



AN EXTENDED MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR:

REMAINING FAITHFUL IN THE YEAR AHEAD

The Revd Dr David A. Hull

Dear Friends,

My mind has returned repeatedly, over recent months, to a charcoal fire. I have written previously, within the pages of MET Connexion, about the encounter between Peter and the risen Lord Jesus, one of my favourite scenes in the Bible. Peter had recently denied his Lord three times and now he had swum, fully clothed, to greet him once again. After breakfast with his disciples, there was one person to whom Jesus wanted to speak and one question he wanted to ask: 'Peter, do you love me?' Three times the Lord asked the question, once for each denial. Then, when Peter had restated his love for the Lord, Jesus called him again, with the familiar words, 'Follow me.'

I often wonder whether Peter looked around when he heard those words and realised where they were standing. They were on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee. It was the place where Jesus had first called Peter to follow him three years previously with the very same words. Jesus had taken him back to where it all began.

GOING BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

I have certainly had a sense of going back to where it all began recently. Many readers will know that my family and I have been through a very tough time since September and we are immensely grateful to MET members who have written

to encourage us and have given generous gifts. It is those circumstances that have delayed this edition of our magazine reaching you. Thank you for your patience.

Following Conference, I was interviewed, as Chair of MET, by members of the Christian press who asked for my response to the votes on the report 'God in Love Unites Us'. The Conference had overwhelmingly, albeit provisionally, voted to affirm cohabitation and same-sex marriage. I stated that I was saddened by the vote; that MET holds that the gospel is for all; that part of the good news is God's purposes for marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy; and that any other understanding undermines the gospel.

That statement was later quoted online and was subsequently circulated amongst the staff, pupil and parent bodies at the Methodist school at which I was stationed as chaplain. The response very quickly made my position within the school utterly untenable and, after much consideration and conversation, I agreed to seek an early curtailment to the appointment. The situation continued to go from bad to worse and, as a family, we faced an impossible situation in which we looked set to lose, not only our base for ministry, but also our income and home.

In the midst of it all, I had a routine meeting with leaders of the Free Methodist Church and, naturally, we spoke of the trials I was facing. To my astonishment, they approached me a little while later with the offer of a post: associate pastor of their church plant in Kingswood: Freedom Church Bristol (which began a little over a year ago) with a commitment to enable me to continue to serve as Chair of MET.

By that time, I had already arranged an appointment with the Stationing Advisory Committee in an attempt to find a way forward. With the offer from the Free Methodist Church, I was able to request permission from the committee to serve another denomination whilst remaining a minister in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Church. After a very supportive conversation, they recommended that I be granted the permission and the President subsequently wrote to me to ratify the decision. My family and I are immensely grateful both to the Free Methodist Church for their warm and generous welcome and to the Stationing Advisory Committee for their expression of Christian unity.

We have known the truth of Paul's great claim that 'in all things, God works for the good of those who love him' and, perhaps like Peter, I have a sense of going back to where it all began. It has been wonderful to discover, in the Free Methodist Church, fellow Wesleyan evangelicals who are committed to the Wesleyan mission with their three distinctive characteristics of Arminianism (the gospel is for all); mission as evangelism and social action together; and seeking to be Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. Our first Sunday in the new role at Freedom Church Bristol found us in the open-air of Kingswood Park for our monthly outreach event, so we really have gone back to where it all began for the Methodist movement in the open-air of the fields of Kingswood!

RENEWING THE WESLEYAN MISSION

As I write from Kingswood, the mother suburb of the mother city of Methodism, I continue to sense the Lord is calling

evangelical Methodists, at this critical time within the life of our denomination, to play our part in **renewing the Wesleyan mission in the motherland of Methodism**. I believe the Lord is calling us all to go back to where it all began. What a mission it was: raised up, we believe, in the providence of God, returning to faithful, scriptural Christianity.

That's what our forthcoming Spring Remaining Faithful conference is all about, **Liverpool 200: Renewing the Wesleyan Vision**. It marks the 200th anniversary of the 1820 Liverpool Conference, a historic event at which the Wesleyan Methodist Conference, concerned that the denomination was beginning to decline, launched a turnaround plan which changed the course of the denomination for a generation. If a turnaround plan was needed then, just think what we need now!

