



THE WAY FORWARD – A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Ashley Cooper

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CLIFF COLLEGE PRINCIPAL ASHLEY COOPER SHARES A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE DECISIONS MADE AT THE 2021 METHODIST CONFERENCE.

I have been invited to write a personal reflection on the decisions made at the last Methodist Conference. That is not easy to do in isolation and as someone who has been part of the reporting group on *God In Love Unites Us (GILUU)*. In order to be able to express the way forward, I need initially to journey backwards.

No one said it was going to be easy! I am not just talking about working with the GILUU report group. Jesus made it abundantly clear that following him would be costly and hard; he warned people to take note before they set off. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus talks of the cost of being a disciple: 'Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'" (Luke 14: 28-30, NIV).

My own testimony is one of amazing transformation and an incredible, exciting journey of faith, yet it has not been a journey without cost and pain. Over the last four years, navigating the GILUU work has been the most costly and painful period of time I have ever known and the scars run deep.

My journey with the Methodist Church began in a lively, fun, vibrant community of faith, and in a family where following Jesus was always a high priority. I came to faith through an evangelical youth group that shaped and moulded me and offered me opportunities to begin to follow a call to leadership and mission. That Methodist youth group and local church invested in me and nurtured me, alongside many others who find themselves in ministry around the world in a variety of

denominations and contexts. They offered me a Note to Preach at the young age of 16, when I began to preach Christ crucified and my evangelistic ministry began.

From these beginnings, I remain a committed evangelist and long to see others begin this life changing, transformational adventure with Jesus Christ that I have known for over 35 years. I am profoundly grateful to Wolstanton Methodist Church and its youth leaders and want to honour them as I write.

Moving quickly forwards, I was ordained at the Ipswich Conference in 2002, and now find myself in my 22nd year of ministry, the 20th since my ordination. Being a Presbyterian within the life of the Methodist Church over the last 20 years has been a cause for amazing joy and also at times frustration. I have journeyed with a Church and colleagues with a wide variety of views and perspectives. In finding my place within this patchwork community, I found a home within the MET family (it was Headway then, but I am getting old). MET was needed because the Church was diverse. Because of the work of MET and its leadership, I was rooted and held. MET expressed my vision and values for the Church and the kingdom:

- a deep desire to uphold the authority of scripture
- longing for revival and renewal
- the uniqueness of Christ and the centrality of the Cross
- a desire to see scriptural holiness spread across the land and around the world
- and a passion for evangelism that I did not see in other places and networks.

These remain my views and continue to be deep charisms of mine as I seek to live out my faith and ministry in the role as Principal of Cliff College. These values chime with me and the college which I serve and seek to lead into the future.

I remember the moment I said 'yes' to the then Secretary of Conference to be part of the working party for what then became GILUU. Everything in me wanted to shout 'no' and to leave this task to someone else. It seemed like a poisoned chalice, but as I opened my mouth, I found myself agreeing to serve the church around that table. It became important to me to make sure that the values I held were clearly heard and represented in the small group that began working together. I believe I held that position throughout the course of our conversations together, and I hope that those with whom I sat around that table - and who have become friends - would see that as well.

I remain committed to a traditional perspective on marriage and hold that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman. I also remain, and intend to remain, a member of the Methodist Church in Britain and remain committed to its journey over these next months and years. The requests for discussions and articles such as this rightly suggest that the Methodist Church, its ministers and lay people, and those who would want to claim an evangelical label are not agreed on issues of marriage and relationships. This has been the case for more than 30 years and will remain so.

These last few years have shown us clearly that the MET family are not all agreed and have a variety of different opinions - and we have a variety of perspectives on how we now move forward. Some have decided that this is no longer a home they can inhabit and have looked to move; others are questioning whether they can stay and seeking to discern what God is saying to them; others, like myself, believe God is calling them to stay committed to the Methodist Church at this point and help navigate a way forward in which the evangelical voice has a rightful place and has integrity as the charisms I mention above are upheld and worked out. The Church needs our voice now, as it has always needed it. The reason that organisations like MET, amongst others, exist is in part to hold that voice in a Church with a variety of opinions.

As I set off on this journey of serving the Church, I knew it was going to be hard and costly. I knew I would need my hard hat. My thinking was that, as I sought to hold a traditional view within a changing church, I would get issues from those who thought differently to me, both around the table and in the wider church. However, I found a welcome around the table and was respected and loved; I found new friendships that surprised me. For me, the difficulties lay with people whom I had seen as friends and colleagues, who suddenly felt that I had either changed my position or let them down or 'sold us out'. The hurt I have felt from the evangelical family has been the most painful part of my ministry so far. Some felt that making personal remarks about my own sexuality was acceptable, even when they didn't know me; as if a person's sexuality was something that could appropriately be judged by them.

I was not naïve when I set off on this journey, I knew the direction of travel the Church had been on for many years. The group had already received a strong steer from both previous working parties and the Methodist Conference. My main task, as I saw it, was to make sure the Church, that I have loved passionately for nearly fifty years and that has nurtured and trained me, could remain a place where the position I hold could be held with deep integrity, and that no local church would have to act outside its conscience and could instead continue to articulate a view that has been held by the majority of the Christian church throughout its 2000 year history.



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The decisions within the reports to the Conference, I believe, enable me to hold the deep theological position that I do with integrity in our Church, whilst living alongside those who hold differing, deep theological positions. We live in a spirit of collegiality and a sense of 'watching over one another with love'. I am grateful that each of us can exercise our ministries with honesty and in the light - and I pray that God will continue to bless each of us.

My main concern now, and the reason for sharing this article, is for the relationships within the group that would traditionally call themselves evangelicals in the Methodist Church. I will commit to doing whatever is within my power to bring a sense of unity and healing to the evangelical family - as we offer a voice within the Methodist movement for many years to come.

As the current principal of Cliff College, I feel I need to end with some words of a former principal. So, we will head to Samuel Chadwick and his final recorded words to his colleagues.

'Stand together for the Word of God, but not in any stupid sense. Stand in a spirit of unity, of faith, of doctrine, according to the fourth chapter of Ephesians.'

The fourth chapter of Ephesians begins...

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV)

If God is calling you to move on from this family, then I pray God's blessings on you and all that God is calling you into. If God is calling you, like me, to stay and navigate this journey ahead within this family, then I pray God gives us strength and the ability to speak truth with love and integrity, to stand firm and, with openness, to journey with those who hold contradictory convictions.

To everyone I say: please pray for us; we need your prayers at this time and the Methodist Church needs each of us to continue to preach Christ crucified!

The Revd Ashley Cooper currently serves as Principal of Cliff College. He has previously served as the Superintendent of the Burslem Mission Circuit and as the Coordinator of Evangelism Enablers in the Methodist Church.

