? If not, why not?

These ‘declarations of faith’ from the *Holiness & Risk* gathering express a desire to explore and inhabit a Methodist Christian discipleship for today. What might it mean for Methodists today to resolve to be better disciples of Jesus Christ? What’s involved in reshaping Methodism so it better enables life-long and whole-life discipleship of us all – lay and ordained? What does ‘being connected together’ mean for us, and how important is it? How do we make disciples of Christ today, and find proper expressions of being a ‘discipleship movement’ again?

This short book is a starter/taster rather than ‘the last word’ about any of these big themes. What’s included here is intended to encourage, stimulate and challenge, and start conversations. The material here is *cumulative* rather than compartmentalised. The discipleship themes build up, mesh and interact throughout. By the end of the book there will be more to reflect upon about each issue than was the case when you first started. So you might want to read this through on your own first and then go through it again with a group.

Decide at this point how are you going to read and use this book?



Being better disciples... Roots and Rules



Holy yearning...

Donald English, Methodist minister and twice president of the Methodist Conference, used to say, “Remember, the Methodist people want to be better than they are.” Though he never explained to me what he meant by this enigmatic statement, I don’t think he was suggesting that we Methodists are focused on becoming ever more educated, wealthy, self-improved or well-connected. As the *Holiness & Risk* statements suggest, I think he was talking about Christian discipleship. About a holy yearning, a desire bubbling up in Methodism since its beginnings, which shaped and reshapes its life, lifestyle, worship, thinking and action, and is bubbling among us today. About a deep desire to love God in Jesus, and gladly offer our lives in worship and service. Put very simply, Methodists, like many Christian people want – no, deeply desire – to be better disciples of Jesus Christ than they are.

This very holy yearning is a gift of God. God puts it in us, so to speak. Scripture tells us that when we resolve to become followers of Jesus Christ – and that can happen in a multitude of ways – we become aware of the Holy Spirit of God living in us. The Spirit reminds and reassures us that we belong to God. The Spirit sets alarm bells ringing when we go wrong; grieves when we wilfully fail, and rejoices at every small step we take on the way to being better Christian disciples. The Spirit aches and yearns for what God wants for each of us, for all of us, for everyone, for everything (read Romans 8). The Spirit of God wants us to be better disciples of Jesus Christ too.

For our part, because we are not yet the ‘finished article’ in terms of being followers of Jesus, this holy yearning is experienced as a mixed bag. Living with a disquieted inner spirit and grieved Holy Spirit is not easy. We can ‘dampen down’ the Spirit, and do, and sometimes for long periods of time. But then, often unbidden, inconveniently, annoyingly but amazingly something happens. A ‘loud’ word is spoken. A significant conversation takes place. We ‘see’ something afresh. A ‘chance’ meeting occurs. A news item touches us. We read something. A tragedy affects us. A person unexpectedly does something good for us. We feel impelled to do something good. We come to our senses. Whatever! But the result is that the yearning reawakens. And the marvellous reliable mystery that enables our spirit and the Spirit to kiss and interweave works again, and we know in the

deep, true places of our being that we want to become better Christian disciples. Early Methodists talked of similar yearnings as the pursuit of holiness, or 'perfect love'.

Divine disquiet

One aspect of holy yearning is what I call 'divine disquiet' and I suffer and benefit from it often. I'm not alone. From years of talking with Christian people I know it to be a wonderfully common condition, and a necessary part of discipleship. One of the greatest things about 'divine disquiet' is that it doesn't lead to hopelessness or despair. That's not its purpose, nor what God wants. Its purpose is to enable us to become better disciples of Jesus. So for example, some Christians talk about being 'under conviction' as if it were a bad thing, designed only to make us feel miserable or guilty. But it's only 'bad' when we refuse to respond properly to it. When we come to realise that the Spirit is urging us to deal with something, and promising divine strength to help us, we begin to understand the proper purposes of being 'under conviction'. Another example is the tendency of some Methodist congregations to interpret a corporate sense of 'God-doesn't-want-us-to-be-like-this-ness' as a sign that God has totally given up on them and they are finished. Actually it's the reverse. It's a sign that God has *not* yet given up on them. It's a sign that the Spirit of Life and Hope longs to renew and change us. So hope, not despair, flows from divine disquiet. As St Paul notes, there is a deep spiritual truth that when we are weakest we are strongest, because that's when we are most open to God's grace which is always enough (read 2 Corinthians 12).

Do you experience 'holy yearning'? Or 'divine disquiet'? What do you think God is saying through it? How is it shaping your personal discipleship... and that of your local church or small group?

How is 'divine disquiet' present and evident in these events in Mark's gospel?

Mark 9:14-29. (when the disciples struggle to imitate the ministry of Jesus in the healing of a boy with a spirit.)

Mark 10:17-31 (when the self righteous rich man comes to Jesus asking how to inherit eternal life.)

Mark 10:46-52 (when blind Bartimaeus is desperate enough to ask Jesus for what he most wanted.)

Mark 7:24-30 (when the Syrophenician woman argues with Jesus for God's mercy to extend to Gentiles.)

Can you think of others?



Methodism is, at its roots, a discipleship movement and a disciple-making movement. Yearning and actively seeking to become better disciples of Jesus Christ, and offering Him to others, lies at the heart of being Methodist Christians. It resulted in the Methodist movement coming into being and my own view is that the future of Methodism is closely connected to the degree to which it is committed today to being increasingly shaped as a contemporary discipleship/disciple-making movement.

I believe that the birth story of any religious movement or grouping provides powerful genetic clues about 'what it is' and 'why it is' that remain influential throughout its life. Whether this particular belief is mere romanticism or not, a rediscovery of a sense of *identity* and *purpose*, of who we are and why God puts us here is rarely a bad thing for any organisation – or person. Consequently, although the 'gene pool' of Methodism is quite different today than it was, say, 200 years ago, changed by cultural and ecclesiastical evolution, and rescued from the dangers of inbreeding by various types of ecumenical liaisons. Nevertheless the yearning instincts to be better disciples of Christ and make disciples of Christ who seek to transform the world in the power of the Spirit remain deep rooted in Methodism.

Increasing numbers of Christian disciples in Methodism today know very little about its roots. Like many nowadays the denominational 'label' isn't very important to them. They choose a local church for various reasons – because it makes them welcome, enables them to make friends, offers the kind of worship and life together they feel best feeds them, provides what they desire for their children, etc – rather than because it says 'Methodist' or whatever on the notice board. Many such folk will be interested to know a little of the roots and inherent nature of the part of Christ's family they currently belong to or travel with. It's included here not so much as a history lesson but in the hope that it will be encouraging to realise that, like many of them, people originally joined Methodism not so much to 'be Methodists', but because being Methodists meant intentionally belonging to a group of people who desired to be better Christian disciples. So much so that to be a 'Methodist' was originally a term of ridicule because of the zeal and rigour with which they pursued a life of holiness and sought to be the best disciples of Christ they could.

Think about your local church. Which of you treasure Methodist emphases as part of your Christian DNA and which of you feel more like other Christians enjoying Methodist hospitality?

John and Charles... yearning and seeking

One of the better known roots of Methodism is that it was founded by John and Charles Wesley, in Britain, in the eighteenth century. Their lives are well documented in many places, rightly marking them out as both great Christian disciples and leaders. Two of many children of an exceptional Christian woman and a devout Anglican clergyman they were educated at Oxford, served briefly and none too successfully as missionaries in America, and had deep experiences of God which shaped their lives and enabled them to lead, serve and resource a movement of Christian vitality and discipleship for very many years. This movement became known as Methodism, or better, “the People called Methodists”. Quite different to each other, Charles, who often suffered ill health, is thought to have been the better preacher and singer, and is best remembered for his hymn-poems which remain some of the finest ever written. John enjoyed more robust health and is recognised as a consummate coordinator and ‘practical’ religious thinker. By weaving together thoughts and practices picked up in many places, from books and experiences alike, he provided the vision and means whereby disparate groups of folk up and down the country became ‘connected’ together under his leadership, sharing a common pattern of discipleship and Christian witness.

What becomes crystal clear when you read about Charles and John, or better still what they wrote themselves, is that throughout their lives they too possessed that yearning restless desire to be better disciples of Christ, to be ‘holy’.

Jesus, confirm my heart’s desire
To work, and speak, and think for thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up thy gift in me –

Ready for all thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
Till death thy endless mercies seal,
And make the sacrifice complete.

(Charles Wesley)

O thou who camest from above, Hymns & Psalms

By Methodists I mean a people who profess to pursue holiness... of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in a uniform resemblance of the great object of it; in a steady imitation of Him they worship... particularly in justice, mercy and truth, or universal love filling the heart, and governing the life.

(John Wesley)

Consequently, the early Methodist movement became the key context in which these yearnings of the founders, and those who joined them, found shape and expression.

‘Methodism’ and ‘the People called Methodists’, what do these two terms signal and imply?

Disciple-making ‘structures’

The initial ‘structures’ of Methodism were those which encouraged and enabled people to become better disciples of Jesus. That’s chiefly why they are as they are. The desire for discipleship came first, and the ‘structures’ quickly arose because they served the desired purpose well.

Societies...

John Wesley tells how people came to him seeking a deeper Christian faith. Today we’d describe them as ‘seekers’ or those on a ‘spiritual journey’. They asked him if he would “spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come”. So he “appointed a day when they might all

come together; which, from thenceforward, they did every week viz., on Thursday, in the evening.” He advised, taught and encouraged them, always concluding the meetings with “prayer suited to their several necessities.” These were known as Methodist *societies*, a term in common use at that time to describe a meeting of people gathered for particular purposes or common interests. Wesley described a Methodist society as a company of men and women “having the form, and seeking the power, of Godliness; united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”

Classes

Almost from the beginning the societies were divided into smaller groups of people called *classes*. Classes, like societies, were geared towards enabling better Christian discipleship. They consisted of about 12 folk, both men and women, who met together. Each class had a leader who was expected to meet with their class at least once a week to inquire “how their souls prosper; To advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort” as appropriate. In the very first classes the leader visited individual members in their homes but very soon the members met together weekly.

It was assumed and expected that Methodists would belong to and attend both society and class. This was signalled by *membership* for which a membership ticket was given, usually every three months.

Bands

Some Methodists belonged to even smaller groups known as ‘bands’. Once again the purpose was to deepen discipleship, particularly through confession, accountability and prayer. The bands tended to be self-selecting and ‘single-sex’ – men meeting with men and women with women.

