

THE ETHOS OF NEW ZEALAND METHODISM

A Personal View

Introduction

It might be wise to define what is meant by that commonly used word 'ethos.' The Shorter Oxford gives more than one lead. Firstly, it refers to 'the prevalent tone of sentiment of a people or community.' Not too precise, for 'tone of sentiment' has a distinctly personal, individual, even idiosyncratic, feel about it – where one opinion is as good as another. And that sounds like Methodism to me.

Secondly, the Dictionary defines ethos as 'the genius of an institution or system'. That seems even nearer the mark, in a way, because we are talking about an ecclesiastical institution. But that word 'genius', in this connection, has a slightly archaic flavour. It has nothing to do with academic excellence. It is, rather, a reference to a prevailing, natural character or spirit, to an inherent tendency, within that system or institution.

Whatever the case, 'ethos' has everything to do with what distinguishes a people, or community, or system, or institution from other people, or communities, or institutions, or systems. And, I believe, it contains within it, more than a hint that the distinguishing marks are, for those within such groupings, marks of positive satisfaction, even of excellence.

What follows is a quite personal view. There is no 'official' statement on Methodist ethos in Aotearoa/New Zealand, because none has been made so far as I am aware. When I was younger, and New Zealand Methodism had a more numerous membership, we were proud to talk about such things. But long years of decline, the effects of our Union Parish experience and the enormous influence of Pacific Islands Methodism, have made us, it seems, less willing to speak in such a way. Nevertheless, I trust that what I have to share with you will strike a chord here or there.

Church organisation

For a start I want to talk about some 'large' structural issues - Church, Connexion, and Conference. Each of them represents a defining element in the concept of Methodist ethos.

Firstly, we are quite clear we are a Church.. We have all the trappings that go with such a status - Sunday worship, sacraments and singing; buildings, bureaucracy and business dealings; stipended and employed staff; a sort of hierarchy; laws and regulations and a code of disciplinary procedures; institutions providing social services and education; and so on, and on. We are Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa, and proud of our place in the ecclesiastical sun, though, truth to tell, we don't take up too much of the beach. There is, however, a sort of folk memory, or conscience, that such is not our true vocation. Twenty-five years ago, at a Conference at Napier, I proposed, totally idealistically, that we should reclaim our place as a 'movement', within the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, rather than, simply, the Anglican Church, as was Wesley's dream. I was surprised at the positive reaction this notion received.

There is something about our persistent desire always to be changing things, in our organization, as in New Zealand society, that suggests that an essential part of the Methodist ethos is never to be satisfied with things as they are. 'Semper reformanda' is an old phrase in Catholic theology; always reforming, or being reformed, and I think it has a relevance for us today. Too often, of course, we have simply wanted to change what others, individuals or

governments, are doing when we don't like what they're doing. Methodism has been singularly moralistic, and issue-oriented. Think of temperance, for example.

This instinct is very well illustrated in our understanding of what it means to 'build to the glory of God.' We are, I think, increasingly uncomfortable with churches whose design and use, whose 'presence', speak of divine worship and little else. 'Church', for more and more, means facing, confronting, challenging, being challenged by, serving, rather than being served by, the community. A movement hardly needs cathedrals or even architect-designed worship-focused suburban church buildings. However difficult, I sense we are wrestling with major questions relating to the tension between 'Church' and 'movement.'

Secondly, we are a Connexion, and proud of the antique spelling of the word. The administrative heart of the denomination is called the Connexional Office. We remember, if we've read our history, that in its origins the Methodist movement was made up of people, both preachers and pew-sitters, who were in a close and personal relationship to an individual named John Wesley. While he sometimes appeared to claim that the members of the Societies and the travelling preachers almost belonged to him, (the latter were 'his sons in the Gospel'), there was the equally real sense that they belonged to each other.

We use the word when we talk about the relationship of the ordained minister to the Conference, but I suggest it has a wider currency. Using the words of an English Methodist historian, I suggest that Methodists are pledged to be linked with other Methodists in a 'common bond of doctrine and discipline, under a common code of regulations and usages, and under a common government.' Our Law Book speaks of 'responsible mutuality' in connection with ministry, and it is as good a phrase as I know to describe that sense of belonging to each other that lies at the heart of being Methodist. Negative definitions are less satisfactory, but being Connexional means, quite distinctly, that Methodism is not 'congregational'. In the final analysis, our primary focus must be on what we share, what we achieve together as a whole family under God, and not just as members of a particular local worshipping and serving community.

