

METHODISM

(Talk given to SACRE meeting, Wednesday 23rd June 2010)

The first part of my talk this afternoon will be about the origins and history of the Methodist movement and what makes it distinctive as a Protestant Church.

Then I would like to say a bit about the important Anniversary we are celebrating this year: **250 years of Methodism in Barnet**

History and Origins of the Methodist Church

Methodism was founded in the 18th century by the brothers, John and Charles Wesley and it has grown through many changes and revisions into a Movement that now forms a community of over 70 million worldwide.

Childhood

John and Charles were born into the family of Samuel and Susanna Wesley in Epworth, Lincolnshire where their father was rector of the local Anglican Church. There were 3 surviving sons and 7 daughters and Susanna placed great value on educating her large family and saw to it that they all had 6 hours of home schooling a day.

In 1709 when John was 6, a fire broke out in the Rectory and John who became trapped in an upstairs room was rescued from a window. His narrow escape led the family to feel that he had been spared for some special purpose and John would later describe himself as “***a brand plucked from the burning***”. This incident and the devotion and discipline of his mother were later to have a particular influence on John.

The Holy Club

Charles and John went as students to Christ Church College, Oxford where both were ordained as Anglican priests. While they were there, they started a small group called “The Holy Club” for prayer and bible study. They also visited the sick and those in workhouses and prisons and their conscientiousness was

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mocked by the other students who nicknamed them “Methodists”.

A Storm at Sea

In 1735, John and Charles set sail for America to preach the gospel to Native Americans. During the voyage a terrible storm arose and John was caught up in the general panic of the English passengers and found himself unable to calm them. He became aware of a group of Germans from Moravia nearby who continued to sing and praise the Lord even when huge waves were crashing about them. Later John asked them how they had been able to subdue their fear and they replied “ ***We put our absolute trust in God, even though we lose our lives, He will never let us go.***”

Conversion

On returning from America, John felt dissatisfied with his lack of faith and he and Charles joined a “Religious Society”. On 24th May 1738 John attended a meeting in Aldersgate St, during which he underwent a profound spiritual experience which he later described as, “***I felt my heart strangely warmed and suddenly felt a sure trust in Christ for my salvation and the assurance of his love and forgiveness of my sins***”. Charles also received the gift of the Holy Spirit at this time and went on to demonstrate his faith in the composition of over 6000 hymns that continue provide a rich source of spiritual renewal and constant inspiration in our Worship and Services.

Preaching

After his conversion, John Wesley started to organise large open-air meetings, beginning in Bristol in 1739 and “field-preaching” and travelling became an essential part of his life. His sermons with their emphasis on God’s love and forgiveness appealed especially to working class people, who felt alienated from the established Church and they flocked in their thousands to hear him. In his lifetime John Wesley travelled 250,000 miles and preached 40,000 times. Many people were trained to become preachers in their own towns and villages and we still have “Local Preachers” today.

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The Methodist “Society”

Converts were formed into local “Societies” and weekly “Class” meetings were held where members could support each other spiritually and nurture their faith by Bible study and prayer. Even today, “Pastoral Visitors” support members in what we still call “Classes”. Members of the Congregation also serve as Officers and “Stewards” and “Local Preachers” sharing with the Minister the roles and responsibilities of guiding the Church and ” are still trained to take services and their crucial role is still very much recognised.

Social Justice and Temperance

John Wesley particularly stressed that a deep inward faith should be combined with practical service to those in need. To this end he urged his followers to care for the poor and sick, widows and orphans and he took a firm stance on prison reform and the abolition of slavery.

The Methodist Church also came to be identified with the “Total Abstinence” of the Temperance movement as it was felt that this was the only way to rescue people from drunkenness and domestic violence. The Church’s view of strict avoidance of alcohol has changed over the years and is now regarded as a matter of personal choice, though it still campaigns against excessive drinking particularly among young women.

Separation from the Church of England

Although Wesley never wanted Methodists to “break away” from the Anglican Church, the strength and impact of the new Methodist movement meant that separation became inevitable. Arguments developed about issues such as ordaining priests, administration of the sacraments and travelling preachers and were finally resolved in 1795 by the “Plan of Pacification” which was a decisive break with the Church of England.