To what extent are the aims and activities of societies, classes and bands the aims and activities of your local church?

Being in connexion

The fast growing numbers of Methodist societies with their classes were not independent, freestanding groups. They were connected together in significant ways. Initially this came through the ministry of John Wesley himself. To be a

Methodist society meant being ‘in connexion’ with Mr Wesley. This meant accepting his leadership, adopting the pattern of discipleship he advocated through his teaching and writing, and belonging to an expanding network of other Methodist disciples. However indefatigable he was, John Wesley couldn’t be everywhere at once and ‘travelling preachers’ arrived to share the work almost from the start. In order to preach or minister in Methodist societies these leaders had themselves to be ‘in connexion’ with Mr Wesley which similarly meant accepting his leadership, teachings and ‘discipline’ in order to lead the people called Methodists. As their title suggests these travelling preachers served and helped lead a number of societies, and in time collections of Methodist societies known as *circuits* came into being. These provided coordination, enabling structures, resources and mutual encouragement for a burgeoning disciple-making movement.

As early as 1744 John Wesley was gathering Methodist preachers together with the intention of prayerfully conferring about the work of God, discerning God’s will and making subsequent decisions that shaped the life of the people called Methodists. This annual meeting continues today and is known as *The Conference*, and “the People called Methodists” – now *The Methodist Church* – is referred to as *The Connexion*.

Together these local and central structures enabled a networked discipleship movement to thrive, changing for good and renewing the lives of individuals, neighbourhoods and nations.

We’re already able to note certain things at this point.

Purposeful structures

A desire to be a Christian disciple clearly shaped the early structures of Methodism. It’s probably unsurprising then that the divine disquiet some Methodists experience today stems from the fact that they feel Methodism is no longer best structured and shaped to enable Christian discipleship. This disquiet may well be the prompting of the Spirit of God, and if so we can expect revelation and guidance as we seek to respond and discern the way ahead.

Of course simply changing the ‘structure’ of something doesn’t of itself bring about a desired change. Your car doesn’t change because you’ve built a new garage to put it in! So changing a ‘structure’ is not always the best thing to attempt to do first. For Christians it’s more important to ask, seriously, prayerfully, together, which kind of ‘structures’ will best encourage and enable agreed aims and purposes.

Then take it from there. This will itself lead to costly choices. A group or local church can agree all sorts of aims and purposes, but because they're Christians it's critical that they allow the agreed aims and purposes to be shaped by a sense of God's call and vision. 'What do we think God wants?' is a very different question to 'what do we want?'

Now while it's true that changing the structures of something doesn't of itself bring the deeper change required or desired; it's also true that structures are not neutral or irrelevant. They can facilitate and enable or hamper and repress – or do a bit of each! A good structure can enable things a poor structure can't, whether it's a bridge, a building or an organisation – even a Christian organisation like a church. It's also the case that structures that once enabled the agreed aims and purposes of a group of people can, over time, come increasingly to hamper or prevent them. It's at times like that when we need the courage to remember that a vision and sense of call *determine* structures, and not vice versa. This realisation led to talk of 'Godly risk-taking' at the *Holiness & Risk* gathering and it lies at the heart of the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative.

What is the vision and sense of 'call' that shapes the aims and purposes of your local church and circuit?

Together... for each other...

A particularly striking thing about Methodist societies and classes is the unquestioned assumption that discipleship requires mutual encouragement and help. You can't do it on your own. A Methodist society is "a *company* of men and women... *united* in order to pray *together*, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over *one another* in love, that they may help *each other* to work out *their* salvation." This is a welcome corrective to the tendency to individualise spirituality and discipleship today. Whatever becoming a disciple means for Methodists it involves other people, to whom we belong. We aren't all alike, and that's alright. We are more 'whole' when we are at our most diverse.

Accountability

The idea of being *accountable* to each other also lies deep in Methodist discipleship. People are not converted to Christianity – they are converted to *Jesus Christ*. New

Christians, like those who sought out Wesley, have a desire to be disciples of Jesus, to pray, to worship, to live out their faith. But that doesn't mean they know how. They must enter an environment which enables them to be taught how to be disciples, given examples of what it means to follow Christ. For Methodists this environment was society and class and provided the mutual support of others, learners learning together how to be disciples of Jesus.

Read through the first six chapters of Mark's Gospel. Notice the different ways Jesus chose very ordinary friends, invested in them by sharing his life with them, cared for their loved ones, taught and shared ideas and values with them, trusted in them to share his ministry, listened to their experiences, challenged and stretched them.

How far do our local church structures imitate the disciple forming pattern of Jesus?

The whole people of God?

Without trying to implant twenty first century notions of equality into eighteenth and nineteenth century heads, Methodist meetings were markedly inclusive for their day. Both men and women belonged to Methodist societies and classes. Female class leaders were appointed from early on and, though outnumbered by men, the idea of 'women in leadership' has not been for British Methodism the contentious issue it has for some other Christian Churches. There are also stories told of how, at a time when British society was even more class-conscious than today, 'Bob', a lowly worker in a pit or factory, was the class leader of 'William', his boss at work, and for both of them, in the context of discipleship, this was perfectly acceptable.

Perhaps most significantly though is the inclusive role of the laity – 'normal Christians'(!) – in Methodism. In spite of the fact that the Wesleys and a few other ordained clergy exercised leadership in Methodism, the great majority of preachers and society and class leaders were laypeople. It's not without reason that many refer to Methodism as a 'lay movement'. There was certainly leadership and authority, but of a kind that assumed that disciples could and should minister to each other for the benefit of all. We've noted that what are now known as Methodist ministers started off as 'travelling preachers'; visiting the societies,

preaching, encouraging, sometimes disciplining. But the societies themselves – as the very term suggests – relied heavily upon what is now sometimes described as ‘every member ministry’. Many Methodists are rightly proud of these roots.

Today, the Conference – British Methodism’s supreme decision-making body – is made up of lay and ordained people in almost equal measure. The membership of district synods, circuit meetings and local church councils are predominantly lay. Local (lay) preachers take the majority of Methodist acts of worship. Since 1932, when three main branches of Methodism joined together (Primitive Methodists, United Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists) to form what we now call *The Methodist Church* there has been a ‘lay president’ (called, somewhat misleadingly the vice-president) alongside the ordained person who is president of the Conference.

And yet many today think that Methodism has become too ‘clericalised’ and cast doubt on the claim that contemporary Methodism is a lay movement. Other influential groups such as the Methodist Council and the Connexional Leaders Forum are numerically dominated by clergy. The vice-president is sadly regarded a junior or unimportant in comparison to the (ordained) president of the Conference. Methodist ministers now tend to operate like many other models of clergy do, and Methodist church life is much like that of many other denominations. Consequently, although lay people hold office in Methodism, and it couldn’t operate without lay roles of various kinds, its life is no longer shaped around the notion of watching ‘over one another in love’, taking mutual responsibility for becoming better disciples as it once was. British Methodism has long affirmed ‘the ministry of the whole people of God’, but changing a theoretical nod of assent into an intentional seeking of what this might mean for us today, and once discerned enacting it with rigour is one of the most significant strategic choices presenting itself to us.

What would be involved if ‘the ministry of the whole people of God’ became more than a slogan? How would this reshape your discipleship? What in your church do you see as the key roles of the minister? How well do they match the way the minister actually spends their time?

'In connexion' with each other...

We've already recognised that Methodists have a peculiar way of spelling and using a word usually rendered 'connection'. They spell it 'connexion' (a normal rendition in the eighteenth century) and talk of 'the Connexion', being 'in connexion' with each other, and of 'connexionalism' – all of which some regard the special distinctive, the 'X' factor of Methodism! In fact the retaining of the old spelling and its special use by Methodists serves to demonstrate its continuing significance. The origins of Methodism as a discipleship movement 'in connexion' with each other through the ministry of John Wesley, his Conference and its travelling preachers, and the arrival of circuits was mentioned earlier. Here we take some time to explore what the 'X word' means today and reflect on the future of Methodism as a *connexional* discipleship movement. This is an important conversation and one concerning many Methodists today, as the *Holiness & Risk* statement made plain.

Though under challenges and questioning, we are not yet ready to give up being 'in Connexion' with each other, and resolve to continue seeking out new and vital ways in which this interrelation of our life as disciples of Christ is worked out.

Put very simply 'connexionalism' is the term used to describe the principles and practices by which Methodism is intentionally interrelated and connected together. For some folk it lies at the heart of Methodist Christianity and discipleship. For others it's unknown and for still others is well-known and thought to be past its sell-by date. Methodist societies have become 'local churches' like many others, with both gains and losses to the movement. 'Classes' and 'bands' have largely disappeared, and with them key elements of disciple-making, though new models of small groupings enabling disciple-making today are emerging. Connexionalism too has changed and developed since early Methodism, but probably more than society or class, remains with us and shapes our life together.

Connexionalism. Essential? Unknown? Past its sell-by date? At this point where do you stand, and why?

Every part of the body...

For as in one body we have many members... so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and... members one of another.
(Romans 12:4-5)

It's the relative autonomy of local churches, circuits and districts each agreeing to belong together that enables connexionalism to exist meaningfully at all. A profound fracture in the agreement by any part of Methodism will effectively end connexionalism. Although 'the connexion' is often used to describe the Methodist Conference, Council or the Connexional Team, 'the connexion' is in fact each and every part of our Church. It's not 'them', it's 'us'. We are the connexion and our life together expresses our connexionalism. Each congregation, church, circuit and district is part of the connexion. Each part represents the whole and that's precisely why it can't act solely in its own interests. The beginnings of Methodism lie in local groups of disciples, shaped by mutually agreed rules, sharing the input of ministers who travelled from society to society, who themselves agreed together through prayerful conferring, with everyone placing themselves under mutual accountability to each other. Connexionalism today is shaped by similar dynamics. What it means today to 'watch over one another in love', 'pay the weekly penny for class membership when some members can't', receive and share in the ministry of God, and together strategically coordinate the mission and witness of the people called Methodists is the stuff of connexionalism.

Subsidiarity

Connexionalism is not centralisation, rather it encourages the practice that decisions ought not to be taken on any issue in the Methodist Church at a 'higher level' than they need to be. This is known as the principle of 'subsidiarity' and has been an increasingly influential factor shaping Methodist decision-making in recent years. Needless to say some Methodists regard this as a good thing which must be pursued with ever greater rigour, while others suggest that the power of the connexion is being weakened and Methodism is fast becoming a 'regional' or 'congregational' Church.

