

Presence Papers 6

PRESENCE WITH PURPOSE

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*In 2004 the publication 'Presence' described
a vision of the future of the rural church*

This is the sixth in a series of occasional papers reflecting
how the rural church is developing today

If you would like to know more about the material in this paper – or about other papers in
this series – please contact Revd Graham Jones at grahamj@rase.org.uk

The argument of this paper is that for the Methodist Church to claim a true presence in rural areas it must have a clear sense of its purpose and mission, which is more than just one of maintaining buildings and traditions and more than one of filling the pews on a Sunday. The understanding of rural that I am experiencing here along the Welsh borders is one of scattered small hill farms, villages and small towns which are not commuting satellites for nearby urban areas. Whilst we do have many retirees from the West Midlands, employment is generally local and low wage.

SOME HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PURPOSE:

I am not sure how much historically the existence of Methodist chapels in the countryside owed to the evangelical fervour of its preachers or the desire for Christian perfection on the part of their congregations. I suspect the big attraction was more to do with social aspirations, politics and the changing nature of the British society. In times past, congregations were mostly drawn from the families of farm labourers, tenant farmers, miners and quarrymen, along with some educated people who valued the freedom to organise their own affairs, use their own gifts and distance themselves from the main land-owning classes.

These indigenous social groupings which supported the chapel movement have been in decline now for over fifty years as employment patterns have changed. Many incomers to the countryside find that the Parish church with its larger congregation, its history, tradition and wide ranging social contacts better meets their needs and aspirations, than does the chapel which often has a very loyal but small and elderly congregation.

Similarly the availability of cars and transport has changed traditional community life as people can now travel for work and leisure. This has led to the decline of community life with schools, shops, pubs and post offices closing. The declining and aging indigenous rural community is therefore caught up in changing social patterns which, along with a slow but continuing national decline in organised religion, challenges the chapel's sense of identity.

WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE NOW?

I am coming to the belief that for Anglicans the building and its traditions are central to their appeal and mission and this I do not diminish nor belittle but simply note that Methodism can't so obviously claim this particular strength and our calling must lie elsewhere. For us it is the activity within the building that is important and this activity could be translated into different environments, such as village halls, or even people's homes.

In trying to discover Methodism's calling it might be useful to revisit the founding vision of John Wesley.

When John Wesley established the Methodist Society at the Foundry members were asked to give one penny a week for the general work of the society and one penny for the work of the stewards in helping the poor. Thus, from the early days, Methodism's purpose was both inward in terms of spiritual growth and fellowship, and outward in terms of good works and social concern. This has left Methodism with a dual heritage of worship and discipleship, alongside fellowship and social action.

If we are to be true to our calling and purpose I believe that we need to reinterpret and renew this emphasis for today and I also believe that Methodism is well placed to do this; we have a rich tradition and a structure to support and resource it.

What are the entry points and how might we engage with them?

If the Postmodern era has brought a decline in organised religion it has also fostered a generation that is open to spiritual questions. Current concerns with environmental issues and climate change can be entry points into a spirituality which is very close to being religious. The big questions of suffering and death have not gone away and the current economic recession may lead some to question the values of a consumer society. Methodists have always been able to talk about the real issues people face; the Class Meeting or the Women's Fellowship was more than Bible study, but a forum to relate experience and this tradition still has much to offer.

We live in an age with ever growing means of communication – the internet merely adding to radio, TV, telephone – but on another level, that of simply human interactions, we are perhaps poorer than ever. There is still a need for open, friendly, accepting fellowship. The newcomer to village life needs to join in somehow if they are to build their own networks. The simple coffee morning, plant sale, bring and buy etc., held either in the chapel or in someone's house, offers the opportunity for people to work together, to meet one another and is an easy entry point for strangers and visitors. This Methodist tradition of fellowship and friendship is something we can build upon.

Rural poverty and marginalisation do exist along with problems of housing, employment and transport for some people. Often the rural communities of this country have some of the lowest per capita incomes amongst working people. There are therefore social needs to be met. Methodism does have a long history of caring for people, befriending the needy and campaigning on behalf of those whose voices go unheard, as part of our witness to a Gospel which is social as well as personal.

