

FEED THE LAMBS

Ed Mackenzie



THE LIVERPOOL MINUTES AND MINISTRY TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

INTRODUCTION

In 1820, the Wesleyan Methodist Church held its annual conference in Liverpool. After a period of growth, this was the first Conference to report numerical decline within the Church, and the Conference adopted a number of 'resolutions on pastoral work' (known as the 'Liverpool Minutes') which were intended to renew the church and reverse its decline. Historians recognise that the Liverpool Minutes helped to reverse the decline of Methodism in the 19th century, and their impact is reflected in their continuing inclusion in the Methodist Church's CPD (The Methodist Conference, 'The 'Liverpool Minutes', 1820' in The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Vol 1 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2005), pp. 71-79). The section of the Liverpool Minutes from which each citation in this article comes will be indicated in brackets.

Even with the passing of time, there is much to learn from these resolutions,

and one striking feature of them is found in their approach to ministry among children and youth. References to children, young people, and the family are scattered throughout the Minutes, with one of its key commitments as paying 'particular spiritual attention to the young people of our Societies and congregations' (VIII). The renewal of the church includes a renewed commitment to pass on the faith to the young.

In this article, I will draw out four themes from the Liverpool Minutes that are relevant for today's discipleship of children and youth: Emphasising the Gospel, Explaining the Faith, Equipping the Church, and Encouraging the Family. After introducing each theme, I will show its roots in scripture, point to contemporary research that illuminates it, and offer some suggestions for embedding it throughout our churches.

1) EMPHASISE THE GOSPEL

The first theme that Methodists need to retain is an emphasis on the gospel as the heart of the faith, passing on a clear and vital vision of it to the next generation. This gospel is not about becoming your best self, cultivating a

spiritual life, or even doing great things for God in the world. The gospel is the Good News of what God has done in history to redeem his people. And it focuses on the announcement that God has sent his Son to save us and to transform us.

The Liverpool Minutes recognise that grasping the gospel rightly is key for the renewal of the church. The ministry of Methodists, the Minutes explain, should be marked by 'sound, evangelical doctrine' (II), and such doctrine should be proclaimed experientially, ensuring that doctrine connects to life as well as to the quest for holiness (III). But what exactly does this doctrine include? In its section on 'The Pulpit' (III), the Minutes clarify that it focuses on 'the leading and vital doctrines of the gospel', and these include such essentials doctrines as repentance, an understanding of salvation by grace, the centrality of faith, and the importance of practical holiness. Later in the Minutes, the section on 'Oversight of the Young' (VIII) speaks of the importance of helping the young within the church gain 'intelligent sympathy' with Methodist 'doctrines and disciplines'. Throughout the Minutes,

then, there is an awareness that the gospel is key.

The New Testament similarly emphasises sticking to the gospel and remaining faithful to the Good News of Jesus. In the gospels, Jesus encourages his followers to build their lives on the rock of his teaching (Matthew 16:18), and to be wary of false teaching or false prophets that attempt to move them from it (Matthew 7:15-20). The apostle Paul also focuses on the centrality of the gospel and warns forcefully against abandoning it (Galatians 1:6-9), and similar emphases can be found throughout the New Testament (Hebrews 5:11-6:3; 1 John 2:24-25). While the gospel itself is expressed in a variety of ways throughout scripture, there is a unified stress on God's redemptive work through Jesus. As Gathercole summarises, 'the gospel is God's account of his saving activity in Jesus the Messiah, in which, by Jesus' death and resurrection, he atones for sin and brings new creation' (Simon Gathercole. 'The Gospel of Paul and the gospel of the Kingdom' in *God's Power to Save: One Gospel for a Complex World?* ed. Chris Green (Leicester: Apollos, 2006, pp. 138-154), p. 194).

In today's context, there is often an indifference to the doctrinal distinctives of Christian faith or even a hostility to it. The stress on conversation and building your own faith can often lead us to dissolve the very distinctives that give our faith its power. Worse, ignoring a focus on the gospel can lead to the proliferation of false gospels, or teachings inimical to Christian faith. In a 2005 study of teenage religion in America, one such faith was identified as 'moralistic therapeutic deism', a view in which, 'God is treated as something like a cosmic therapist or counsellor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble, but who does not particularly ask for devotion or obedience' (Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 148). Other kinds of gospels can also appear if we do not stay true to the apostolic gospel given to us in Scripture.

Staying true to the gospel means we are clear in our minds as to the nature of the

Good News we are to share. It means that we allow its power to work itself out in our lives and our discipleship. And we ensure that as we speak to children and young people, we help them to grow into a relationship with God, centred on what God has done in his Son and continues to do by his Spirit.

