



The Methodist Church of New Zealand
Mission Resourcing



Information Pack

What is a Methodist?

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Attempts to define a Methodist are not easy. We are not a creedal church; we are unable to point to a particular creed as can some church and say "that is us". Our church structures are not sufficiently distinctive to make us stand out. In some places our church structures include bishops, though they are somewhat different to those within the Catholic and the Anglican traditions. In other places our church structures are more akin to those of English Protestantism. We have no single moral code that distinguishes us and marks us out as being different from other people. We have as much diversity amongst us regarding moral issues as does society in general. A look back through the Methodist Church newspapers in New Zealand during the first 20 years of Methodist life this century demonstrates how the church did unite around the issue of temperance. Consumption of alcohol was regarded as the great social evil and to be a Methodist was to be identified with the cause of prohibition. No longer is this so and there is no other single moral issue which binds us together as a distinctive and united group. We are not a national church as are some other churches. The Presbyterian Church remains a Scottish church, a vehicle of Scottish patriotism and nationhood as well as a Christian church. Similarly the Anglican Church has been a vehicle of English nationhood though many Anglicans today say that there must be changes from this. There seems to be nothing particularly distinctive about us. Yet when we get together we often remark that there is a family resemblance. We do recognise one another. This happens as one travels around the world and one meets with Methodists in other places. There seems to be a way of relating, a way of being together, a style that is recognizably Methodist. But what is it?

When we learn a new language it is said that we learn a great deal more about the grammar of our own language. When we enter the culture of another people we also learn a great deal about our own culture and become more conscious of the culture that we have hitherto taken for granted. Similarly it has been in ecumenical discussion that we Methodists have learnt to be more self-conscious about ourselves. Under the pressure to explain ourselves to others we have become clearer about our own identity and ethos.

So the English Methodist Church in the 1950's, seeking union with the Anglican Church, sought to define the distinctive characteristics of Methodism (conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church - Interim statement 1958, page 28 II)

- 1) A conviction that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith
- 2) The doctrine of assurance and the importance of personal religion
- 3) The Methodist Hymn Book and a faith which can be sung
- 4) The place the laity occupy in the government of the church
- 5) An itinerant ministry, that is, an ordained ministry who are at the disposal of the church and will go where they are appointed

The statement concludes: "Methodism has never claimed the exclusive possession of any Christian privileges or excellences not open to all who hold the faith..." (Page 37). I wonder how English Methodists would view this statement today, Number 5 at least is under great threat within the English Conference where the assumption about itinerancy and a ministry at the disposal of the church is being widely discussed and criticized.

In his book **Methodism** Rupert Davies attempts to describe the nature of Methodism by seeing Methodism as a stream or an element in church history. He describes Methodism as a stream of Christian life and action and suggests that there is such a thing as a Methodist ethos running through history. Davies writes, "It is quite wrong to think of Methodism as coming into existence in the time of the Wesleys. Methodism is in fact a recurrent form of Christianity which is sometimes contained within the frontiers of the church at large and is sometimes driven or drives itself over these frontiers to find a territory of its own." Here is a fruitful way of defining Methodism. Davies suggests that Methodism is more than a particular historically conditioned denomination. It is in fact a style of being Christian which has occurred over and over in the history of the church. The dominant characteristics of this, form of Christianity he identifies as follows:

- 1) A complete and wholehearted acceptance of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, along with a conviction that doctrine which is not proved in devotion and life and does not issue in practical charity is valueless. In the last resort experimental religion as John Wesley called it is greatly preferable to doctrinal orthodoxy if the choice has to be made between them.
- 2) An insistence that the heart of Christianity lies in the personal commerce of a Christian person with his/her Lord. Christians can know that they are forgiven and that they are being transformed in character. It is religion in the first person – God loves me, God forgives me, I am being transformed in love.
- 3) There is a stress on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit who is seen as the agent which binds people together and who is the agent of personal transformation.
- 4) An earnest attempt to embody the life in Christ of which the New Testament speaks in personal and social holiness and the formation for this purpose of small and disciplined groups where people may be encouraged and supported in their living of the Christian life.
- 5) A desire to make known the Gospel and to share the love of God on the widest scale and in the simplest terms.
- 6) A generous concern for the material as well as the spiritual welfare of the underprivileged.
- 7) A church order in which laity stand alongside ministry.