Certainly there is a greater distribution of power and responsibility between local churches, circuits, districts, Conference and other connexional bodies today than

has previously existed. And again perception is crucial. Subsidiarity understood as having something ‘dumped on us’ by ‘them’, resulting in resentment, will kill us. Subsidiarity understood as encouraging us all to take decisions which make a difference and embody our continuing commitment to be a disciple-making movement will enliven us. When each part of the connexion recognises that’s what it is, is truly itself, interdependent and interrelated with the rest of the connexion, when it shares its stories, self understandings, challenges and a renewed commitment to contemporary disciple making, connexionalism will be strengthened and renewed. If each part doesn’t understand itself in these terms, connexionalism throughout the whole Church is in grave danger.

Missional

Like all other Methodist structures connexionalism is essentially missional in intention and a chosen model for enabling disciple-making in the Methodist tradition. We look at a couple of examples of this.

Itinerant ministry

One of the elements of connexionalism going right back to the origins of Methodism is the nature of the Methodist ministry and particularly that it is an *itinerant* ministry. Methodism had travelling preachers before it ever had settled pastors.

Methodist ministers – both presbyters and deacons – are ordained to the whole Church. They’re appointed to circuits rather than specific congregation(s) and are ‘stationed’ – to use the technical term – to these by the Conference. For their part Methodist circuits, through their leadership structures decide how presbyters, deacons, local preachers and increasingly lay employees with various roles exercise their ministry within the circuit. Circuits also share in the process whereby the whole Church attempts to identify a mutually apt ‘match’ of both minister and appointment in terms of further enabling the mission of God through the ministry of the Church. Every part of the process involves both laity and clergy and is connexional in nature and intent. Itinerant ministry, ministry ‘sent’ and ‘received’ by the whole Church, demonstrates the missional commitment of a connexional Church. In Methodism ministers are intended to be a resource to be deployed essentially for purposes of mission rather than a workforce to be employed by local Methodist churches.

The itinerant system of Methodist ordained ministry is a hotly debated subject nowadays.

- Increasingly, presbyters indicate limits to the geographical area of the connexion to which they might best like to be appointed and far fewer are signalling an initial readiness to go ‘wherever the church sends them’ for a variety of reasons. So is itinerancy dead anyway?
- With a projected continuing shortfall of ordained ministers over the next few years, due in large part to numbers retiring outstripping the numbers of candidates hearing a ‘call’, is the system sustainable anyway? And is one response to become far more explicit in challenging people to consider a call of God into Methodist ordained ministry?
- With many Methodist people today experiencing other models of ordained ministry on their spiritual journeying or through belonging to an ‘ecumenical church’ – for example, models whereby the local congregation takes a greater role in calling appointing (and firing) ‘their’ pastor – is itinerancy the best means to deliver what it claims?
- Does itinerancy enable both people and minister to develop their discipleship and ministry over time; does it allow things to be ‘seen through’? Does itinerancy permit specialism in ministry (for both ministers and people) to flourish at a time when variety appears to be needed to engage an increasingly fragmented society? To what extent are circuits enabling or preventing a more flexible and fluid itinerancy to emerge?
- Are ‘congregationalism’ and current ‘connexionalism’ the only models for ministry available? Is it just one or the other?

The principle of connexionalism has been and remains closely linked to the notion of an itinerant ministry. What isn’t yet clear is whether or not any further erosion of itinerancy itself results in the effective death of connexionalism worth the name. To what extent can contemporary British Methodism have one without the other? Can itinerancy still work as intended, as a missional model of ministry, an expression of a disciple-making movement in a world quite different to the one in which it first emerged?

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of itinerancy today?

Sharing resources

A commitment to sharing resources is another expression of Methodists being 'in connexion' with each other. It makes plain in practical terms that a big 'we' and 'our' mission, are as significant as a smaller 'us', here in this particular congregation or locality. Sharing itinerant ministry is one example of this, but not the only one.

The way *Methodist circuits* operate is a key example of a connexional Church choosing to share resources in order to engage in God's mission as best as it can, as an essential part of discipleship. In practical terms it makes a lot of sense. Why 'reinvent the wheel' in every congregation? Why appoint folk to roles and responsibilities in each local church when they can be properly shared by several local churches and so release more time and energy for disciple-making ministries? Methodists know that how local congregations of greater or lesser resources share their life together is a key act of witness and mutual relatedness.

Sharing resources also makes *strategic* sense. We have yet to fully realise the kingdom opportunities arising from being able to prayerfully strategise about how the mission and ministry of Methodism shall be planned and shaped over an area, city or region. How we can supplement rather than reproduce the ministry of other Christian Churches. How we can focus our life among people otherwise untouched by Christian ministry and mission. How we can decide to keep financially 'loss leading' ministries alive because it's mission-critical that we do. How we can devolve people to where they're most needed and best gifted. How we can live as Methodist disciples who, to quote John Wesley 'regard the whole world as our parish' rather than regarding the parish as our whole world.

Circuits, like itinerancy, are a topic of hot debate and strong feelings today. Isn't it better for each local church to go it alone, some say? Let those that grow, grow and those that die, die – we've got too many churches anyway! Doesn't sharing meagre resources only dissipate energy, prevent mission and disciple-making, and threaten to drag the whole circuit into paralysis? These are valid questions. The sharing of resources can easily appear to be merely self-preservation, but at its truest and best it is profoundly Christian, mission-led and a powerful expression of the mutuality of a disciple-making movement. That's why some leaders of 'new churches', who might be expected to rubbish the idea of circuits are increasingly not doing so. Many 'new churches' have embraced the idea of 'networks'. Some now covet what they clearly regard as the strategic mission potential of the 'circuit', groups of disciples committed to being 'in connexion' with each other for the wider

purposes of the kingdom of God.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that the circuit remains a key expression of connexionalism today. Methodism regards them as the primary focus for its mission and ministry. Local Methodist churches have a good deal of autonomy – more than they might sometimes think or realise, or some believe they should have – but ultimately they are not 'independent', they are 'in connexion' and therefore share their resources – life, ministry, mission, worship, people, property, time, money, vision – with others.

All this reinforces why, as part of the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative, the current commitment of the whole Methodist connexion to review circuits and seriously explore how they can better become the missional, disciple-making entities they're designed and structured to be, is so crucially important. Currently many, many millions of pounds lie in our local church and circuit accounts, providing the wherewithal to make all manner of things possible – if there's the will!

What for you are the treasures of the circuit system? And what is the irritating baggage?

There are other expressions of connexionalism expressed through sharing resources which I note briefly here. For example, when a church building has served its purpose, closes and is sold, who gets the money and what do we do with it? Significantly, the proceeds are shared between the local circuit and a fund administered centrally which provides grants to areas of priority mission need elsewhere in the Connexion. All the decision-makers are encouraged to use these resources for missional, disciple-making purposes rather than propping up old ways or keeping the show on the road. Connexionalism requires a broad strategic view of 'plant' as well as people.

The contribution each Methodist local church and circuit makes to the running costs of wider Methodism is itself a practical expression of connexionalism. This is known as 'the assessment'. There's probably not a local church in the country that hasn't questioned from time to time why they have to give away 'their money' to 'them', and that's understandable, particularly if sustaining the life of the local church is a struggle. The Methodist response is to remember that we are in connexion together and that means that some of the mission and ministry we want to undertake can best be done in other ways, in other places and through other

people. Some of the assessment goes to resource the ministry of districts, which in recent years have been given greater roles and responsibilities in Methodism, and increased resources to undertake them. Some of the assessment goes to resource connexional structures such as training colleges and the annual Conference. Some of the assessment resources the work of the Connexional Team, a group of people employed or appointed to provide services and resources on behalf of the whole connexion.

The Connexional Team can be understood as the servant of the whole connexion, doing some of the work that a large organisation with more than three quarters of a million people passing through its doors each week, over a quarter of a million members, about ten thousand local preachers, two thousand active ministers, several hundred lay employees in circuits, districts and abroad as mission partners, and around five thousand seven hundred church properties requires. There are some things that the Connexional Team can and must do, in the name and for the sake of the whole connexion. These are often things where it would be unreasonable or impossible to expect every church or circuit, or even district or 'region' to provide their own source of expertise or input.

But the Connexional Team is also required to help lead the Connexion, by developing strategies through which the Connexion can fulfil its mission, suggesting alternative ways of achieving things, preparing resources for the whole Church, not least its governance bodies, taking its part, alongside others in the connexional responsibility of being a Methodism fit for God's purposes today.

Like what? The list below gives a flavour of the kind of things the connexion instructs or invites the Connexional Team to undertake, along with others, on its behalf.

Website, helpdesk, finance, budgeting, pensions, world Church partnerships, grants and property matters, a press and publicity service, expertise in safeguarding, personnel, well-being and constitutional matters, overseeing the processes for candidating for ministry, speaking for the whole Church, for example in the public square, to Government and to ecumenical partners; developing thinking on what authorised ministries are needed and how they should be equipped; undertaking limited term projects to explore intensively issues of key significance to the Church's mission, and much more...

What do most want the Connexional Team to do for you? What is currently done by the Connexional Team which you think should be undertaken by local churches or circuits?

The ‘ecumenical spirit’ of connexionalism...

Like many good and right things in Christianity connexionalism ‘happens’ and is then properly subjected to theological reflection. What was the Holy Spirit doing when we Methodists accidentally/providentially adopted this pattern of life together? And are we right to continue to commit ourselves to it? The Methodist Conference statement on the nature of the Church, *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), spent some time on the theological nature of connexionalism and is the best single place for further reading on this topic, though others have reflected on it since.

Some point out that the nature of God as Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the perfect example of the mutual interrelatedness which connexionalism models in human, organisational form. Others think that’s pushing it too far! Connexionalism also expresses the marvellous truth that through Christ all Christians belong to God and thereby to each other. That’s why when the risen Jesus confronts Saul, the persecutor of *Christians*, on the road to Damascus he says ‘Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?’ We have a common Lord, share a common faith and undergo a common baptism into Christ and his One Church. This spiritual interdependence is rightly expressed in terms of human interdependence, through friendships, responsibilities, shared practices and shared organisational structures.