It is here that we must speak of the Church's bicultural and multi-cultural goals. These goals give expression to our mutuality. It might be said that we are bedevilled by our missionary history, and have only recently begun to escape from the colonial mentality that assumed that the relationship between the Maori and pakeha cultures should be expressed in terms of superiority and inferiority. It took 150 years for the Church to grant even limited autonomy to its Maori Division. That historic mind-set has not been fully displaced.

We recall that some of the early missionaries played a significant role in 'selling' the Treaty to the *iwi* within their sphere of operation. They also tried their best (but failed) to influence the government in both New Zealand and England to change their land policies. As a Church we are now committed to the principles which, we believe, underpin the Treaty of Waitangi, but we are aware of the gap between rhetoric and practice.

The history of Methodism in New Zealand is now the story of the encounter of many cultures, and the interpretation of the Gospel belongs to them all. True connexionalism provides the basis for what the Mission Statement says about the Church's commitment to the Treaty as a covenantal relationship between two peoples. That relationship is not now limited to the two parties to the original Treaty, but embraces a growing number of other peoples and cultures. Our commitment as a Connexion to it is a sign of hope for the future.

Thirdly, our whole life finds expression in the Annual Conference. There have been Conferences for over 250 years, and over that time, in accordance with a well-known principle, they have become more complex, more business-oriented, more ordered; less inspirational,

less 'theological', less positive. So long as Methodism was growing it was good to have reports surveying the previous year, reassuring the faithful that all was well. Such optimism isn't much in evidence now, yet, by and large, do we still engage in the retrospective review, rather than in forward-looking planning?

Why do those who attend Conference put up with it? Some have voted with their feet, and attendance is dropping. But there are still three hundred or so who go to no end of expense and trouble just to share each other's company. Is it the fellowship that counts most? Conference is where you can see more Methodists at one time than anywhere else, and that makes for a good feeling. Maybe it is just expecting too much of an assembly of 300 people, where every individual has the right to be heard, for it to run with business-like efficiency. Conference is as much a part of the mythology of Methodism as of its ethos.

I believe we instinctively know that Conference is the place where the authority of the Church finds its truest expression – though it is a legal fact, as well. We want Conference to address our concerns. When we are not sure of the answers to the problems facing the Church as a whole, or our little part of it, we trust there will be wisdom enough among those 300 people. What we don't so willingly recognise is that Conference should be, a microcosm of the whole of our society. The difficult issues that disturb New Zealand society also disturb our Church - even if we hope our answers will be of a different quality. If it were a fact that Conference reflected the concerns of New Zealanders generally, we would find it a more exciting place - we might be tempted to participate more than we do.

Leadership

The Church is not a democracy. I earlier made mention of two factors that influence our self-understanding as a Church - the experience of the Cooperative Ventures, and the growing significance of Pacific Islands Methodism. Since our predominant partner in Cooperative Ventures is the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand it is inevitable that the presbyterian form of church government is often enough held up as an example to be followed. It has to be said, however, that the degree of local autonomy that a Presbyterian Parish enjoys is quite clearly at odds with the principles of Methodist stationing and with the authority of Conference in deploying its ministry. The use of personal and parish profiles and of face-to-face interviews has helped to make the process a more humane one, but in the end it is an essential part of the ethos of Methodism that the needs of the whole Church should take precedence over the needs of a local parish. I do not think that principle is negotiable.

The fact that Conference often appears to be dominated by a few articulate leaders probably says as much about the unwillingness of the majority to get involved as about traditional 'respect' for ministers as leaders. We want the Conference to be a democratic forum, the place where connexionalism really does find expression. Whether we like it or not all those who attend Conference are, for the moment, the Church's leaders. There are doubtless many ways Conference might be greatly improved, but I do not for a moment think it can be replaced. What the Church needs, in common with society as a whole, is not less leadership but, rather, better leadership.