Davies suggests that such groups have existed through the history of the church. Usually they have sought to be a church within the church, an "ecclesiola in ecclesia", renewal movements within the whole body. Frequently they have been persecuted and there has been an element of stress and friction between them and the more established sections of the church. Davies suggests the following are part of this stream of Christian life and action – the movement of Montanus, the Waldensians, the life and work of Francis of Assisi who he suggests did for this age what Wesley did for his, German pietism, and the work of the Wesleys. This is a fruitful way of thinking of Methodism – less as a particular denomination which came into being in 18th century England and later spread through the world but as a recurrent stream in history breaking out into the life of the church from time to time.

In 1981 under the Church Union Committee Report the New Zealand Conference passed a resolution which suggests some marks of the Methodist movement:

- (a) That Conference reaffirms that whether in or out of a church union the Methodist movement has an historic task to fulfill and to this continuing task, in ways relevant to our nation and world we call our people;
- To confess Christ and to be continually open to new steps in costly discipleship
 - To live out the love of God for all people particularly the poor, ignored and minority groups in our society
 - To develop centres of fellowship where faith may be nurtured and a true Christian obedience discerned
 - To work for the transformation of both persons and society, refusing to divide these two aspects of Christian mission, and bearing the pain of the struggles involved
 - In all this to live with a genuinely “catholic spirit”.

This resolution was later expanded and sent to the church as a pastoral letter.

Notwithstanding a number of attempts to define the nature of Methodism we in the New Zealand Methodist Church live with a rather muddy definition of what Methodism is. We pride ourselves on being flexible and yet we can be extraordinarily legalistic. We claim that we have no stilling creedal requirements for membership and often this leads us to a position where anything seems to go and where there is a great vacuum when it comes to defining what beliefs bind us together. We describe the church as a fellowship and yet we can be as political as any other church or secular group. Pressure groups and in-house fighting are not unknown among us. We pride ourselves on being pragmatic but frequently the same pragmatism leads us into making overly hasty decisions and later learning to regret them. The itinerancy of the ministry is affirmed over and over but a decreasing number of ministers have confidence in the system.

I would like to come at the question “What is Methodism?” in another way. Instead of trying to define the nature of Methodism with some statements which correspond to our reality I would instead like to ask who our conversation partners are in our living of the Christian life and our being a church. Conversations are made up of at least two parties. Each stands in a particular place and from those particular places they seek to hear each other and respond to each other. The places that Methodists stand in, in the conversation are various. Methodists are set in a variety of national and cultural situations. Methodism literally covers the world. We owe this phenomena to the way in which our English 19th century forbears responded to the request for missionaries who would take the gospel to all parts of the globe. There is no doubt the 19th century missionary movement made many mistakes. Looking back we can see how paternalistic and culturally insensitive the missionaries often were. We can see clearly how the missionary endeavor and English commercial interests often traveled hand in hand. Yet for all that we cannot overlook the deep faith and the urgent desire to spread the good news of God’s love which prompted those who left their more comfortable home to spread the gospel in other places. It is impossible to remain unmoved by stories of how at English conference after English conference people were challenged to give themselves to the mission field. Year after year people stood and offered themselves for services in countries which were not even names to them knowing that many of them would never return because of the hardships and the possibilities of illness. The end result is that Methodists find themselves scattered throughout the world and like all Christians seek to be responsive to the winds and the challenges of the societies in which they live. The question for all Christians wherever they are placed is, “How is our Christian witness and identity to be maintained in this time and the place?”. For Methodists the question is also, “How is our Methodist identity to be maintained?” For Anglicans and RPesbyterians and others the question relates to their particular identity.