2) EXPLAIN THE FAITH

A second theme found in the Liverpool Minutes, related closely to the stress on the gospel, is the need to explain the faith clearly to children and young people. Young people then and now do not simply absorb by osmosis the truths of the faith and it would be wrong to let them pick and choose the elements of the faith they like the most. Rather, churches need to think carefully and faithfully of how best to help them grasp and be grasped by the truths of the gospel.

The importance of this is again emphasised in the Liverpool Minutes. In its section on 'Care for the Children' (IX), it points to the obligation to 'feed and take the oversight of the lambs', the youngest members of the congregations, and there are references throughout the Minutes to the 'instruction' of children. It is particularly in the section on 'catechetical instruction' (XI) - that is, instruction in the faith - that this comes to the fore. There, the Minutes commend that in Sunday Schools and in the home 'catechetical instruction' should take place so that children within the church should be rooted and grounded in the faith. The Minutes refers to the importance of Methodism Catechisms in guiding this task, and these played an important role in ensuring that the essentials elements of the gospel were taught and explained to the young.

In the New Testament, we find too that instructing Christians in the faith - including young Christians - is a key task for the church. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks of 'scribes... trained for the kingdom of heaven' who are like masters of the household bringing out treasures old and new (Matthew 13:51-53). In the Great Commission, the Risen Jesus instructs his followers to make disciples, which, alongside baptism, involves instructing them in all that he has taught (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul also emphasises the role of teaching people

“
While the Bible does not offer us strategic guidelines for engaging children and young people, it does assume their integration into the community of faith.
”



in the faith, with 'teachers' having a vital role within the church (Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11-13). Alongside early Christian prophets, teachers would instruct and explain the faith and so build up the church. Paul's hope and prayer is that believers would be rooted and established in the faith, and so grow in their life with Jesus (Colossians 2:6-7). Since children would also be present at church gatherings (Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20), they too would be instructed in the faith.

In today's context, the idea of 'instructing' young people in the faith is sometimes resisted. Some would claim that children should be encouraged to construct the faith for themselves, while others would emphasise that children learn through participation rather than through intentional instruction. And yet because the gospel does have content, there is something to pass on. And while entering into conversation with children is of course important, it is possible to combine that with instructional approaches that do help young people to learn the essentials of the faith. A church that is confident about the faith it confesses needs to be confident about explaining it to all, and especially to the young.

Prioritising the instruction of youth within the church will mean having a grasp of what it is that we are passing on to young people. Ideally, this should focus on the essentials of what C. S. Lewis called 'Mere Christianity', focusing on the Orthodox beliefs all Christians share, and especially the gospel truths of what God has done in Christ. Methodists can also rightly offer a Wesleyan slant on such doctrines, including showing their relationship to experience - to the 'warmed heart' - and to practical holiness. How such instruction will take place will differ from place to place, but being intentional about the process is vital.

3) EQUIP THE CHURCH

A third theme within the Liverpool Minutes is the importance of equipping the church to minister well to its children and youth. It is not enough to have a vague sentiment that young people need to be incorporated into the church. Rather, we need to embed intentional practices to help ministry within the

church include and focus on children and youth.

Alongside its emphasis on explaining the faith, the Liverpool Minutes also show the way in which engagement with youth should feature throughout the structures of the church. In particular, the Minutes emphasise the importance of ministers within the church engaging with youth as part of their ministry; ministers should engage with the 'lambs' as well as the 'sheep' (IX). One way to do this is to aim to meet and encourage children of church members each week. Sunday Schools should also be encouraged, with ministers meeting and speaking with their leaders, and also visiting the members of the Sunday School once each quarter (X). In a section on 'Oversight of the Young' (VIII), the Minutes suggest that Ministers seek pastoral access to young people between the ages of fourteen to twenty-one. In the formative years when young people transition from childhood to adulthood, ministers have a role to play in offering encouragement and prayer.

While the Bible does not offer us strategic guidelines for engaging children and young people, it does assume their integration into the community of faith. The Old Testament shows how young people are incorporated within God's people through home life as well as through their participation in worship. In the reading of the law at the time of Ezra, for example, whole families - children as well as parents - attended, listening as the law was read and explained (Ezra 8:1-6). In the New Testament, churches were intergenerational communities where adults and the young would meet in homes and build up together the body of Christ. It is also significant that Jesus stressed the importance of welcoming and blessing the young. Whereas his disciples sought to keep children away from him, Jesus draws them to him with open arms and explains that the kingdom belongs to them (Mark 10:13-16). Elsewhere, Jesus notes that one who receives a child in his name receives Jesus, while those who reject children reject him too (Mark 9:36-37). It is striking too to note the way in which the apostle Paul mentored Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Timothy 1:18-19), helping him to live out and discern his ministry.