Ministry

Now to ministry, which we could not discuss, in terms of Methodist ethos, until we had understood the centrality of Conference. But I have also introduced the notion of leadership, and starting with 'Daddy Wesley' as Francis Asbury called him, the leaders among Methodists have rarely had a comfortable ride.

Methodists from the Pacific Islands have brought with them an understanding of the Church and of leadership that remains closer, in style and assumptions, to the Methodism of the mid-19th century missionary period. To their ministers and to their ministry, in particular, is attached much greater prestige, or respect, or *mana* than is the case in *pakeha/palangi* Methodism. The structures for ministerial formation in New Zealand are caught in this dilemma, and it would, in my judgement, be unwise to move too quickly to eliminate this ambiguity.

We might talk here about another myth - that phenomenon called itinerancy. Wesley believed, quite simply, that if a preacher spent more than a year in one place he would preach the chapel empty. Moving them around was, too, his way of supervising his 'sons in the Gospel,' though, even in his own time there were exceptions. Recent research has made it clear that until about 1770 the average length of appointment of one of Wesley's 'helpers', his travelling preachers, was less than a year. It then became the practice for a preacher to be stationed for one year, and sometimes more.

By the time settler Methodism had become established in New Zealand in the 1850's the pattern of three year ministries had become the norm. If Conference still made the appointments, the local church had an increasing say, even to the point of 'inviting' a minister if they were an 'influential' (i.e. financially secure) Society. If a less financially secure Society wasn't treated well by the Stationing Committee they could be thankful that the unwanted preacher wasn't going to stay too long.

When, in the 1880's the length of a ministry was raised to a maximum of five years, an Act of Parliament had to be passed to allow it, because it went against the words of the Model Deed! Now the Church sets a minimum, not a maximum term, and itinerancy is defined by the Law Book as every minister being appointed by Conference for a year at a time. That is the essence - ministers are under the authority of Conference, not their local church or Parish Meeting or congregation.

Not everything is said about ministry just by describing how ministers are appointed. What does ministry 'mean'? So complex structure as a church requires ministers who have planning and administrative skills, who are theologically articulate, and whose spirituality enables them to create and lead effective worship. Equally they need pastoral sensitivity to 'grass-roots' aspirations and fears, and to the predicament of the individual. To have these qualities is, surely, not asking too much of those who are appointed to be leaders at the parish or district or national level. We expect no less of those in leadership roles in society as a whole.

This question has come into focus over the past twenty years or so as a result of the Church's bicultural experience. There is now a changed understanding of ministry, as something which is shared by every member of the Church. 'Every member a minister' is a guideline which reflects, I believe, a more realistic and even a deeper understanding of the very nature of Christian ministry. Ministry is not something to be left to others - each individual has something to offer.

The College-trained presbyter is no longer the norm, though the need for such trained leadership remains. There are 'specialist ministries' for which something other than the traditional theological college training is necessary. I have a sense that our Church is one of the few such bodies attempting a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between lay and ordained ministry. Even to maintain both in some sort of creative tension is a real achievement. We might not do worse than recall our origins, when there were relatively few 'travelling preachers' and a host of local preachers.

The changing face of ministry is such that full-time stipended ministers now take their place within a variety of ministries, each responding to a particular community need. Yet all of them

may share in that responsible mutuality which goes with being in Connexion. It is neither a matter of status nor whether our 'orders' are acknowledged by sister Churches as authentic. If we are a movement, at heart, then we have to be finding new ways of being 'ministers of the Gospel.'

The means of grace

Let me go on to what are called the 'means of grace', which are the everyday expressions of the ethos of any religious group. Methodism's instinctive attitude to the means of grace is that they have an evangelical purpose. Every part of worship provided an opportunity to present Christ as the object of faith, and as the way to the realisation of one's potential. But the call to discipleship is no longer an explicit part of worship - the 'altar call', as it was once termed, and the public declaration of commitment are rarely heard. Attitudes to worship have changed markedly over recent years. In the 1930's Everill Orr, the Auckland Central Mission Superintendent claimed to offer 'cultured evangelism' Sunday by Sunday. Like many of his contemporaries he saw himself as an evangelical, in line with Methodist tradition, but he wanted to avoid its imagined extremes.