The interconnectedness of all Christians through Christ is expressed by the New Testament word *koinonia* – which basically means ‘called together’ and indicates a ‘common life in Christ’ for believers. Christians are impelled, whether in local, national or international groupings to seek to be ‘in communion’ with each other. This interconnectedness works in mysterious ways. It’s interconnectedness with ‘the communion of saints’, all those who have gone before us in faith and now inhabit heaven ‘ahead’ of us as it were. Christians are ‘in connexion’ with the eternal family of God. It’s also interconnectedness with all other Christians, including those still to come to be, but particularly those sharing ministry and mission with us in this time and place. Methodism recognises that although it

has become 'a Church' its origins remain as a discipleship movement within the whole Church of Christ. So if that deep purpose is discerned to be better served today in a different way, then Methodism must take that very seriously, in order to remain what, at its heart, it is. What is God saying to us, for example, through the LEPs or United Areas, or about Covenants in England, Wales and Scotland we have rightly entered with other Christians? The 'ecumenical discipleship' question asks us sharply whether our own buildings are vital and must be hung on to at all costs in order to be faithful; or whether the whole Christian Church's witness is more important than even beloved denominational traditions and chattels in a given community.

What elements of Methodism would you not be willing to sacrifice for the sake of greater visible unity of the Christian Church in your community? What might be the Methodist contribution to other Christians in terms of discipleship?

Belonging to a world Methodist family

Koinonia reminds all denominations and traditions that they are 'called together' in Christ to be part of something bigger than themselves, and connexionalism serves Methodism in the same way. This special sense of being 'in connexion' extends to a world Methodist Christian 'family' now some seventy plus million strong, of which the British Methodist Church is but a small part. It may come as a surprise – but a rather wonderful one I think – that every member of the Methodist Church in Great Britain is by virtue of that membership also a member of the Methodist Missionary Society (MMS). In a time when formal membership of most things appears less appealing to more people, I consider this fact alone sufficient reason to be a member of the Methodist Church. We should make more of it on the membership ticket given out to those who commit themselves to this formal belonging each year.

The origins of what became the MMS go back into the later eighteenth century and the name *Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society* was adopted in 1818, suggesting that Methodism expressed itself as a mission society before it formally identified itself as a 'Church' – a term only appearing on membership tickets much later in the nineteenth century. Methodist disciples understood themselves as 'mission people' both in their own neighbourhoods and around the world. In

terms of commitment to and resourcing of what used to be called 'home mission' and 'overseas mission' Methodists have always punched above their weight. The instinct to be a mission people propelled Methodists and Methodism to be active in development, aid, relief, politics, and every main issue relating to justice, fairness and peace. It does still.

At least two fundamental theological convictions fuelled – and fuel – this deep Methodist commitment to spiritual and social discipleship. First, 'all-ness' – that all people need to be and can be saved by Christ who died for all, that knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ is simply wonderful. Second a 'big' view of a 'big' Holy Spirit. Methodists at their best have always been open to the filling of the Holy Spirit – it would be odd if a movement committed to 'holiness' wasn't. Methodism is certainly one of the main tributaries contributing to the emerging of the Pentecostal tradition and later 'renewal' movements. But Methodists have never regarded the Holy Spirit as being 'captive' to the Church, whose essential or only role was to 'bless up' God's people. That understanding of the Spirit of God is altogether too small. Methodists have instinctively embraced the dominant role of the Spirit in the New Testament, the one who reveals the things of God, convicts and converts. A Spirit who is abroad and present in all that God has made. Not 'behind' the Church shooing it on like a parent getting children late for school out of the door, but 'ahead' of God's people, urging them to be disciples of Christ in all the world. Put simply, Methodists expect that whatever they do, whoever they meet, wherever they are, God the Spirit is already there. The challenge is to join in!

Methodists therefore tend to be aware that they live in a complicated, wonderful, needy, mysterious world. They desire to live on a big map.

Today, in a global context which because of migration, war, economics and employment Methodist Christians move 'from everywhere to everywhere', the 'world Church' is 'here' and not just 'over there'. The one-time 'children' have grown into a fine family, brothers and sisters in Christ, with characteristics and gifts and faith of which we should be thrilled and proud. Some of them are dealing with things we only have nightmares about. What a gift we are to each other! How important it is for our unity in Christ, our listening to one another, our learning from one another, that living on a big map in a multitude of ways shapes our discipleship and mission today.

How big is your understanding of the Holy Spirit? How important is being a part of a world Methodist family to you? How big is the ‘map’ you live on?

A costly decision of identity

It would be going too far to suggest that connexionalism is *koinonia*. Methodism happily talks about ‘The connexion’ while the New Testament never talks about ‘The *koinonia*’. Nevertheless the similarities are stimulating and encourage us to accept and believe that connexionalism is not merely a piece of human pragmatism, or simply a model of organisational structure, easily dismissed when the next structure comes along. Rather there is a proper Christian rootedness to connexionalism, and in pursuing it we can and should believe that we are pleasing God and operating in a way open to and capable of being filled and directed by the Holy Spirit.

British Methodism stands at something of a crossroads in respect of various aspects of connexionalism. Few folk doubt that being ‘in connexion’ enabled the people called Methodists to become, for a period, the fastest growing Christian grouping in British history. But what enabled and fuelled mutual discipleship, and helped shape a missionary disciple-making movement is now questioned on precisely those grounds. In strongly traditional environments like those of a religious movement, structures designed for one mission context are often perpetuated long after they appear to have become a hindrance to effective mission in another. So some Methodists today look wistfully at other models of being church where the grass seems greener and more plentiful. Paradoxically, some who stand outside Methodism often look on enviously, considering our connexionalism as a jewel which must not be pawned for a flimsier way of being. Methodists today need to decide again whether connexionalism is important to them, a distinctive worth retaining. If we decide to reject it, then we must prayerfully begin to search for a new pattern of being and hasten its dismantling. If we choose to remain ‘in connexion’ with each other then we must seek new models of connexionalism which enable us to be ‘ourselves’ today. Connexionalism is not a straitjacket into which Methodism must fit, it is a way of living out our Christian discipleship together in a way which takes seriously the commands of Christ, that loving Him means loving one another and everything God has made. The future of connexionalism is therefore essentially not about maintaining certain structures intact, but about hearts and minds, about

deciding together how a contemporary discipleship/disciple-making movement wants to live.

What aspects of Connexionalism would you most want to change? If Methodism was to start again today would Connexionalism be the model you'd choose?

Congregations and small groups

Groups, small and larger, are clearly deep rooted in Methodism. It's interesting to note how the original Methodist structure of society and class chimes with the 'congregation and cell/small group' pattern of Christian belonging adopted by increasing numbers of local churches today. Many advocates of this pattern make the connection with early Methodism and rightly identify it as a means of healthy Christian growth. Today's small groups and cells aren't identical with Methodist classes and bands, nor are today's 'congregations' the direct equivalent of a Methodist society. Nevertheless, many local groups of Methodists whose pattern of Christian belonging consists only of attending Sunday worship as a member of a congregation, and doesn't include belonging to a genuine 'small group' designed intentionally to deepen discipleship, fly in the face of their own tradition and contemporary experience concerning the 'structures' seemingly best able to make better disciples of Christ today.

In terms of enabling better discipleship the sum of 'congregation and cell' is greater than the parts. So belonging to both is best, as early Methodists knew. But if a choice really had to be made between the two the pattern of early Methodism would suggest that 'small group' precedes 'congregation' in terms of effective disciple-making. 'Cells' are particularly potent for new Christian disciples. At the very least, Methodists committed to becoming better disciples, whose weekly diet is meeting for public worship in a 'congregation' should reflect on what it would mean to reshape their meeting to better match the purposes of cell/class.

Some churches find ways of sharing and conversing about the sermon, the issues they will be facing at 11am on Monday morning, other faith issues they face, when they gather as a congregation on Sunday so they don't add another meeting into people's busy diaries. Is this a possibility for your church?

Methodist rules permit very small Methodist congregations to become ‘classes’ of a larger nearby Methodist church, but this is often in name only. Small groups of new or established disciples that behave like small groups rather than as very small congregations, open up all sorts of possibilities for better discipleship.

Does your local church focus on congregation or cell/small group? What do you think each contributes best to deepening discipleship? What are the key differences between a congregation and a small group? Which do you feel you need most in terms of your discipleship, and why?

Small groups come in many kinds and with various aims and purposes. Some focus on worship, others prayer; often intercessions for the world and for each other. Others focus on personal sharing and are vitally important because they are ‘safe places’ where we can be ourselves in confidence and with confidence. Such places are precious, and laden with possibilities for Christian growth. Many groups concentrate on learning and study, and often follow a particular course, like the lengthy but rewarding *Disciple* courses or the hugely popular *Alpha* course.

What might enable your church and circuit to better engage with Christian discipleship? How are you going to bring that about?

All sorts of other factors influence group dynamics and determine the extent to which small groups can provide the environment for becoming better disciples.

Where should it meet? Sometimes a home is best, sometimes it isn’t. Localities, churches and people are all different, so working out where something takes place deserves more serious thought than it often receives. The wrong location can thwart many a potentially good occasion.

Is it permanent or seasonal? This is often determined by what the aim and purpose is. A study course is often undertaken in a set number of weeks, then finishes, with perhaps another course beginning some time later. But a ‘personal sharing’ group environment usually needs greater permanence to work well. I say ‘usually’, because the downside of a well-established group is that it’s sometimes very difficult for newcomers to get into. So groups designed for personal sharing must, for their own sake, regularly check whether they are open or closed to those

who desire to join and can often bring new life and insights to a group.

Is it about discussion or conversation? This might sound pedantic but specialists say that groups that ‘discuss’ and those that enable conversation between people are quite different, with the latter having the greater potential for deepening faith for most people. In recent years one of the best and most popular Methodist publications in Britain was called *Time to Talk of God* and, as the title implies, mainly adopted conversation rather than discussion as both its style and message.

Who is it intended for? People are different. Take music. Some like rock, others hip-hop, or folk, or classical. Early Methodist classes were mainly shaped by geography – where you lived – but groups can be shaped by many other considerations, such as age, common interests or even ‘personality types’. Given greater mobility and the benefits of technology, most groups today aren’t simply ‘geographical’.