The importance of equipping the church to welcome and incorporate children and youth is one that is widely recognised today. Since the church is only one generation from extinction, finding ways to ensure youth are present and ministered too is vital. Research also reveals that churches which invest in young people are more likely to grow. The renewal of the church relies on inclusion of the young, and intentional ministry and discipleship of them.

Suggestions of how best to do this well will differ from the Liverpool Minutes. Our context differs, as does the reality of life for children and young people in the twenty-first century. There are, however, a number of key steps churches can make. This includes ensuring that churches are welcoming and warm towards younger generations, cultivating an intergenerational community, and identifying and drawing on the gifts of the young in our midst (Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016)). A key insight of the Liverpool Minutes is that the leaders or ministers of a church should take a lead, since their own commitment to children and young people shapes the ethos of the church.

4) ENCOURAGE THE FAMILY

A fourth theme from the Liverpool Minutes is encouraging the family, and especially encouraging parents to disciple their children in the life of faith. Rather than passing responsibility for the faith formation of young people to ministers or youth workers, parents who follow Jesus should realise that they have a uniquely God-given role to help their children learn the way of faith.

The Liverpool Minutes highlight this dimension in a number of passages. The opening of the Minutes, for example, calls Methodists not just to attend to 'personal religion' but also to the 'Christian instruction and government of our families' (I). A similar emphasis concludes the document, where the desire for the 'abundant effusion' of the Holy Spirit includes families as well as Societies and Congregations (XXI). In its section on the Pulpit (III), the Minutes urge the people of God to 'fidelity in

family duties, and especially in the godly training up of their children.' One key way to help children grow in the faith that the Minutes highlights is through 'family worship' (IV), a commitment that parents make to read scripture and pray with their children. Strikingly, the Minutes also claim that religion within the Societies 'depends largely upon the cultivation amongst us of family religion' (IV).

Scripture also encourages parents to model and teach faith to their children. In the famous passage from Deuteronomy 6, parents are called to speak of faith at home and on the road, and to include symbols and words of faith around the home (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). The picture here is of parents modelling faith among their children, teaching them in daily life the meaning and implications of the law. In the New Testament world, parents would have typically had the role of teaching and modelling faith for the household, and this was true for Jews and pagans as well as those who became follower of Jesus. Paul's instruction to fathers to raise their children in the Lord and instruct them fits neatly within the first century context (Ephesians 6:4).

Despite this biblical teaching, some parents are hesitant about teaching or modelling faith within the home. At times, this is due to a concern for the autonomy of the child, even though parents are happy to pass on other key beliefs and values to their children. At other times, parents fear that talking about faith might actually put their children off Christianity for good. Despite these concerns, research shows that when faith is modelled well within the home, then children are most likely to take it on for themselves (Olwyn Mark, *Passing on Faith* (London: Theos, 2016)). The Spirit works through the parents to plant and nurture the seed of faith in the lives of children.

How then might this shape our churches? We need, first of all, to encourage parents to take up their role of disciplers of their children. This means speaking of 'faith at home' in the context of sermons and signposting helpful resources to parents, including - for instance - the excellent 'Parenting for Faith' resources produced by BRF

(<https://parentingforfaith.org>) or the 'Kitchen Table Project' run by Care for the Family (<https://kitchentable.org.uk>). With a contemporary emphasis on the power of testimony within the church, we can also encourage parents to share what faith looks like in their family and the joys and challenges of praying and reading the Bible with their children. Finally, we might also explore approaches to catechesis, in the home as well as the church (for a discussion of this theme, see Ed Mackenzie 'Generative Catechesis - Teaching the Faith to the Next Generation' in *The Generative Church: Global Conversations about Investing in Emerging Generations* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2019), pp. 106 - 129).

CONCLUSION

The Liverpool Minutes calls the church to focus on children and young people, and in so doing echoes a call heard across churches today. Its call, however, is for an evangelical formation of young people; this requires a clear grasp of the gospel's content and power, and a clear means of helping the young understand it and live it out. Picking up a thread that has for too long been neglected, the Minutes also emphasises that parents alongside churches have a key role to play. The formation of the young is a task for the whole community of God, whether at gathered worship or dispersed within homes throughout the week.

Dr Ed Mackenzie is the Lecturer in Biblical Theology and Mission at Cliff College and the co-director of Generation, the Centre for the Study of Youth, Children and Families Mission and Ministry (<https://cliffcollege.ac.uk/about-cliff-college/centre-yfc-mission-ministry>).