Nevertheless, some present-day Methodist worship is an exercise in nostalgia, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as Wordsworth said of poetry. The nostalgia for Charles Wesley's hymns overlooks the fact they were once as 'modern' as those of Colin Gibson and Shirley Murray in our time, though age does not guarantee quality. I sense we are increasingly ambivalent about liturgical material carefully prepared, say, by the Faith and Order Committee. Printed orders of service are relatively new in New Zealand Methodism - think of the trouble some still have in using them. Maybe we still hanker after spontaneity, though inspiration doesn't always come that way.

Worship is more than its liturgical form. Four hymns, three prayers, two readings and one sermon is surely not the only pattern - yet for many it still is. On the other hand, local liturgies may have so little in common with those of other places, that they lack the sense of 'family' which is at the heart of all things Methodist. There is much more to Methodist worship than music, though we are still, I think, inclined to fall back on the hardy annual that it 'was born in song'. If that is the only thing for which our worship is memorable, it may not be enough to ensure the survival of Methodism.

The reformation John Wesley inaugurated did turn its back on a great deal of tradition, with the essential exception of Holy Communion. More needs to be said about that sacrament. In our origins it was a problem, and even after Wesley's death there were still an ambivalence about whether a Methodist chapels should celebrate the sacrament - should unordained Methodist preachers be so authorized? It's not much more than 50 years ago that the observance of this sacrament was as a supplement to, rather than an integral part of morning worship, and for time out of mind it has been celebrated monthly, rather than weekly. And again, while there have always been authorised liturgies, many ministers and congregations prefer their own.

There are no such doubts about preaching. We stand firmly in the Reformed and the Evangelical tradition, and the exposition of the Bible is at the heart of worship. Even in plain and unadorned Methodist churches, in terms of both exterior and interior design, one symbol commonly found in the so-called sanctuary is the open bible. It is hard to imagine a Methodist congregation that would forgo its sermon, even though the preaching may as often be based on the daily newspaper as on the weekly lectionary.

Order and discipline

There has always been a law book - at least, there has been since 1797. In the 100 years since

New Zealand Methodism became fully united and fully independent there have been six major revisions. There will, of course, never be a final version. Methodism is an ordered entity, and there is a real sense that in being so it is being true to its very name. And yet its laws are not like those of the Medes and the Persians 'which altereth not' as the Authorised Version says. Nor are Methodist processes to be compared with, say, Anglican canon law which must go through an infinitely more laborious process of amendment.

The fact that any clause in the Laws and Regulations can be changed by Conference within a minimum two year period says something important about the Methodist ethos. Conference tends, as a consequence, to legislate on small, as well as large issues. It seems to enjoy debating the design and management of its structures, and goes into quite unnecessary detail in prescribing how they will function. It is inevitable, therefore, that we should regard the Laws and Regulations as guidelines, to be set aside if they don't seem to work, rather than laws and regulations intended to stand the test of time. Using organisational vocabulary, our law book is more about management than governance.

It is interesting to see how smoothly the new Code of Disciplinary Regulations is taking its place in the Methodist scheme of things. The Church moved in this direction because it was forced to - we live in an increasingly litigious society. But there is often a typical Methodist reaction to legal prescription and the Code still has a place for a low-key pastoral approach to the resolution of some levels of inter-personal dispute. It is very much a part of the Methodist ethos at least to appear to let the heart rule the head.

Doctrine and theology

What has just been said is of a piece with our attitude to doctrine. Our Doctrinal Standards have a long history, and are best understood in the words of the 1932 British Conference statement, as 'standards for preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.'

In 1894 a nation-wide mission was led by the English Methodist evangelical leader, Thomas Cook. In his book on his world tour he described New Zealand Methodism as being of an 'advanced type.' From the context of his remark I believe he was referring to the fact that its leadership had moved into the hands of a younger generation of ministers not so tied to the traditions of English Methodism. If the age of the Presidents at the time of their appointment is anything to go by, the then leaders of the Church were in their early forties with not much more than twenty years experience of ministry behind them.

By 'advanced' I also believe Cook was probably saying something about their 'liberal' cast of mind, rather than about liberals as contrasted with conservatives. Just as New Zealand as a whole was beginning to look for, a separate identity, so, too, was the Church. C.H.Garland's 1893 Conference lecture on changing approaches to biblical scholarship and evangelical doctrine was an early example of this search for identity. The lecture created controversy within the Church and on the public platform. Despite this, it is probably fair to say that from that time those appointed to positions of leadership increasingly were of Garland's mind.

