

Renewal I

Much of our focus over the past year has been on the subject of mission. In short, we have sought to answer the questions such as, 'Where is God leading us as a Church' and, 'How can we support you in your mission?' The fact that we have shared in these discussions is good news in itself. The exciting news is that we are also responding! We are affirming what we consider to be our strengths – prayer, pastoral care, youth work to name three examples. We are identifying needs – people have questions about life and faith that need answering; we are looking to make deeper links with the local community that encourage people to see faith and Church positively.

Our mission must be reviewed continually. Having talked in such depth, what is our next step? I would encourage us to think about renewal. Just as it is impossible to talk about mission without referring to evangelism (bringing people to faith and training them in discipleship), it is impossible to talk about mission without referring to 'renewal'. This is the starting point for this series of reflections.

These notes will serve as an additional outline to three services that look at how God can be at work in us bringing renewal. As a refresher, I would like to remind us of what we mean by these terms.

“The link between mission and renewal”

Mission is about recognising:

- What God is doing.
- Discerning where God wants us to be at work.
- That evangelism is a key aspect of our mission.

Examples

- Our Church discerns that there is a need to reach out to both our own young people, and young people in the local community. We therefore host a holiday club.
- What other examples can you think of, where we have identified a need and responded?

Renewal describes how:

- God is at work in us, so that our faith is strengthened.
- God can be at work in the people that we meet.
- We can create the right conditions for growth.

Renewal is not about

- Doing what worked 20 years ago, in the same way, and expecting God to bless it.

Examples

- The healing service offers people healing and renewal.
- God is at work in people on the fringes of the Church encouraging them to think about faith.
- Questions about life and faith are a sure sign that God is at work bringing renewal.
- Ultimately, when the Holy Spirit is able to move within us and mould a community that has a sense of closeness that is different to that found in secular organisations, renewal begins to happen.
- When Churches move from being simply 'friendly', to being a place where people can make friends, the Holy Spirit may be at work in renewal.
- When congregations increase in number, this may be a sign of renewal.
- When people in congregations feel a fresh sense of calling to particular tasks, again, God is at work bringing renewal.

Have there been moments in your life when you have felt God bring renewal?
What signs of renewal do you see around you?

Renewal II: To recap - renewal happens when we:

- Discover the same passion as those who founded our congregation.
- Focus on the New Testament Teachings of Jesus
- Read the 'Signs of the Times'
...and reshape our Christian life accordingly.

From where is this evidence?

In the 1960's, the largest Church in the world (the Roman Catholic Church) met for the Second Vatican Council. This was a huge conference, involving delegates from all over the world, including priests, theologians, and observers from other denominations. It discussed, in part, how the Catholic Church was seeing renewal in both its congregations and missionary organisations. These three factors were common where renewal was taking place. Many protestant organisations drew on these insights and entered into further dialogue. Today they are generally accepted and feature in even some of the most recent reports such as 'Mission Shaped Church' from the Church of England and numerous documents within Methodism.

'Rediscovering our passion.'

The phrase 'the charism of the founders' ('charism' meaning passion, giftings, vision), was the term originally used. In the recent BBC TV series, 'Who do you think you are', celebrities trace their family roots. The most moving parts of the footage occur when this becomes more than an intellectual exercise. Those involved begin to understand more about themselves and their own identity. Their own sense of purpose may be uplifted. At the same time, they are not interested in reliving the past and living in the same way as their ancestors. In short the family tradition rolls on. Exactly the same is true of the Christian Church when we think about the vision, passion and energy of those who brought us to this place.

Who is our founder? (Read Luke 4)

- Jesus Christ – we need to think about what drove his ministry, and how he worked.
- The Methodist Church and other traditions that influence us. (We will look at this later.)

On Jesus, his purpose and his mission

- Jesus is the Messiah – he comes to heal the rift between us and God.
- He is here for the poor, those imprisoned by sin, those who search for direction, and those who are oppressed.....

How does Jesus bring renewal?

- Being open and empowered by the Holy Spirit. (Jesus is 'Anointed')
- 'Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk'.
- Training, empowering and authorising disciples.
- Expecting people to 'do it for themselves'.