- 1) Methodists are as part of ecumenical Christianity. We are called first of all to be in conversation with the whole Christian tradition. This is at least a part of what it means to be a Catholic Christian. We share the early creeds, the scriptures and worship with Christians of all times and places. The whole of the Christian tradition is there for us to explore. The Christian faith in all its various forms is there for us to draw on and to gain enrichment from. We can learn from the rich liturgical traditions of the orthodox church and we can also learn from the bare simplicity of the Brethren chapel. We can learn from Christian movements in Africa and we can learn from the strength of the church in Europe or the fervour of a Pentecostal meeting in Latin America. It is all there for us to explore. To be a part of ecumenical Christianity is to recognize that the whole of the Christian family present and past, is part of our total family.

Wesley claimed that Methodists were inheritors of the apostolic faith. He did not see himself as a theological innovator. He himself was well versed in the church fathers. He read widely in theology and philosophy and literature and he invited his preachers to do the same. When his preachers complained that they could not spend time on reading he told them that unless they could spend four hours a day in study of the scriptures and the tradition of the church then they should part company with the Methodist movement. Over and over Wesley claimed the whole of the Christian tradition for himself and for his people.

Let me pause over this word tradition. Contrary to some popular opinion it does not refer to a dusty, old and better forgotten past which functions to hold us back. Rather the tradition is the past which we remember and draw on for inspiration, encouragement and stimulus. The tradition is a lively and living memory, emerging from the story of the Christian community. In conversation with it we can find invigoration and assistance for Christian living and believing in our day. It is through conversation with tradition that Christian faith is kept alive and remains in contact with the living Christ who is the heart of that tradition. Through this conversation we remain in contact with ways of believing and living other than that which we take for granted. There are so many forms that Christian faith and believing take in our day and have taken through the history of the church. We are always faced with the temptation of regarding the way it is for us as being the only way. Conversation with tradition opens us up to the diversity of Christian believing and living.

The tradition of the church is rather like an old attic in which the family treasures are stored. There in the attic are the good and the bad things that have happened in the story of God's people, the sad and the joyful, the proud and the embarrassing. Alongside the stories of the love and the faith of Francis of Assisi we can also find the instruments of torture used during the period of the inquisition when people were tortured to help bring them to repentance. Alongside the story of deeds of great love and faith we will find the stakes at which people were burned because they were regarded as witches and heretics. As Christians we are invited to explore this attic, this tradition, pick it over and allow ourselves to discover things old and new. Often almost the rubble we will find unexpected treasures. Some parts of the tradition have become obscured and partially lost over the years and need to be recovered. It is often said that history is written by the winners of the battles in history. This is largely true. The consequence is that the tradition of the church sometimes focuses overly much on the story of princes and bishops and the faith and achievement of simple believers and particularly the poor have become obscured or ignored. Similarly the story of women through the years has often been forgotten or set aside or placed on the periphery of the story of the church. The disregarded in every age struggle to find a secure place in the histories of our people. In our day there is much patient and valuable work being done by those dedicated to uncovering the role that the poor, the women and the disregarded have played in the emerging tradition of the church.

At this stage I would like to say something about the relationship between sect and church. It is a characteristic of a sect that a fragment of the tradition is treated as though

it were the whole tradition. In distinction from this the church dwells in the wholeness of the tradition. Sectarianism is a lively possibility for the church in our day. People to the right and the left of the theological and political spectrum are apt to regard their fragment of truth as being the whole. In Methodism in our day pentecostalists and glossaiallasts at one extreme tend to claim that their way of believing and living represents the whole tradition. At the other end of the extreme some social activists regard their understanding of the gospel as being the only true one. Methodism is in deep trouble when it loses contact with the breadth of the tradition. It easily lapses into sectarian behaviour and attitudes. Over and over again we find ecumenical discussion that Methodism needs the rest of the tradition.

A sect tends to be intolerant of diversity. Indeed it is difference from others that gives the sect its reason for being. On the other hand a church can tolerate and even welcome diversity. Within the church people know that there are different ways of being Christian and there are different ways Christians have professed and do profess their faith. A crisis exists in Methodism whenever we become intolerant. There is intolerance of the right and of the left. We could describe this as Puritanism of the right and of the left. The puritans of the right and the puritans of the left though saying different things are psychologically first cousins. Neither can tolerate people who disagree with them, each tend to go on search and destroy missions directed towards the other or they simply ignore one another, fearing conversation with the other at their point of strength.