For well over than century this preference has largely been maintained. Few (if any) appointments to the Presidency or to significant Connexional positions have been made from the 'conservative' side of the Church, though they may have always been in a majority in the pews. A feature of the last twenty years has been the emergence of an articulate and recognised focus for evangelical Methodism. Its biblical stance may differ from the so-called 'mainstream', but the Church has at last, it seems, admitted a greater theological breadth of

view. The Aldersgate Fellowship was, in fact, established in 1985 partly as a response to a move within the whole Church to explore the meaning of catholicity, especially as a fundamental part of the Wesleyan tradition.

Church and Society

Methodism, as has been said, grew out of the Church of England, and in the first half of the 19th century, discovered that there was no way back into that fold without the sacrifice of its hard-won identity and integrity. Yet its church government is more akin to that of its episcopal parent than to that of the Reformed sisters and brothers, with their congregational emphasis.

Methodism won for itself, in this country, a reputation for its strong social conscience, and its equally strong moral stance on many public issues. In fact, this is what Methodism is still commonly remembered for - not its worship nor its theology but its social concern. We cannot, of course, claim too much in this respect - we do no more in this field than any other Christian grouping. We may have once been a strong voice in what was once called the 'non-conformist conscience' – in today's divided world we should not be afraid to take the unpopular stand for compassion and justice.

Our Church was never a popular alternative, nor has it, I think, ever been very comfortable in the lime-light. Two reasons for this stand out. Methodism has always made demands on its membership. In its earlier years, for example, it generally had the highest proportion of its membership, of any major denomination, attending worship on a Sunday. It gave opportunities for leadership, and expected a great deal in return. The second reason is a negative one, and particularly in evidence over more recent years. To be in the lime-light requires a degree of public 'presence', and we have been afflicted by the 'tall poppy' syndrome. Methodism is unwilling to stand out from the pack, and seems uncomfortable when an individual leader does so.

New Zealand Methodism is an amalgam of four separate traditions, whose differences, though important at the time, could never keep them apart indefinitely. I believe there has always been a sense of self-sufficiency, arising from this shared history, which has made Methodism uneasy with its ecumenical colleagues. We remember the social clay out of which we were formed.

Our venture into organic union with the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches and the Associated Churches of Christ now seems to have run its course. As has been noted Connexionalism and congregationalism do not mix easily. But such organic union is not to be identified with ecumenism, and here New Zealand Methodism has played an unusually significant role. At both local level (chaplains for example) and at national level (CCANZ and other joint activities) the Church has participated and given leadership.

Because we are a small denomination we have felt more acutely the 'loss' of membership over recent years. Some might say that we have become introspective as a result. Others, more positively, will point to the enormous influence that has entered the Church with the influx of Pasifika Methodism over the past thirty to forty years. Their pride in being Methodist has rubbed off on to the Connexion as a whole. That we can now even contemplate a separate future, while still maintaining our ecumenical responsibilities, is a significant example of the resilience of our Methodist ethos.

Conclusion

Methodism is, to use the title of a book written a few decades ago, a 'Questioning Church..' Conference does it business by asking questions. It has always done so. The recent revision of

the Laws and Regulations reduced the number of questions from 69 to 43 without taking away any important issue. One most significant change is to place the two questions, usually left unanswered, at the very beginning of the Conference's business sessions, where it is expected the Council of Conference will give a lead.

These are the questions 'What is God saying to us now?' and 'What more can be done to promote the work of God?' They are questions that have been asked for a relatively short time in the history of the Church, and it may seem surprising that it took so short a time to let them fall into total disuse. By their very nature and wording these are questions that can carry no expectation of a final answer.

I would dare to say that at the very heart of the Methodist ethos lies a question, not an answer. A movement doesn't really have answers, because it hasn't yet arrived. Answers, it might be said, are by their very nature an end rather than a beginning. The Holy Spirit, as wind or breath cannot be captured. The object of our faith 'makes all things new.' Without being idealistic, or irrelevant to where present-day Methodism stands, I suggest we take to heart our beginnings as a movement.

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