



A FIVE POINT PLAN

David Hull

DAVID HULL, CHAIR OF METHODIST EVANGELICALS TOGETHER, REFLECTS ON THE PRESENT MOMENT WITHIN THE METHODIST CHURCH.

Not unexpectedly, these are days of significant difficulty within the British Methodist Church. Over the summer, the Methodist Conference, our highest ruling body, voted for the first time, many of us feel, to move away from the teaching of the Bible and to enshrine non-biblical practices within its constitution, practice and discipline, affirming cohabitation and therefore sexual intimacy outside of marriage, and changing our definition of marriage to include same-sex marriages and to open Methodist premises to hold such marriage services. Tens of thousands of Methodists, it would seem, disagree strongly with the decision. In the wake of the Conference decision, I wrote of the way in which many of us have identified with the words of Psalm 130. *'Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord'*. Since the vote, a number of national Conferences of Methodist Churches overseas have strongly disassociated themselves from the decisions.

Where do we go from here? Throughout the marriage and relationships debates, we have adopted a three-fold strategy. Firstly, we have been committed to

calling the Church to remain faithful to what was its existing understanding of marriage. Secondly, we have sought to build relationships with other Wesleyan evangelical denominations in Britain, not least so that, if and when evangelicals within the British Methodist Church feel conscience bound to leave, we could help to open doors into a new home. Thirdly, we had said that, if the Methodist Church were to change its understanding of marriage, we would enter into negotiations, as much as possible, on behalf of those who would feel they must leave.

The Conference has now reached its decisions. We have continually said that the most important thing is that we all follow the advice of Mary, the mother of Jesus: *'Do whatever he tells you'*. This is certainly not the time for knee jerk reactions, but for counting the cost and seeking the Lord. We are committed to supporting all evangelicals within the Methodist Church, however they ultimately respond to the decisions of the Conference.

Some have left already. Derek Balsdon, our Development Worker, records the numbers at the time of writing in his update on p. 3. We have sought to connect such people and congregations with those who can help them to find a new spiritual home and assist with practical arrangements.

For those who are committed to staying within the Methodist Church, either through conviction or through practical necessity, and for those for whom the decision is not as yet clear, we have developed a Five Point Plan to guide us through our work on these matters in the months ahead.

POINT ONE: HOLDING THE CHURCH TO ACCOUNT

We are committed to supporting all those who choose to remain within the Methodist Church. Some of our members are content with the new arrangements. Some, though they disagree with the decisions, remain through conviction - this is where the Lord has called them to be and this is where the Lord is calling them to remain. Some have chosen to remain to give the conscience clauses of the mixed economy a chance - to give the Methodist Church the opportunity to be true to the commitments it has made to those who continue to believe that marriage is - and can only ever be - between one man and one woman for life, to the exclusion of all others, and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy. Others remain because they feel trapped, bound by what are sometimes described as the 'golden handcuffs' of property and finance and livelihood.

I have been greatly encouraged by those who have said that, though they supported the *God in Love Unites Us*



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resolutions, they could only do so because the conscience clause was in place to protect evangelicals who are committed to traditional Christian teaching, and now they are committed to ensuring the conscience clause is honoured. We will work together in doing everything we can to hold the Church to account on the promises it has made. It is vital that, for those who remain, their energy is channelled in the right direction - towards making the good news of Jesus known to a world in need - and that everything possible is done to create an environment in which their ministry can flourish.

POINT TWO: STRENGTHENING EXISTING WORK

We will encourage and seek to enable those who leave the Methodist Church to strengthen existing work in this country. From the beginning of the recent debates, when the prospect of a change to the Methodist Church's position on marriage first appeared on the horizon, I have said that I do not believe this country needs another denomination. Pragmatically, it seems to me that we would not have the necessary resources, but more importantly, out of conviction, it seems to me that it would be far better to strengthen existing denominations, organisations and networks which stand where we stand, rather than to divide resources further and allow our attention to be directed towards bureaucratic matters that would inevitably consume much energy.

I was delighted that, at a recent conference, we were joined by the national leaders of other Wesleyan evangelical denominations. I know they would welcome conversations with groups of people or ministers who are looking for a new spiritual home. No one is seeking to 'poach' people from one denomination to another; no one is encouraging anyone to 'jump ship'. We all stand together for the Lord and his kingdom within the common heritage that we share, seeking to encourage one another in the work of the gospel.