Because of our modern means of communication we are all more aware of world needs than any previous generation. Whether it is the needs of Third World communities, fairtrade, peacemaking or the challenges of global warming, the rural population shares the concerns of the urban and suburban ones and many people do want appropriate channels to play their part in making the world a better place. Methodism has a tradition of campaigning for social justice and social responsibility. We raise money for the Methodist Relief and Development Fund, Christian Aid, Action For Children and many other good causes, and this allows people to play their part in shaping the world and responding to the issues of the day.

SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE MARCHES CIRCUIT ON THE WELSH BORDERS

In the experience of many churches in the Marches Circuit the first and most important factor in renewal lies in a re-engagement with prayer and worship. It may be a regular prayer group (Knighton, Builth, Leintwardine and Clun), a monthly prayer and praise meeting (Minsterley group) or informal mid-week worship and fellowship (Bishop's Castle).

From the praying group has come renewal of worship and the development of different kinds of worship, such as café church (Knighton and Leintwardine), Half-hour service and coffee (Wattlesborough and Snailbeach) and Wednesday morning worship (Bishop's Castle). Sunday worship in the circuit is as likely to be led by worship leaders, mission bands or church stewards as by local preachers or ministers and Local Arrangements are embraced by some congregations with enthusiasm (Minsterley does its own monthly family service).

A comment at a Circuit Meeting about taking out pulpits and pews and installing cookers and chairs has led to several imaginative rebuilding projects. The result is the transformation of drab buildings, which were only used on a Sunday, into modern attractive meeting places being used several times a week for worship, fellowship and community needs. Such refurbishments have now been achieved at Minsterley, Worthen, Leintwardine, Knighton and Builth Wells. They have been funded to a large extent from the sale of property and generous use of Circuit Advance Fund money.

A redundant Sunday School room has become the Community Room at Pontesbury, hosting gym equipment and church meals, and is available for community use. Slowly this venture is building new links with the village; a few new faces are appearing on a Sunday.

Other chapels are hosting such diverse things as a "leg clinic" (Knighton), run by the District Nurses, an Action For Children group and a pensioners lunch (Builth Wells), and a doctor/patient liaison group (Worthen). People are coming for Lent lunches, Traidcraft, Mothers and Toddlers, church teas (Bishop's Castle), as well as for worship.

One chapel in the Circuit (Snailbeach) with a small and elderly membership raises and gives away over a thousand pounds a year for charity. This is raised by a monthly Thursday morning Communion service, coffee mornings and an annual Memory tree/ Carol service, (£5 to write the name of a loved one on a tree decoration)..

A recent District appeal to raise money for two projects in Rwanda has reminded the Circuit of world needs. One chapel of seven members (Wattlesborough) took it on board and organised a sponsored walk, amazing themselves by raising £1000! Other churches have signed up as fairtrade churches and Eco-congregations.

A WAY FORWARD:

It is always easier to interpret the past than to predict the future but I am convinced that the Methodist Church in a rural context still has much to offer. Like many organisations we do need to change but that change is about remembering who we are and reinterpreting that identity to meet current needs.

As a final point I also want to say that this is a mission to be pursued ecumenically. Wesley established Methodism as societies and not churches. My final question is one of whether our work can be done in isolation from other Christian groups? If we try and do so does that lead to a tribal mentality, in which we only have links with a small part of the community and our buildings are seen as being private chapels for a group of well meaning people who don't live in the real world?

Whilst ecumenical approaches are not always easy and in some places it might be best to keep a distance from other people's internal difficulties, is there something about who we are which says that we need to have a relationship with others if we are to do our work effectively? Many organisations find themselves influenced by the supermarket and see success in terms of market share, getting bigger, having ever more customers. Churches are not immune from this and in the past chapel has rivalled church. I am beginning to believe that Methodism's mission, particularly in a rural context, can't be done this way because a concentration upon success, growth, and numbers detracts from the mission God has called us to do.