Any church is in trouble if it loses its memory of the past. Methodists are frequently an important people, often not doing their homework carefully, often prisoners of the latest fad, impatient of interaction with the larger Christian tradition. As truly ecumenical Christians we will want to reach out in interest and love to all sorts of expressions of Christianity. There are many modes of Christian discipleship and our own discipleship is enriched as we find ourselves in conversation with those who differ from ourselves.

Of course no single individual can contain within him/herself the whole breadth of the Christian tradition. Part of what it means to be the body of Christ is that we respect that each of us has a fragment of the Christian truth and each of us had dealings with God. No one of us can claim to represent the whole. What we can do is to so listen to one another, so be together, that corporately we are in touch with a significant part of the diversity which legitimately exists within the Christian community.

- 2) To continue our conversation with the whole of the Christian tradition is quite impossible. Within ecumenical Christianity Methodists are distinctive because we carry on a particular conversation with John Wesley and the stream of Christian history of which he was and is a part. Within the larger conversation we carry on a particular conversation.

At this point I'd like to say something about classic lives in the life of the church. There are some persons, call them saints if you will, who make a decisive breakthrough in Christian living and believing. By their living and acting and dying they show the way for others. They demonstrate ways of being Christian that we know are true. Among such people are the Apostle Paul, St Augustine, St Francis, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Bernard and Dominic, Meister Eckhart, Cathering of Sienna, Teresa of Avila and a whole host of others. The lives of people like these continue to echo down the corridors of time. We find ourselves in conversation with such people. They offer to us new possibilities for Christian living and believing. They continue to speak long after their death. Often groups have grown up around the memory of such people. These groups continue the living conversation with them. So the Franciscans and the Domincans and many other orders within the Catholic Church continue to keep alive the memory and the style of being Christian that belong to their founder. Methodist keep alive a style of Christian believing and living that remains valid in generations subsequent to the time of Wesley himself. We should remind ourselves at this point that Wesley did not intend Methodism to become a separate denomination. Rather he sought to found a renewal group or order within the Church of England. It is simply another reminder that Methodism needs the rest of the church if it is to remain lively and true to its own being.

John and Charles Wesley are among the classic figures of Christian history. Like others they present possibilities for Christian believing and living which continue to speak in new and differing situations. It is important, however, that we do our remembering of Wesley in the context of ecumenical Christianity lest our believing become so narrow that we lapse into sectarianism and confuse this single stream of the Christian tradition with the whole. Within the larger stream of the Christian tradition we keep alive this particular stream. In like manner the Presbyterians and the reform tradition keep alive the stream of Christian living that has steemed from Calvin and others, the Lutherans remain in a living conversation with Martin Luther, the Anglicans continue a stream of Christian living focused on a national church of the middle way. Methodists keep alive the living influence of John Wesley. We do this not as though we were remembering a museum place. Rather we retain Wesley as a lively conversation partner out of which present obedience might be discovered.