POINT THREE: CONTINUING NEGOTIATIONS

Many of those who are in such a position have been very disappointed by the Conference's decision not to release the buildings and finances of congregations who cannot in good conscience remain.

There are many across the Connexion who have a strong sense that faithful people of previous generations have given sacrificially to enable Christian ministry in their locality. They feel they are stewards of what has been entrusted to them and cannot just walk away from it all and jeopardise the faithful ministry that is undertaken in those places without at least doing all they can to secure it for the future. They recognise that the local circuits will not be able to sustain ministry in those areas if they leave; they feel they cannot in good

conscience stay. Neither can they afford to buy the buildings they have given so much to maintain when they are sold on the open market for purposes other than gospel work, least of all when prices are inflated by gaining planning permission for conversion to housing before they are sold. They cannot understand how such an approach can align with the first charitable purpose of the Methodist Church, namely to advance the Christian faith. Why not release the resources, graciously and generously, honouring the consciences of all and enabling the work of the gospel to continue? We will continue to do all we can to negotiate for such grace and generosity.

POINT FOUR: CONTRIBUTING TO LOCAL DECISIONS

If you are staying within the Methodist Church, at least for the time being, the focus of the debates now moves to the local church. Do everything you can to contribute to these debates. Now that the Conference has reached its final decisions on the *God In Love Unites Us* proposals, local church councils will be voting. Their vote will be limited only to whether they wish to host same-sex marriages on their premises. We hope that The Runaway Train and our other Remaining Faithful resources will be useful in helping churches to gain an understanding of the issues and the processes that have brought us to this point. Do download the publication



The most important thing is that we all follow the advice of Mary, the mother of Jesus: 'Do whatever he tells you'



from our website and circulate it electronically, or request printed copies free of charge from our Development Worker (details below).

POINT FIVE: EXPLORING NEW POSSIBILITIES

For some time, we have been exploring the possibility of something positive coming out of this turmoil within the Methodist Church: a closer working together of fellow Wesleyan evangelicals in this, the motherland of Methodism, to see the Wesleyan flame rekindled. We have been so grateful to all those of such other groups who have encouraged us and stood with us in remaining committed to the traditional Christian understanding of marriage and relationships. Our working name for the group (though who knows how it will develop?) is the Association of Wesleyan Evangelicals (AWE). We long to see Britain - and indeed the whole

world - filled with the awe of the Lord. We hope that there might be a way of individuals, local churches and national groups to come together to share vision and support one another in our mission across the land.

THE FUTURE

These five points represent our priorities in seeking to move forward following the decisions of the Conference relating to *God In Love Unites Us*. It is important to remember that our work relating to these debates is only one part of our activity. Every other aspect of our work - of standing for the authority of the Bible, the centrality of the cross, the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, prayer for revival and spreading Scriptural holiness - has continued throughout these past years, even in the midst of a global pandemic, and will continue into the future.

Two things seem to be of the utmost importance as we move forward from this present moment: firstly, that those who feel conscience bound to leave the Methodist Church are enabled to do so in a way that is as supported, gracious and generous as possible, offering a powerful witness to the world of Christian unity that extends far beyond the bounds of denominationalism; secondly, that those who remain, whether through conviction, calling, or necessity, work together to enable all to flourish in ministry in ways which generate more light than heat, holding the Church to the promises it has made, offering an evangelical voice within the Church and holding out the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to a world in need.

In opening, I referred to the many evangelical Methodists who have spoken, in recent months, of identifying with Psalm 130. That was, of course, the psalm John Wesley heard sung in St Paul's Cathedral on the morning of 24 May 1738. It seems to have expressed his own sense of desperation at the time. Later that day, of course, he went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where, he would write in his journal, 'my heart was strangely warmed'. Thus was catalysed the greatest revival these isles have ever known. It is my prayer that, however he directs us in moving forward from this present moment, the Lord will lead us from our experiences of the depths to the great heights of renewal and revival through his glorious grace.

The Revd Dr David A. Hull, Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together, is a minister in full connexion with the Methodist Church, serving with the Free Methodist Church as Lead Pastor of Freedom Church Bristol. He has examined the developments within the Methodist Church which have brought us to this moment in 'The Runaway Train', freely available to download from methodistevangelicals.org.uk/runaway-train or by post from MET's Development Worker, the Revd Derek Balsdon: development@methodistevangelicals.org.uk.