Is it single sex or mixed sex? Most groups today are for both women and men and there’s no good reason why not. However ‘accountability groups’ and ‘covenant groups’ designed specifically for men or women are now growing in number, and appear to be particularly effective instruments for discipleship deepening. In many “new church” networks and student congregations, belonging to such groups is as natural and expected as was belonging to a class or band in early Methodism. Key issues relating to discipleship today, which early Christian leaders described with marvellous succinctness as ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’ are dealt with straight and blunt. If being a disciple doesn’t change your life, challenge you at the deepest practical levels and involve struggles, then is it discipleship at all? Many younger disciples today seem to know what early Methodists knew and what older generations of Methodist Christians like me appear to have forgotten. Disciples are accountable to each other, for the benefit of all. Following Christ affects everything. It’s not so much life enhancing as life transforming. It’s about taking up your cross and following Jesus. If it’s not, then it’s not discipleship worth the name.

Reflect on small groups in your church? How might they be reshaped so as to be more useful to deepening discipleship?

Open entry?

The condition for admission into Methodist societies is also worth noting. Unusually there was only one: a person must “desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved from their sins.” Old-fashioned language to be sure, but the message is clear; you join a Methodist society because you desire to become the best Christian disciple you can. Because Methodist societies didn’t regard themselves as ‘churches’ in the classic sense – though some think they were the main ‘fresh expression of church’ in eighteenth century Britain – there’s no mention of the need for a ritual sacrament such as Baptism at this point. Nor is there any theological test to undergo or a formal doctrinal statement to avow, as in some Christian groupings then and now. Though they will have begun a journey of faith there’s not even an assumption that a person seeking admission is already ‘converted’.

This broad, aspirational criterion for admission to a Methodist society is regarded by many as a jewel, highly attractive and deeply meaningful. It signals an understanding of the gospel and the revealed nature of God which is very dear to many Methodists. That God is essentially gracious. The gospel is for each and everyone and therefore for all. Because Jesus Christ died for all, and before we knew it or could respond to God in any way. Methodists not only believe that God saves all those whom God wills but also that God wills all to be saved. So everyone can receive Christ and can come to know they are His. Everyone is invited. Offer always precedes demand in the things of God. But ‘demand’ there was, as we shall shortly see. It is this broad invitational evangelical doctrine that shapes Methodism as a disciple-making movement.



The demands, or possibly better, natural expectations upon those wanting to become Methodist Christian disciples were made clear as early as 1743 when, just a handful of years after the first Methodist meetings began, the 'Rules of Society' were published. The *General Rules of the Society of the People called Methodists* are short and to the point. They were published as a small penny pamphlet designed to be carried around in the pocket and intended as a practical guide to Christian living. The 'rules' of Methodism, like its 'structures' were designed to aid the desires and intentions of a discipleship movement. That's why it's known as Methodist *discipline*.

John Wesley wrote that when the desire to be saved, to be a disciple of Christ, "is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits." Consequently it was expected that those who continued to meet in society and class should continue to evidence their desire to be a Christian disciple. Steven Manskar illustrates this with reference to the parable of the prodigal son (read Luke 15:11-32). This Jesus story is a story of grace. It tells of God's unconditional love, which invites and makes a way for everyone, even those far away from God, to return and be received. What happens, Manskar asks, when in spiritual terms we 'come home' and seek to live in 'God's household'? Is it one unending party or do we have to accept God's 'house rules'? He imagines an additional gospel text, inserted at the end of the story of the prodigal son. The father has received back his lost son with great rejoicing and throws a party. But the new text notes that the next morning the returned prodigal is woken early so he can join the family for breakfast, share in prayers, then go out in the fields to work.

Getting the right balance between open invitation and proper demand is very difficult. Methodists have always insisted that the invitation is to all, but that there are expectations and demands in belonging. Our gracious God does receive us 'as we are', but seems not content to ever leave us like that.

To what extent is 'offer and demand' in healthy balance in your life? What expectations – spoken or unspoken – does your church place on newcomers?

Three simple rules...?

Well, what about the rules themselves? They are these. *Do no harm. Do good. Love God.* Are you surprised by how few there are? How short they are? This kind of rule necessarily requires examples, and John Wesley offered early Methodists lots of them.

To 'do no harm' meant to "avoid evil", he said. Therefore Methodists were not to take the name of God in vain, they weren't to get drunk, fight, quarrel, go to law with fellow Christians, or do those things which they knew didn't glorify God. Nor, specifically, should they buy or sell 'uncustomed' (ie black market) goods, borrow without a probability of paying back, or more generally "lay up treasure on earth". To live by this rule would be evidence of a continuing desire to be a disciple of Jesus.

To 'do good' meant Methodists being kind and merciful to all people, as far as was possible. This goodness was directed at both the body and the soul. Goodness to the body meant giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting or helping the sick and those in prison. Goodness to the soul included evangelising, "instructing and reproving", encouraging all they met and bearing witness to God's goodness. Wesley said that Methodists should deny themselves and follow Christ daily, enduring any reproach or suffering for the sake of the Lord. To live by this rule would be evidence of a continuing desire to be a disciple of Jesus.

'Loving God' entailed "attending upon all the ordinances of God". Wesley lists these as public worship, the ministry of the Word, "either read or expounded", the Lord's Supper, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures and fasting or abstinence. To live by this rule would be evidence of a continuing desire to be a disciple of Jesus.

In 1779 a much older John Wesley wrote a sermon (Sermon 107, titled 'On God's Vineyard') in which he provides perhaps the best single statement about the Methodist way of forming disciples. Assuming attendance at and membership of both society and class he wrote:

Nothing can be more simple, nothing more rational, than the Methodist discipline: It is entirely founded on common sense, particularly applying the general rules of Scripture. Any person determined to save his (sic) soul may be united (this is the only condition required) with them. But this desire must be evidenced by three marks: Avoiding all known sin; doing good after his power; and, attending all the ordinances of God.

Those who have noted echoes with the commandments of the Jewish Law in the Old Testament, and the commands of Jesus in the New Testament, are not mistaken.

What do you think of these rules? Should they still be at the heart of discipleship today?



Reflecting on the rules...

It's worth reflecting on these rules and the evolving picture of Methodist discipleship that's beginning to emerge. As indicated earlier, the reflections interrelate rather than stand separate from each other.

Consequential rules

First, it's clear that the rules are *consequential* of a desire to be a *disciple of Christ*. They express discipleship before they define it. At the heart of Methodist discipleship is faith in Christ, and the pursuit of the Christian life, learning to be learners of the Master. To use classic Christian language, Methodist discipleship is about 'the imitation of Christ', or to use today's language, Methodist disciples seek to be 'Jesus people'. Wesley wrote:

If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental they are these... the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth; the former relating to that great work which God does for us, in forgiving our sins; the latter to the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.

Rooted in Scripture

The rules clearly owe their origin to *Christian Scripture*. That's the source which produces them. John Wesley said that Methodism was "plain, scriptural religion, guarded by a few prudential regulations" and he hotly repudiated those who suggested that anything about Methodist doctrine or discipleship was 'unscriptural'. He wrote, "I build on no authority, ancient or modern, but the Scripture. If this supports any doctrine, it will stand; if not, the sooner it falls, the better." Methodist doctrines and practices, their zeal for Christ and serious pursuit of discipleship arose from Scripture: nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

The Wesleys were not, however, what the twentieth century would come to describe as 'fundamentalist' or 'literalist'. Nor, with very few exceptions and for all its passionate evangelicalism, was later Methodism. John Wesley may have declared "let me be *homo unius libri*" – a man of one book, by which he meant the

Bible – but this didn't mean that he read only the Bible, as he read voluminously and widely. It meant that the Scriptures, as the word of God, were the supreme and authoritative account by which we come to understand the truths and nature of God. It's through Scripture that we learn what God – Father, Son and Spirit – is like, how to become like Christ, and receive for ourselves the “faith once delivered” to all those others who also seek to be Christian disciples. It's through the ‘general rules of Scripture’ that the great doctrines Wesley thought to be ‘fundamental’ are discerned. Scripture was given by God as a trustworthy account enabling us to know, love, serve and please God. As such it could be trusted to direct, instruct, nourish, guide, comfort and challenge. In short, it is God's manual for Christian disciples.

Scripture, then, contains that wealth of essential and irreplaceable material which spells out what Christian discipleship means. Particularly it means following Jesus Christ, responding to his call (read Matthew 4:18-22). It means learning about him and learning from him, through the Holy Spirit who reveals Christ to us (read John 16:13-15). It means following his teachings, found in the four gospels particularly but also throughout the New Testament. It means obeying his commands, such as:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind”
(Luke 10:27)

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39)

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”
(John 13:34)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”
(Matthew 5:44)

“Take, eat; this is my body... Drink... all of you... this is my blood... which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”
(Matthew 26:26-27 and Luke 22:19)

“Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19-20)

It means also learning the teachings of other Christian disciples, those who formed the earliest communities of disciples, found throughout the New Testament.

Methodist disciples should therefore read and study Scripture and know it well, as the Rules make clear. But the essential point wasn't that you were able to quote the Bible from memory *ad infinitum* (though many could), otherwise good Christian discipleship became a matter of who won the quiz. Rather – then and now – disciples are shaped and formed by Scripture through bending their will to God's as they learn of God through the word of God. There's a world of difference between knowing something by rote and knowing something by heart. Disciples study Scripture, certainly, but they also let Scripture study them, then shape them! That's why 'studying Scripture' is an activity listed under a Rule stating 'love God'.

Today there are many ways of studying Scripture and permitting the Holy Spirit to minister through it. Some people, as we've noted, join study groups. Some use daily reading notes (some more diligently than others!). These come in booklet form but increasingly on websites. There are daily readings and reflections on the Methodist Church website (www.methodistchurch.org.uk and click on *A Word in Time*). Following a daily 'office' such as an order of morning or evening prayer combines Scripture and prayer in a pattern which unfolds the Christian story. It provides constancy and regularity while dealing with different Scriptures each day. The idea that scripture shapes and forms disciples is a core aspect of meditating on scripture. *Lectio divina* and other similar approaches are proving hugely helpful to many Methodists who have lived on a more 'preached word' diet for many years.

How diligently do you 'study the Scriptures' and let the word of God shape you as a disciple of Christ?

2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible and is a time of special focus on the Christian scriptures. Christian disciples will be encouraged to explore new ways of engaging with Scripture. But also, in spite of being the world's best seller, the Bible remains for increasing numbers of people today an unknown book with unknown teaching and worst of all, an unknown God in Christ. The missing God who is not missed! The loss of the Christian story and Christian memory today is more than a matter of biblical illiteracy. It has ramifications for culture, society, ethics, values, politics, commerce, media and intellectual discourse – in short every key area of public life and cohesion. Not to mention personal spirituality! Methodists have committed themselves to the 'year of the Bible' – just the sort of thing a discipleship movement should do!