Over the years of the 20th century, the Church of England and Methodism have drawn closer together again through Ecumenical partnerships and now often share

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joint services and events together. Indeed our own church in East Barnet has a formal Partnership with St Mary's – the local Parish Church which is a joy and of mutual enrichment to both congregations

Primitive Methodism

In the early 19th century, some believers began to feel that the Church was not following the strict teaching of John Wesley and they broke away to form the "Primitive" Methodist Church". Among other issues, they particularly stressed the importance of simplicity in their chapels and in worship and concentrated on elevating the role of lay pastors. By the early 20th century however, the two branches of Methodism began to return to a common understanding of doctrine and practice and after some intervening years of discussion, came together in partnership in 1932 to form the present-day Methodist Church.

I would now like to say a bit about the beliefs which we hold in the Methodist Church has managed to keep faith with the traditions and beliefs of John Wesley and the early Methodists whilst interpreting them to fit the demands and needs of the modern world.

Methodist Theology and Doctrine

John Wesley's conversion at Aldersgate in May 1738 convinced him of the **Eternal and Complete Assurance** of God's love and forgiveness and, in his own words "*a trust in Christ alone for salvation*".

He felt it was his Mission to preach the true fundamental message of Christ's teaching that **All may be saved** – no-one is beyond the reach of God's love and salvation is there for all who turn to Him. John Wesley placed his "inclusive theology" within that part of the Christian tradition known as "**Arminianism**" which emphasises that although we have free will, if we embark on a journey of faith

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through worship and prayer and strive for a closer relationship with God try to live a we will be truly loved and in touch with Him. Wesley felt that this “**Holy Life**”, would so permeate our lives that the power of God’s love would be demonstrated clearly to all those around us including other Christians and those in our wider community.

Covenant Service

At the heart of the Methodist year and in the direct tradition of John Wesley’s time, Methodists hold an annual **Covenant Service** (usually at New Year) in which we celebrate all that God has done for us and renew ourselves in faith. . The **Covenant Prayer** that we repeat is a challenge to us that we will put ourselves, our lives and choices into God’s hands and an affirmation that we will surrender to His Will. This prayer is at the heart of our Methodist belief and has been seen by other Churches as so crucial to the leading of a Christian Life that they have adopted it too.

Organisation and Leadership

In 1784 John Wesley made provision for the leadership of the Church to be in the form of an annual “**Conference**” where the whole church is represented and each member can feel part of the decision-making process. Nowadays the Methodist Church still follows this tradition of “*one body connected in Christ*” and the “inclusive theology” as he laid it down. This is why we call the organisation of the Church’s structure, “**The Connexion**”. Churches are joined to the Connexion by **Districts** and local churches within those Districts are then formed into called “**Circuits**”.

. There is thus an emphasis on a truly democratic structure and individual churches can bring issues to the Conference where they will be discussed as openly as possible and everyone is given the opportunity to contribute.

In addition, the Methodist Church mindful of Wesley’s command that we should use our faith in practical ways to further the cause of good in the world continues to campaign against injustices both at home and across the world.

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To conclude, I would just like to spend a minute or two to tell you about the **250th Anniversary of Methodism in Barnet** which we are proud and delighted to be celebrating this year.

250 Years of Methodism in Barnet

1760 - 2010

The excerpts we have from John Wesley's diaries and Journals indicate that he travelled great distances preaching and visiting Methodist groups all over the country often stopping at Barnet on his way to and from the North. This continued throughout his life until he was 85!

1760 The Shewell family who had become Methodists, lived at Beacon House next to Monken Hadley Church and were great friends of John Wesley and offered him a meeting place for the small but growing Methodist congregation in Barnet.

1770 The Methodist "Society" in Barnet was continuing to flourish and the Shewell family donated a cottage to them for their meetings.

1783 An excerpt from John Wesley's diary relates that he stopped for lunch at the "Red Lion" at the top of Barnet Hill. This was a "Tory" establishment and the Wesleys were Tories !

1880 New Barnet Wesleyan Methodist Church built.

1890 The "cottage" sold to the newly-formed Baptist Church in Barnet.

1892 High Barnet Methodist Church built.

1915 Wesleyan Methodist Church built in East Barnet.

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- 1963** New Barnet Methodist Church demolished and funds from the sale of the land used to establish a new combined Church "Brookside" on the site of the East Barnet Chapel.
- 1987** Demolition of High Barnet Methodist Church and the creation of the "Spires" shopping centre.
- 1990** Wesley Hall" opened as a combined Worship and Community Centre.
- 2006** High Barnet and Brookside congregations combined to form "Barnet Brookside" Church.
- 2008** The East Barnet Methodist/Anglican Partnership formed between Barnet Brookside and St Mary the Virgin, East Barnet.
- 2010** Celebration of 250 years of Methodism in Barnet !!
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