How does God therefore bring renewal to us as individuals? (For discussion)

- He makes us aware of his 'awe' and presence.
- Brings us (and others to faith).
- Leads us into fellowship - a 'small group'.
- Convicts and empowers us by his spirit.
- Leads us to specific tasks.
- Note - this happens against the backdrop of a faith community.

How will God renew our Church? (For discussion)

- We will question 'what does God want us to do?'
- People will come to faith in Christ.
- People will discover a sense of calling.

A note to leaders

- We cannot change the world, but we can change 12 people.
- We must encourage discipleship. "Every member of the Church must live as a disciple".

Comment 'People suddenly find that the ground beneath them is shaking, only to find that God is shaking it!'

Renewal III

As an update, we were remembering how renewal happens when we:

- Discover the same passion as those who founded our congregation.
- Focus on the New Testament Teachings of Jesus
- Read the 'Signs of the Times'

...and reshape our Christian life accordingly.

We are looking at the first strand of renewal – 'Returning to the charisms of the founders'. If Jesus is our founder at the most fundamental level, the next level of leadership is the disciples and believers of the early church.

Read Acts 2:42-47 and asks the question, 'What drives the Early Church?' and 'What were the keystones of the early Church community?'

What drives the early Church?

Beware of viewing its leaders as being wholly passive – and of God being the only one at work. Leaders in the early Church needed to:

- Find a place where new Christians could gather.
- Work out how to consolidate and build on their success.
- Shape a community through worship and fellowship.

What were the keystones of the community?

- Teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of Bread
- Prayer.
- Sharing of possessions (this is particularly striking)
- Church is not just for a Sunday (or Sabbath!)

How does God renew us as individuals? (Discuss)

- Is anything in this list missing from your life?
- Be active, not passive in your faith.
- Focus on what is important – beware of materialism.
- "Costly giving" – You get out what you put in.
- The joy of sharing.

The phrase 'costly giving' is again recent and results from the experiences of Churches that are seeing renewal now. In short, renewal is hard work. It can be spiritually, physically and financially demanding – although the rewards far surpass any hardship.

How can Churches move forward?

- We cannot meet everyone's needs at the same time.
- We can meet different needs in different ways.
- Sunday worship is never enough to give people the nurture they need.
- Small groups become increasingly important.
- Build on "communion" – time with God, time with each other, meals.

Renewal IV – Read a sample of Wesley’s hymns – HP 216, 267, 691, 706, 745

Having looked at Jesus as our founder, and the formation of the early Church, we are now going to look at how we have been influenced by the Methodist and other traditions.

A little about our own family history – who ‘founded’ us?

- We are European, Protestant, Methodist, ‘Free Church’ (i.e. independent of the state)
- Methodism divided into Wesleyan (‘formal’), Primitive & Bible Christian ‘relaxed’.
- These different expressions of Methodism merged in 1932.
- We were/are non-conformist – i.e. we have, in the past been considered radical.
- We are congregationalist – ‘responsible & active’ rather than ‘passive’ in ministry.
- We are now joined (hallelujah!) by other churches – e.g. Anglican, Pentecostal, New Life, Baptist, Welsh Calvinistic, Brethren – and Roman Catholic.

Divine drive – what were the passions of those who went before us?

- A ‘Divine discontent’ at people not hearing the gospel or seeing it in action.
- The belief that...everyone, no matter how unlovable they feel, is loved by God.
- The belief that everyone can have a relationship with God.
- Encouraging seekers to search for a spiritual experience of God. (Assurance, Heart-warming)
- Encouraging disciples to search lifelong for ‘scriptural holiness.’
- A pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit that has great vision.
- A healthy scepticism towards the institution and a disrespect of conventional boundaries.
- A focus on ministry towards prisoners and those who were poor.
- A focus on children’s welfare (e.g. Education, Sunday Schools)

Divine discontent does not mean that if you are discontent you are somehow holy! It describes the sense of righteous anger that was felt when church pioneers felt that the gospel was not being taken, in word and action, to those who needed it most. This sense of divine discontent was also present in people such as William Booth. Booth, founder of the Salvation Army was a disaffected Methodist. Leaders of organisations such as Barnardos and NCH were also Methodist. The first Sunday School was formed in Bristol by Robert Raikes – again, this was an initiative of the Methodist Church.