How will you and your church celebrate the 'year of the Bible'?

The crucial balance

The Rules carefully balance 'works of mercy' and 'works of piety'. That's a healthy balance. From the beginning Methodist discipleship was not about being so heavenly minded that you were no earthly use. 'Methodist' was a term of ridicule not only because they got up at unearthly hours to pray but that they then went off to the prison to visit 'no-hopers'! John Wesley said the reason God "raised up" the people called Methodists was "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" and this pursuit of 'holiness' was always expressed in terms of *personal* and *social* holiness. No surprise then that Methodists played a full part in campaigning for the abolition of slavery and forming what became the Trades Union movement. Acts of compassion and devotion, and social transformation have always belonged together in Methodist discipleship.

The balance of attention and ministry to 'soul' and 'body' has often been a divisive issue. Some Christians tend to treat humans as bodiless souls only requiring to be made ready for heaven, others as soulless bodies only to be materially looked after. Thankfully this is seen increasingly as a false divide, and Christian mission and ministry is now almost always 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'. Works of mercy and piety are two wings on a bird, each needed to enable it to fly. Methodism has always instinctively known this, and when it is most being itself has lived out a passionate commitment to human beings: body, mind and spirit,

individually and corporately. Its roots shaped a movement that simply didn't feel comfortable when 'religious' bits of discipleship were separated from 'secular' or 'social' bits. Methodist discipleship has therefore always meshed together morning devotions, visiting folk, witnessing clearly to Christ at work and home through lives and lips, joining a campaign to cancel developing nations' debt, before attending a time of worship with a fine supper afterwards!

What works of mercy are most pressing and required by Christian disciples today?

Constancy and change

The 'three simple rules' are a real gift of God to Methodists because they continue to provide a contextual and helpful way of being better disciples today. *Do no harm, do good* and *love God* are guiding lights applicable in all times and places. How these are lived out involves both constancy and change. Some things remain constant. For example not stealing or murdering, and praying and sharing in the Lord's Supper are as right now as they were 250 years ago. We should note though that when something is constant it doesn't mean it's unchanged. The ways of praying and sharing Holy Communion today are various and hugely nourishing and it may be that the spiritual staleness some of us experience lies in mistaking constancy for things remaining unchanged. Constancy is about receiving from God so as to be nourished, not thinking that 'it's just bread and wine again'!

Other expressions of the rules change more profoundly over time. But very much alive is whether as Christian disciples we should be counter cultural and believe in honesty as an absolute virtue ('Your "Yes" shall be Yes' as Jesus said) or join in the pervading assumption that dishonesty is acceptable provided you are not found out. 'Doing no harm' and 'doing good' today almost certainly includes actions and commitments that couldn't be known by early Methodists. Email etiquette perhaps, or the use of the internet, ending world poverty, or a lifestyle that signals the seriousness with which we want to care for God's planet and its fragile climate. In every time and place there will be apt expressions of Christian faith, and these will be measures of our commitment to being better disciples of Christ. Identifying what these 'apt expressions' are in the early twenty first

century, individually and corporately, and living them out in a way that encourages and enables others to seek to become disciples is vital today. Equally important is the realisation that some expressions of apt Methodist discipleship may now be redundant, and what was thought to constitute discipleship was in fact an expression of it and not the thing itself.

Identify some 'apt' expressions of Methodist discipleship today. Why are they apt and important? Identify expressions of Methodist discipleship which you think are now redundant. How will you embrace apt expressions and leave behind redundant expressions of discipleship?

Staying in love with God

The work of revisiting the rules and suggesting apt examples of them continues. Rueben Job's little book *Three Simple Rules – A Wesleyan Way of Living* is a recent and helpful attempt to give contemporary expression to the historic rules of Methodism. His treatment of the third rule – *love God* – is re-presented as *Stay in Love with God*. This, he states, was the aim and intention of John Wesley and the people called Methodists when they sought to keep the third rule. The 'Ordinances of God' were practices that kept the relationship between God and human beings vital and living. Public worship of God, Holy Communion, prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study and fasting kept Methodists in touch with the presence of Christ, brought life and strength, and enabled them to become better disciples. They still do.

Consequently these spiritual practices enable and fuel holy living. All three rules combine together. You can take daily communion, but if you do harm, don't avoid evil, engage in no acts of mercy, then you've misunderstood what is required to stay in love with God. The rules are all of a piece. The revelation the Scriptures bring results in actions of healing and reconciliation, impelling Methodists to fight against the injustices and inequalities of the world. The food for the journey given in Holy Communion gives strength and nourishment for the lifelong challenge of personal and social holiness. Worship reminds us of who we are and who God is, and links us to other disciples. Fasting focuses and clarifies our spirits. Together these rules and the 'living' spiritual practices they require enable a Methodist disciple to stay in love with God. And you can't stay in love

with God and not yearn for God's goodness and grace to be shared with the whole world.

Because staying in love with God is so important, and sometimes so hard, it's worth pausing to explore some of the ways in which our faith might be relit and our discipleship deepened today. Some of the ways have already been outlined. The importance of belonging to a small group, and particularly one to which you become accountable for example, and the need to study Scripture to be shaped by the Spirit through it. But others require emphasis here. They're not distinctively Methodist but common to all Christians. Occasionally however there is a Methodist 'flavour' given to generic spiritual practices.

It will be useful at this point to read Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6, or even better chapters 5 to 7 inclusive. This is known as the Sermon on the Mount, and is regarded by many as Jesus' 'manual of Christian discipleship'.

'when you fast...'

Fasting was included in the list of practices to which the people called Methodists committed themselves in order to stay in love with God. Some of us wish it wasn't so, but it is. If you're fortunate enough to have visited Methodists from other parts of the world, in Asia, Africa and South America particularly, you quickly realise that regular fasting is a part of their 'normal' discipleship more than it seems to be in British Methodism. Of course some British Methodists fast too. And, quite properly, some fast but others don't know about it, because they heed the words of Jesus that when they fast they are not to look dismal so that their fasting is not seen by others but will be seen by God (see Matthew 6:16-18). Even so, my hunch is that fasting is a spiritual practice out of fashion for many of us, and British Methodists and Methodism alike would benefit from a recommitment to fasting.

For some disciples the fact that Jesus says 'when you fast' rather than 'if you fast' is enough. The Lord expects it – so do it. But it's also worth asking why Jesus might have assumed fasting is 'normal' for his followers. It clearly has little to do with dieting! Nor is it to be confused with the terrible fact that many poor people in the world have no option but to 'fast' regularly! (Though I know some Methodist Christians who give the cost of meals they would have eaten were they not fasting to agencies like the Methodist Relief and Development Fund.)

Fasting is to do with seeking God's will, clearing your mind and making space so as to listen to God. It is to do with self-discipline and denial of self, where you take stock, and deliberately recall who is who and what is what between you and God. It is often associated with prayer, particularly for someone or something. It is sometimes a pact between Christians who resolve to fast together in solidarity for some situation or circumstance. Local churches sometimes commit themselves to a season of fasting in relation to their life together. So the giving up food bit is not an end in itself, but sets the context of spiritual seeking and openness to God's will and purposes. Fasting disciples are saying to God 'we can live without a meal or two, but we can't live as we want to live without you and without seeking to please you.'

When did you last fast? Does it need to rise up the agenda of priorities of your discipleship individually and corporately? How can you ensure that this happens?

'when you pray...'

Prayer was and remains a regular and essential activity for Methodist disciples, as for all Christians. Societies and classes made prayer a priority and the Rules make it clear that public and private prayer, and prayerful acts of mercy were all expected.

Extemporaneous prayer – 'free prayer', 'prayer from the heart' – remains a natural expression of Methodist spirituality. It's wonderful to hear some Methodists pray aloud and realise you're sharing in a lifetime conversation with God. Methodist extemporaneous prayer at its best is highly intimate, deeply respectful and very attractive. It's also sometimes a bit disabling, in the sense that other Methodists who consider themselves less eloquent or 'spiritual' sometimes feel intimidated by it. 'I'll never be able to pray like that, so what's the point?' One of the roles of class leaders was to encourage and enable each member to learn to pray 'in their own voice', as they were able, both alone and together. That's good advice today, and 'extemporaneous' prayer remains a key means of deepening discipleship.

But 'Methodist' praying isn't limited to extemporaneous prayer. Besides providing Methodist disciples with a powerful means of singing their faith, the hymns of Charles Wesley particularly also enable Methodists to pray, whether sung in worship or read quietly at home. Through hymns Methodists offer praise and thanksgiving,

confession and petition, dedication and offering. Charles Wesley gave Methodists a rich way of communing with God, of poetically and profoundly expressing all the directness, intimacy and majesty of Methodist spirituality.

Father of everlasting grace,
Thy goodness and Thy truth we praise...

Father of everlasting grace, Hymns & Psalms

My God! I know I feel thee mine,
And will not quit my claim...

My God! I know, I feel thee mine, Hymns & Psalms

Give me the faith that can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain...

Give me the faith that can remove, Hymns & Psalms

Though most are of a lesser quality, many new worship songs have the same direct intimacy.

Then there are 'set prayers'; the Lord's Prayer for instance. Some Methodists were – and are – lukewarm about 'using books', while others have used set liturgies to great benefit from very early times.

Two particular examples of Methodist praying express different aspects of the connexionalism we focused on earlier. The first is the use of the annual *Methodist prayer handbook* which focuses each day on a different Methodist district and a different part of the world Methodist family. Information is often provided by people in the areas of the world designated for prayer and enables us to pray sensibly and sensitively for each other. The second is the Covenant service, explicitly set in the context of 'being called to be Christ's disciples', and particularly the covenant prayer, which is being 'discovered' by more and more Christians today. I quote the 'new version' here. The 'original' can be found on page 290 of the Methodist Worship Book, and it's interesting to reflect on them both and let God speak to you.

*I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will, not mine, be done in all things,
wherever you may place me, in all that I do
and in all that I may endure;
when there is work for me and when there is none;
when I am troubled and when I am at peace.
Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;
when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking;
when I have all things, and when I have nothing.
I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you,
as and where you choose.
Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
May it be so for ever.
Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.*

This is an incredible prayer in itself, but is designed to be said *congregationally*, with people standing together side by side. Methodists make the most serious commitments to continuing, life-long discipleship together, in each other's hearing. It's an echo and reminder of an earlier model of mutual faith, commitment and accountability in the classes.