The story of John Wesley needs to be told and retold in every generation. Born in 1703 and dying in 1791 his life spanned virtually a century, and retains a great deal of genuine human interest. Born into a clergy family nurtured in particular by a devoted mother, Wesley left home as a boy for his later schooling, proceeded to Oxford University and there under the influence of some of the great writings of the Christian spiritual tradition joined with others in a rigorous living of the Christian life. This led him to go as a missionary to Georgia, from which he returned a bitterly disappointed man. In the 24th of May 1738 an experience of god in a society in Aldersgate Street led him to a new awareness of God in his life. Here the revival began, Wesley the harsh yet devoted man learnt how to truly love other people and in this spirit set out to spread the gospel among the people of his time. The following April he first preached out of doors, in his own words allowing himself to become most vile. It was the beginning of his work in going to people where they were to be found. He later said to his preachers, "Go not to those who need you but to those who need you most". In this spirit Wesley became the evangelist, theologian, pastor and spiritual guide to the poor of his time who under the impact of the industrial revolution were crowding into the cities of England. The background to the revival is this rise of cities along with the unemployment, poor living conditions and loss of meaning that went with it. In such a time Wesley sought new ways for the mission of God to be continued. He was a well educated person but gave up a narrowly academic theology to become a truly folk theologian. He determined that he would preach plain words to plain people. This is not to say he was not a considerable theologian. He was and this is being rediscovered in our day. The important point is that his scholarship was to be available for the work of the kingdom and was not an end in itself. He sought to hold together personal salvation and the healing of society. At one stage he wrote that Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land and to reform the nation. So he sought to take the whole person seriously. A school for needy children was opened and as can be read in his book **Primitive Physic** Wesley set up dispensaries where simple medicines and remedies were offered to those who were physically ill. He understood salvation to be a process. The Holy Spirit he proclaimed is at work in every person from the time of their birth, bringing them to repentance and continuing to shape them in love. The way to this growth in love he discovered is through life in community. Class meetings were set up and through them people were encouraged to be accountable to one another for their discipleship and their Christian living. At the heart of his gospel was the simple affirmation that God is love and that we should set no limits to what God's love can do within us and we should set no boundaries as to who God's love is for. The gospel is to be understood as being for all people and it needs to be taken to people where they are.

We cannot emulate Wesley. There is no way that we can take the theology and the actions of Wesley and simply transplant it all into the 20th century, ignoring the period between the 18th and the 20th centuries. Our contexts are different though we may discover some very significant points of contact between them. What we can do is to hear Wesley's questions

and we can allow ourselves to be drawn into lively conversation with him. Some of these questions that we hear from Wesley might include the following;

- If Wesley went to those who needed him most and if he particularly went among the poor of his time, who are the poor in our day and do we feel a similar call to be found among them?
- Wesley had a great deal of respect for the structures of the Church of England but he sought to create church structures which would prepare people for and support people in mission. What of our church structures in our day? Do they actively support people in the doing of God's work and do we provide those structures through which people may themselves grow in love and Christian maturity?
- Wesley sought to hold together inward commitment to God and the working out of the social consequences of that commitment. How are we able to hold together prayer on the one hand and care for the shape of society on the other, the Covenant Service on the one hand and the social creed of the church on the other. Some of the greatest Methodists in our country and beyond have been people who have been able to hold these two things together. In our own history people like Percy Paris and Ormond Burton and Ashleigh Petch are examples of this. In England people like Donald Soper represent this same stream.
- Wesley invited people to centre their beliefs on the central doctrines of the Christian faith and from this base to live with a Catholic spirit. What of us in our day? How do we recapture such a sense of catholicity in our living and our loving?
- Wesley knew that the way towards growth in the Christian faith was through discipline. What's happened to discipline in Methodism? Have we become so soaked in 20th century attitudes that we distrust any sense of personal discipline.
- Wesley was certain that the action of the Holy Spirit within the life of a believer is to draw us towards a life of love. The work of the Holy Spirit has less to do with extravagant experiences than it has to do with the quiet and persistent growth of love in our lives. Is there a question here that we need to ask ourselves in our day?

Other questions will emerge out of the individual's conversation with Wesley. Here is the core of Methodist identity, living in conversation with this classic Christian personality and the theology and the way of being Christian and being about God's mission that emerged from his living. As Davies reminds us, Wesley himself is part of a stream of Christian living and believing.

It is out of this conversation that we find our identity. There is a fading identity within Methodism and this is largely due to the fading memory of John Wesley. Our identity is found as we engage in conversation with the larger Christian tradition and with John Wesley as part of that tradition. Our identity is found in community with one another where we share our experiences of God and of the Christian living. Our identity is found together we seek to be part of God's mission to our world and to the neighbourhoods in which we find ourselves. To be Methodist is to allow ourselves to be addressed by that particular part of the ecumenical tradition and heritage which we have responsibility for. To give up the larger conversation with the Christian tradition is to give up being Christian. To give up a conversation with Wesley is to give up the reason for being Methodist. Ecumenism is primarily the sharing of the conversations that we each have with that portion of the Christian heritage that has shaped us and is shaping us. In ecumenical dialogue we overhear what the others have found to be of value in their heritage and we invite them to share it with us.

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