What will it mean to go back to where it all began? It's a question we will be considering as we gather in Liverpool, seeking a renewal of the Wesleyan vision. The current debates within the Methodist Church are the presenting issue, but they are not the defining issue. What defines us, binds us together and spurs us on in the work of the kingdom is far greater. We will look back to the great defining features of the evangelical mission of the Wesley brothers and the early Methodists as the power of God fell mightily upon them, changing the course of this nation. We will ask what the implications of that great vision are for us today as we seek to join in the work of building the kingdom in our own day and age: what does it mean for our ministry and mission of evangelism, discipleship, worship, preaching, work amongst children and young people, church planting, and social engagement? We will turn to the Lord in repentance, seek a fresh vision from him, and plead for an outpouring of his mighty power. I do hope you will join us on 28 and 29 May at Hope University's Hope Chapel in Liverpool. Please book as soon as you can!

In the meantime, as we have outlined in our Remaining Faithful regional gatherings, we have a very simple three-point strategy. Please do everything you can to play your part:

- 1. Speak out.** The Lord called Ezekiel to speak his word to the people of Israel, even though they would not listen. Faithfulness is about what you say, not whether they listen. So please take every opportunity to contribute to the consultation.
- 2. Build up.** The Bible calls us to build ourselves up in our most holy faith. Within the current debates, we are rediscovering the importance of standing together with a common vision. That's what our Spring Remaining Faithful conference is all about, Liverpool 200: Renewing the Wesleyan Vision. Join us to begin a conversation, to be inspired, to pray together and to see how great a flame aspires!
- 3. Count the cost.** There comes a time when the people of God must count the cost of faithfulness. One phrase that is often on my mind at the moment is from Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'If', which I learned when I was at school: 'If you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch and toss, and lose, and start again at your beginnings and never breathe a word about your loss ...'. Pitch and toss may not be a very Methodist pastime! Yet, in that line, Kipling powerfully describes what the cost of faithfulness may be. My wife and I have, in recent events and unlike ever before, known the risk of losing our place

of ministry, home and income with shocking swiftness. Others may well find themselves in very similar situations. Now is the time to count the cost, as generations of God's people have done before us, and to discover again the faithfulness of the Lord.

MOVING FORWARD

Seeking a renewal of the Wesleyan vision as we gather in Liverpool is, however, only the first stage in going back to where it all began. We will gather again, after Conference, on Saturday 18 July 2020 (venue to be confirmed) for a second conference: **Remaining Faithful: Moving Forward**. Please put the date in your diary now and plan to join us if you can. Having sought a renewal of vision in May, we will give our attention to policy in July, with an opportunity to debate the practicalities of, and options for, ways forward for those committed to remaining faithful to the Wesleyan evangelical mission and the teaching of the Bible. By that point, we will have an idea both of where we sense the Lord is calling us to go in terms of vision, and where we are in terms of the decisions of the Methodist Conference which will have met in early July. That means we will be able to begin an informed discussion about how we will be able to get from where we are to where we long to be as we seek to play our part in renewing the Wesleyan mission in the motherland of Methodism.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we may wish we had a much more certain knowledge of the path that lies in front of us. However, that is often not the way it is with the people of God and it is certainly not the way it was at the beginnings of Methodism. John Wesley wrote of 'desiring barely to follow Providence as it gradually opens'. It was a journey they knew only step by step, seeking to follow God's prevenient grace as he went ahead of them. They struggled to keep up with him! Yet, they also had utter confidence that following step by step was all they needed to do. They ended each annual conference by singing Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Captain of Israel's host, and guide' which includes the triumphant lines:

'By thine unerring Spirit led, / We shall not in the desert stray; / We shall not full direction need; / Nor miss our providential way!'

As we, in turn, seek to follow providence as it gradually opens to us, we dare to proceed with the same confidence.

There has been much that has been unexpected for my family about the way in which this year has begun and there is much uncertainty for many of us in what lies ahead. Yet I enter this year excited by the vision that lies before us of renewing the Wesleyan mission in the motherland of Methodism. We're going back to where it all began. If it's a vision you share, come to Liverpool 200. I hope to see you there!

I usually sign off rejoicing in our partnership in the gospel and, whilst I continue to rejoice, I feel I also wish to conclude, with a prayer that the Lord will keep us all faithful throughout the year ahead,

Yours faithfully,

David