Methodists remain committed to prayer as a privilege and responsibility of discipleship. The year of prayer, *Pray Without Ceasing*, caught the Methodist imagination like few other designated 'years' or 'decades' or 'octaves' have done. Some say it's time for another! Increasing numbers of Methodists are using prayer labyrinths and committing themselves to intercessory initiatives, which is a cause for rejoicing, but not complacency.

Do an honest health check on your prayer life – individually and corporately.
What is God saying, and how will you respond?

'when you give...'

Then there's giving, which Jesus clearly considers a normal part of discipleship. Though this spiritual practice isn't explicitly mentioned in the Methodist Rules, it was certainly expected of Methodist disciples. One of the factors giving rise to

Methodist classes was the need to raise money for the chapel. John Wesley had bought the New Room in Bristol, taking a sizeable debt upon himself. So had other Methodist preachers, and in 1742 the leaders of several societies met to find a way to meet the building debts, the increasing costs of a growing movement. It was suggested that each member of a society be asked to give a penny a week for this purpose. However since the vast majority of Methodists were poor it was recognised that some would be unable to contribute. So it was decided that each class would have a leader who would take responsibility for visiting the members and collecting their contributions. The class leaders would also commit themselves to making up any shortfall when poor members couldn't give, even though many were themselves of modest means. This was agreed and serves as another 'strand' leading to the arrival of the Methodist class system. The fact that money and the costs of buildings are so closely connected to Christian discipleship and the spiritual practice of giving is worth noting as another moving and intensely practical example of 'looking after each other in love' within a disciple-making movement.

What was stated above about Methodists from other parts of the world and fasting could also be said about tithing (the spiritual practice of giving the first part of your money – tithing means a tenth – 'back to God' and be willing to live gladly on what is left). While many British Methodists are 'good givers' tithing doesn't appear to be as common among us as for other parts of the Methodist 'family', or for several other Christian groupings. Though some of us squeal at the theology, our brothers and sisters in Christ sometimes suggest that we are as 'poor' as we are, in terms of spiritual passion, life and hope, because we do not 'give'.

'Every home a church. Every church a mission. Every member a tither.' A statement of the Methodist Church in Brazil. What do you make of it?

While the society Rules don't mention 'giving' they do instruct Methodist disciples not to 'lay up treasure on earth'. This plainly refers to Jesus' teaching:

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up... treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Matthew 6:19-21)

Giving doesn't only involve money of course. Some Methodist professionals and tradespeople regularly 'tithes their time' for others. I know accountants who offer to 'help with the books' of charities and Christian organisations; lawyers who offer advice for free, builders, plumbers and electricians who set aside two or three weeks to build and repair buildings in needy parts of the world; and nurses, doctors and teachers who give regular spells of time to help others, down the street and around the world. Similarly, many Methodists give generously in terms of visiting 'shut-ins', doing shopping and ferrying people to banks, doctors surgeries and hospitals. They're placing treasure in heaven. As Charles Wesley put it "My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord, into thy blessed hands receive."

Such giving is moving and wonderful, and sometimes costs 'more' than actually giving hard cash. But it remains the case that in our materialistic, consumerist, money-obsessed culture, there's no more telling way of identifying the priorities of Christian disciples than their use of hard cash. For those of us who do have treasures on earth (and some of us have a great deal of them), there's the command that we use them to make 'treasure in heaven', to resource the work of God's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount has some hard and radical things to say to an affluent society like ours in a world of great need.

As Jesus made clear, disciples place their treasure where their heart is. Giving is linked to vision, value and need. When we catch the vision, when we appreciate the value of something and the need for something, we give where our heart is. That's why a local church which scratches around to raise its running costs, with coffee mornings following jumble sales, can listen to a leader of an HIV/AIDS project or an orphanage, take an offering and send them off with thousands of pounds. Wonderful! But there's something disturbing to note. A decline in giving to the costs of belonging to a church family may well indicate that it has ceased to provide the vision, inhabit the values and fulfil the needs and purposes which enable people to give to it. In other words, their heart isn't in it.

There are two views circulating about the giving of British Methodists today. One is that we have been and are incredibly generous, that we give sacrificially. The other is that we've forgotten how to give, and that this has severe implications for the mission and ministry of the Methodist Church. The bottom line is that disciples give sacrificially to what they believe in, what serves God's kingdom.

What advice do you give to new members of your church about giving?

Journaling

Keeping a journal of your spiritual progress is growing in popularity today. It's not a new idea. Many great Christian disciples down the ages kept a journal. Nor is the idea alien to Methodists. Far from it, as the voluminous journaling of John and Charles Wesley demonstrates. Some think it prone to introspection and self-centredness, and there is always the possibility of that happening. But it's worth taking a chance and beginning (or recommitting yourself) to spiritual journaling. It aids prayer – many people keep notes of prayer concerns and people they want to hold before God. It provides a natural way of communing with God. It brings encouragement when you realise how far you've come in respect of some issue or decision. It reminds you of the times God has spoken, or you have become particularly aware of God's leading and faithfulness, and helps deepen faith. It stimulates witness and testimony to God's goodness. It enables you to have a sober judgement of yourself! So it's well worth considering. As is the idea of a journaling group, where sharing together closely resembles 'watching over one another in love'.

Well, how about it?

Worship

The public worship of Christians has always been vitally important, and remains so today. Worship styles, what we sing – music group or organ, books or powerpoint; or what we say – liturgical or 'free' – is in many senses the new denominationalism. Few things divide Methodists today like the tone, style and content of public worship. Does our rich inheritance of Charles Wesley hymns make us more or less likely to resist new generations of Christian songs and hymns? Is what some folk refer to disparagingly as a 'hymn sandwich' a sufficient diet for contemporary disciples? If not, why not, and what might we do about it? Is our current model of worship, led as it is by various local preachers and ministers, rather than a 'regular pastor' a culturally helpful model or not?

What aspects of worship feed you most? How far do these reflect your personality and how far the worship itself?

Methodism is now certainly a 'Church' and questions and issues relating to public worship are real and significant. It's worth noting again however that Methodism arose as a discipleship movement within the wider Church, and at least in early decades it was expected that Methodists would attend 'church' in addition to Methodist meetings – which is one reason why societies and classes usually met midweek or Sunday evening after 'church'. A Connexion was not identical to a Church. Only after John Wesley's death in 1791, who vigorously resisted all such developments in his lifetime, did British Methodism move swiftly to adopt rites of Baptism and Holy Communion designed for American Methodism and regularise some of the sacramental trappings of 'church'.

Today we can decide again to what extent Methodist worship enables discipleship and disciple-making. If so, how varied and flexible shall it be? What levels of participation and ownership do we want and need? Do we encourage worship to become more 'local' or more 'circuit' led, with all sorts of implications for the deployment of local and ordained ministers and the role of local musicians and worship leaders? And if we take seriously the conviction that our special contribution to the wider Church is as a discipleship movement, how does our public worship relate to the worship of other Christian groupings in our area?

Reflect on these questions

Gathering and dispersing

Methodism has always regarded worship of God as the highest human activity and privilege. But at its best it has never put all the eggs in the basket of an hour on Sunday! True Methodist worship has always been more than *public* worship. It's been about the life of discipleship. A life in which public worship, fellowship (when are we going to find an appropriate gender-neutral word that means the same thing? Sharing friendship in Christ?), mission and evangelism, service and witness, have been of a piece and together produced an offering of worship to God.

In his fine book *The Reflective Disciple*, Roger Walton notes that being Church involves both gathering and dispersing. In the early days of a movement gathering is balanced with dispersing: one providing the impetus for the other. Nourishment received in meeting together is expended living out the faith. As a movement matures there's a tendency for the gathering to become an end in itself and therefore increasingly disconnected from the living out of the faith. As a

consequence congregations become 'unfit' in the sense of being unhealthily self-absorbed and also insisting on a diet that is doing nobody much good. In similar vein Christine Elliott speaks evocatively about church as a river. It starts in the hills fast, winding, energetic. But as it reaches flatter lands it broadens, moves slower, and sometimes even ox bow lakes appear and the water becomes virtually stagnant, caught in a marginal backwater.

Whatever else our reflections on worship might involve, they must involve how our life together, of which worship is the essential part, enables the nourishment and sustaining of our discipleship today – both as congregations and as individuals.

Gathering and dispersing. Is the life of your church in balance, or out of balance? How might it better become a disciple enabling community?

Matthew's Gospel gives two images of discipleship: a light on the hill, and salt which gives flavour. What difference does following Jesus make to how you live your life outside of meeting other Christian friends.

I offer one important example, important because so many faithful Methodists have mentioned it, and in so doing have signalled that at least as far as they are concerned, life in Methodism is out of balance and almost stagnant. It concerns the need of the life of the Christian community to enable contemporary people to be whole-life disciples. For many of us 'life together in church' does not scratch where 'life elsewhere' itches, whether it be life in the home, at work, at leisure, in the community or in the nation. There is a gulf between professed faith, and lived experience, and the result is that discipleship is incoherent. The gathering and dispersing are out of balance. Addressing this issue in a creative, sacrificial, resolute way is possibly the single most significant step towards becoming a Methodist discipleship/disciple-making movement for today.

Dispersed at work

As just one example, we might consider the workplace. This would be thoroughly Methodist. John Wesley, like the leaders of the Reformation urged Christians to see their working lives as at least as much a part of their discipleship offering to God as their church-based activities. In more recent generations, the Methodist Church made a disproportionate commitment, compared with other denominations

in Britain, to workplace chaplaincy. Today many Methodists spend more of their waking hours with their work colleagues than they do with anyone else, including their families.

Our workplace gives us a wonderful opportunity to sort out in practice how to rise to Jesus' challenge to be 'in the world but not of the world'. We want to be excellent employees and give a positive expression of the joyful life of a Christian. In often competitive and stressful situations, we may have a special role in offering a strong gentleness, an ability to listen and care about people, and a quiet witness to more secure fundamentals than status and salary. But sometimes our discipleship at work will bring us more stark challenges when we have to choose between going along with the norms around us, or those imposed on us, and standing up for what we believe as Christians.

Those who find being a Christian at work a demanding calling very definitely need the support of the wider Church. Part of the value of discipleship models like classes and bands is that in such small and confidential groups Christians who feel isolated at work can talk through the issues and be supported by the prayers and wisdom of others. And congregational life can also either ignore or integrate the workplace aspects of members' lives.