Methodism also reacted strongly against any idea that the poor and uneducated were beyond God’s reach. The search for spiritual experience is distinctly Methodist. Wesley’s heart was ‘strangely warmed’ at a Bible Study in Aldersgate, London. It was at this point that he realised that God loved for Him, and that Jesus died for his sins. Although Wesley came from a high church background, his journals reveal that he was well accustomed to the Holy Spirit being at work in his listeners. Sometimes this elicited powerful spiritual and emotional responses. His only concern was that such experiences led to people being strengthened in discipleship. The idea of scriptural holiness is one of giving priority to what the bible has to say and open to the work of the Holy Spirit. He insisted that it was possible for believers to enter into a perfect relationship with God (e.g. HP 267, Love Divine) – although of course, our tendency to sin limits how long such moments last!

Wesley was not always popular. By far! Whilst he nurtured a fresh expression of Church for the mid 18th century, he was autocratic, disrespectful of parish boundaries and obvious of his criticism towards others. Nonetheless, his pioneering spirit gave birth to one of the most influential missionary movements that our country has seen. The difficulty was that the new wine that poured into new converts could not be contained within an institution that had not been as faithful in its calling as it could have been, and that was struggling to change. Originally Methodist Churches were called ‘societies’ and Wesley encouraged members to attend their local Anglican Churches. Wesley never wanted to split formerly with the Church of England; although as the years rolled on this became inevitable. Societies became Methodist Churches. Our structure of local preachers and worship leaders owes itself to how early Methodism encouraged people to discover the gospel for themselves and share it with others.

Questions

- Have you had a spiritual experience of the presence of God?
- Do you know that God loves you?
- Do you know that Jesus died for you?
- Have you felt/Do you ever feel ‘divine discontent’?
- Do you have a vision of where God is leading you?

How do the differences across the Methodist Tradition show in practice?

We have inherited different ideas about

- How Churches should be organised and run.
- Ministerial authority
- Liturgy and Worship.

The Wesleyan strand of Methodism was more formal in its approach to worship. John Wesley, our founder, was a High Church Anglican. In fairness, he recognised how elements of liturgical worship (especially where the mass was read in Latin) were unhelpful to those who were uneducated. He and his brother John set about forming a movement that was 'Methodical' in its approach to nurturing faith. Methodists brought the tradition of hymn singing to this country, influenced by the Moravians (a German Church). Many of Charles' hymns are set to pub tunes!

Wesleyan Methodists expected their ministers to act with authority, accepted decisions made more remotely (i.e. by the institution), saw value in set liturgy and expected their ministers to wear robes. Primitive Methodists reacted against this and were more relaxed in worship. They were particularly noted for continuing the tradition of outdoor preaching and mission at camp meetings. There are similarities between the 'Prims' and the Bible Christians who ministered mainly in the South West. These slight differences in how congregations like to be led remain to this day – although we all have our natural preferences as well.

In terms of non-conformity, the minister of the non-conformist congregation says, 'Why don't you try this?' To which the people respond, 'Well you may have a point, but we are going to do this instead!' In truth there is a measure of mutuality and respect between the people and the minister – but the minister's influence is more limited.

In terms of congregationalism, if the Church spire falls off the, Congregationalist Church deals with the emergency first, and tells the minister later. (By the way, the Church spire has fallen off overnight, but we matters in hand!) The Church that is not congregational panics until the minister has arrived and sorts out the problem. Obviously, I am exaggerating but the main features of our Churches are lay-ownership and lay-participation.

In terms of what other people bring, Methodism continues to be reminded of its roots(!), and reshaped by insights from other traditions. For example, the Baptist tradition remind us of the need for adults to reach the point of conversion, Pentecostalism encourages us to be open to the spirit. Brethren encourage us to remain focused on what the Bible has to say.

Questions:

- What are your specific roots?
- Should ministers wear dog-collars, or gowns?
- Do you find written liturgy helpful, or off-putting?
- What is the role of a minister? (Note think about Our Calling and the mission of the Church before answering this question – the mission of the Church is embodied in (i) Worship, (ii) Learning and Caring, (iii) Service, (iv) Evangelism.
- What is the role of a Chair of a meeting?
- What significance do you see in Methodist Ministers chairing the Church Council?
- **How is the Methodist Tradition shaping you?**