Do you know about the working lives of the members of your local church? What more could your church do to support Christians seeking to find appropriate ways of witnessing at work?

Spiritual disciplines are a bit like gardening. The less you plant the more weeds you get. The more you plant, the fewer weeds you get. Discuss.



Making Christian disciples...



The people called Methodists have not only sought to *be* better disciples of Christ but have from the beginning also been committed to *making* disciples of Christ. Being a disciple-making movement certainly involved their own spiritual growth but also an open invitation to others to become Christ's disciples too. That's why occasionally throughout this book the joint term discipleship/disciple-making movement has been used. John Wesley famously said to Methodist preachers "you have nothing to do but save souls". Early Methodism would never have grown as it did if everyone had kept the faith to themselves! We've already noted the openness of Methodist societies and the attractiveness of a community which takes being Christian seriously. We've also noted how the Methodist emphasis on Christ dying for all, and everyone being enabled to follow him leads naturally to an evangelistic spirit. The pursuit of holiness can be an isolated and withdrawn thing, but for Methodists it has always been a corporate, engaged, shared thing. For Methodists then, being a disciple-making movement inevitably involves 'offering Christ' to all.

Alongside our insistence that Christ is for all, Methodists seem to experience a particular call of God to offer Christ, in word and deed, to those people seemingly most disconnected from Christianity in any meaningful way. This is regarded by many as the key reason why God brought Methodism into being – 'raised it up' to use traditional language – at all. John Wesley told Methodists, "go not only to those who need you, but those who need you most". This manifests itself in a readiness to invest in pioneer ministries among under-thirty year olds, a continuing engagement with children and young adults and deep commitment to fresh expressions of church. It also manifests itself in prioritising the needs of poor and marginalised, fighting for those who are unjustly imprisoned, and standing with 'outcasts and sinners' – just as Jesus did. Methodists are not always good at it, but the instinct that we are called to it won't go away, reminding us of our roots as a disciple-making movement. It's yet another source of divine disquiet which God brings about and wants to help us resolve.

In what ways do you recognise these instincts in yourself and your church?
How do you respond?

Luke's Gospel puts particular emphasis on Jesus care for those on the fringes of society. Find some examples and reflect on them in relation to God's will for the witness and ministry of your local church.

There's a particular 'tone' to Methodist evangelism – inviting people consciously and willingly to become Christ's disciples. I recall a conversation with a Christian leader at a convention. He'd preached the evening before and I'd preached that evening and now we sat in a hotel bar chatting. "The thing I like about Methodists" he said, "is that they really want people to get to heaven." "Don't all Christians?" I asked. "Yeah, I guess" he replied, "it's just that some of us seem to speak more about what happens if you don't follow Jesus than what it's like when you do." He hit on something important. The most memorable sermon I have heard (to date!) was at *Easter People* – a convention attended by many Methodists – some years ago by a leading Methodist preacher. He'd been given the theme 'Obey God' by the organisers. He started somewhat apologetically saying that he wasn't going to tell us to obey God, then proceeded to talk, from his own experience of bereavement about God's goodness, graciousness, forgiveness and never-ending love for us all. He concluded, "So the question is not 'will you obey God?', but 'why wouldn't you want to obey such a wonderful God?'" It was a very Methodist sermon!

We're learning today that there's a crucial difference between a convert and a disciple. Making converts is important, and in a time when Christian belief was the accepted 'norm' and people could be assumed to know the basic Christian story and have attended Sunday School it was reasonable to invite people to follow Christ and when they agreed, to signal that with a prayer, a tract and an introduction to a local Christian group. But we're not in that time anymore and those assumptions can't be made any longer.

Today is not the day of the professional evangelist, though there's a continuing need for those who can invite us to follow Jesus with passion and conviction. Today is once again the day of the disciple-making movement. For most people today Jesus is represented through a person or a group of people. Communities of disciples are naturally evangelists. Today it remains absolutely crucial that disciple-making movements like Methodism continue to 'offer Christ' and in a whole host

of apt ways. But in our increasingly post-Christian context in Britain that will involve less a poor version of ‘conversion’ and more the challenge of life long, whole-life discipleship. Certainly for many younger people today only full-blooded Christian discipleship, life-transforming, world-transforming, radical and real will do. They’ve looked at nominal Christianity and decided it’s not worth living or dying for. One or two of us older ones have decided much the same too!

Encouragingly the kind of movement or congregation that enables *better* discipleship is usually also better at making *new* disciples. In this respect American Methodist Robert Schnase offers five challenging practices to congregations to make them fruitful in terms of being a discipleship movement *and* a movement that makes new disciples. They are *Radical Hospitality*, *Passionate Worship*, *Intentional Faith-Development*, *Risk-taking mission and service* and *Extravagant Generosity*. It’s interesting to note how these chime with the *Holiness & Risk* statements set out near the beginning of this book and articulate common tones of Methodist Christian discipleship.

Let me focus on one of Schnase’s practices. *Radical Hospitality* is a key mark of Christian discipleship and a quality of a Christian community today. Jesus acted hospitably, and to the most unusual of people. *Radical hospitality* exceeds ordinary expectations and wants the best for people. It results in divine disquiet, a restlessness arising among congregations and individuals if their lives are not committed to such hospitality. Such hospitality changes attitudes, values and practices – in both those receiving hospitality and those offering it. Schnase writes “Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are as quiet as adults, more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority in the congregation.” (*Five Practices of Faithful Congregations*, pages 27-8).

How committed are you to disciple-making, and radical hospitality?

Rule of life

Methodist Christian discipleship might be described as a rule of life. A ‘Rule’ points and directs people in the way of Christ. Though the structures and rules of Methodism are in some senses peculiar to it, they marry easily with other ‘Rules’ and patterns of Christian discipleship, in a common desire and striving

to be Christian disciples. Perhaps for this reason some regard being a Methodist Christian disciple as subtly different from belonging to a church in the more general sense and more akin to being a member of a religious order. The nature of Methodist *membership* – historically first of ‘class’ and much later ‘Church’ – is regarded by some Methodists as marking belonging in such an ‘Order’.

Methodist membership. Meaningless? An inappropriate way of marking belonging today? An important means of signalling belonging to a discipleship movement? A Rule of life or a piece of paper?

There is huge interest today in ‘rules of life’ partly because they’re recognised as enabling authentic Christian discipleship. Some speak of ‘second millennium denominationalism’ being replaced with ‘third millennium monasticism’. So the notion that belonging to a discipleship movement like Methodism is ripe with possibilities today.

The Methodist Diaconal Order of the British Methodist Church is an order of ministry (one of the classic threefold orders of ministry – deacons, presbyters/priests and bishops). It is also a Religious Order and has a Rule of life. This includes a commitment to the means of ‘staying in love with God’ outlined above, responsibilities that come from belonging to a specific group of disciples, and commitment to the ministry to which they are called. (See www.methodistdiaconalorder.org.uk page 11 for the full rules.) I know some Methodist presbyters are quite envious of this – in a spiritual sense of course! But then there’s no reason why they can’t formulate a rule of life for themselves. Or, indeed, why each and every Methodist person can’t resolve to inhabit afresh a pattern of discipleship for today. As we are beginning to see, there are fertile roots and resources available so that all Methodist people can enter into a deeper discipleship of Christ with its privileges and responsibilities.

A Methodist Rule of life for today... why not formulate one for yourself and resolve to live it out?



The challenge of Methodist Discipleship



A sketch of Methodist Christian discipleship has been drawn, no more than that. But the picture emerging has certain shapes, contours and tones. When it is most itself Methodist Christian discipleship is:

Focused on Jesus Christ. It is profoundly, thoroughly ‘Christian’. Jesus is the beginning and the end; the Way, the Truth and the Life; the model and example; the inspiration and means.

Whole life. Discipleship of Jesus Christ shapes the whole of life, not just the ‘religious bits’. It’s about us as individuals and human beings, and involves us totally, body, mind and spirit. It’s also, equally, about our interconnectedness with others, in groups, congregations, families, through our work and leisure, in communities local and global. Piety and mercy are intrinsically connected. It is no small or peripheral thing.

Life-long. It takes a lifetime to learn to be a follower of Christ. There are no shortcuts to maturity, to holiness. There is always something new to encounter, to learn, to give. It involves initial and recurrent points of renewal, a repeated covenant to be God’s, in times of joy and sadness, sickness and health. Christianity is a life-long discipleship that begins new every day.

Belonging to a community of faith. Living out shared discipleship which is open, accountable, inviting, challenging, demanding, nourishing and life-giving. To belong to it is transformative – of self, of community, and ultimately of the world, because it is led and resourced by the Holy Spirit.

In his sermon ‘On Zeal’ John Wesley wrote that Christian zeal is “no other than the flame of love.” He continued:

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely love of God and others, which fills the whole heart.... In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: – long suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance... In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of others. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace.... Next... *works of piety*: reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer,

receiving the Lord's supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the church, dispersed all over the earth – a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.

... Here... is the great object of Christian zeal. Let every true believer in Christ apply, with all fervency of spirit, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that hearts may be more and more enlarged in love to God and all people.

A deep challenge is before us. We must decide, individually and together, whether our assertion that we are a discipleship/disciple-making movement is historic or contemporary, whether it is merely 'then' or if it is also 'now'? We must decide whether the presence of divine disquiet among us is a thing of desperation or a sign of God's readiness to renew us. To decide and discern these things, and once discerned to pursue them through continual change and sacrifice, seeking the guidance of the Spirit, is a *kairos* opportunity for the people called Methodists today.

As John Wesley said:

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 first set out.

My own conviction is that the kind of Christian disciples who would enrich our world, and help meet its needs today is closely akin to what I have outlined here as discipleship in the Methodist tradition. Methodist Christian disciples – loving Jesus, connected to each other, living on a big map, naturally bringing together deep commitment to both personal and social piety, holding to hugely healthy doctrines, sensitively inviting others to become Christians – have in their tradition at its best those rich and balanced ingredients which when offered afresh to the

Holy Spirit will enable the world to be transformed into a greater likeness of what God desires for it.

Methodist Christian discipleship. Exciting and scary. Rooted in Jesus and his community of discipleship. Wholelife. Life-long. Accompanying the Holy Spirit to transform the world to the likeness of God's kingdom. Yes or no?

Useful literature referred to in the text

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- Called to Love and Praise (report of the Methodist Conference 1999)
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- The *Alpha* Course
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