

**“AND ARE WE YET ALIVE?”:
METHODISM IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1945-2010**

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Since the days of John Wesley British Methodism has collected, tabulated, analyzed and worried over statistics. In the nineteenth century, figures for Methodist membership became a source of pride in the hands of denominational leaders like Hugh Price Hughes and of disbelief to liberal academics like Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford.¹ More than a decade of unprecedented numerical decline in the years around the First World War caused alarm, perplexity and soul-searching in Wesleyan ranks.² In the second half of the twentieth century, however, such depressing statistics became commonplace, and the triennial returns for 1992-95 reported not only a decline of 8.2% over three years (a drop in membership of 28,000) but an accelerating rate of loss, year on year.³ This prompted the secular media to publish stories about the “meltdown” of Methodism in Great Britain, while some scholars predicted that the Methodist Church would be extinct by 2035.⁴

Although reports of the death of Methodism in Great Britain have been much exaggerated, it is undeniable that the hopes associated with Methodist reunion in 1932 and with post-war reconstruction after 1945 have not been realized. The second half of the twentieth century was undoubtedly a difficult time for British Methodism, prompting one researcher of the period to borrow and amend the first phrase of a Wesley hymn, to give the title “See how great a flame *expires*.”⁵ Debate continues within the British Connexion over how best to reshape the Church for a new society, and indeed over whether Methodism has fulfilled its mission and should cease to exist, or

¹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), 1; compare Dorothea Price Hughes, *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 161-162.

² Martin Wellings, “‘A Time to be Born and a Time to Die’? A Historian’s Perspective on the Future of Methodism,” in *Methodism and the Future*, ed. Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (London: Cassell, 1999), 149.

³ “Church Membership,” in the Agenda of the Methodist Conference, 1996, 12.

⁴ “Introduction,” in Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte and Sarah Williams, eds., *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 3.

⁵ Title of a thesis by the Revd. Dr. John Haley. The hymn, “See how great a flame aspires,” used without irony, gave the title to the Wesley bicentenary exhibition “How Great a Flame” in 1938: Rupert Davies, “Since 1932,” in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* [hereafter *HMCGB*] (London: Epworth Press), iii (1983), 363.

has fossilized beyond hope of rejuvenation.⁶ This anxious prospect forms the background for this paper, which seeks to give an outline of the story of Methodism in Great Britain since the end of the Second World War.

The approach taken in the paper will be to offer a brief survey of scholarship on this subject, then to set the scene by sketching the principal characteristics of Methodism in 1945, and finally to explore developments between 1945 and the present in four chronological sections. In each section an overview of British political and social life will be provided before turning to the inner life of the Methodist Church. It is recognized that there are inevitable problems with a chronological approach and some advantages in approaching the subject thematically, but the massive social and cultural changes which took place in the two-thirds of a century under review mean that the benefits of tracing themes are outweighed by the discontinuities over time.⁷ It is also recognized that the survey which follows is inevitably selective.

The Story So Far: Studies of Twentieth-Century British Methodism

There are very few general works wholly dedicated to the history of British Methodism in the years after 1945.⁸ Rupert Davies, co-editor of the monumental four-volume *History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, supplied two chapter-length studies of the years from Methodist Union to the 1980s: an essay in the third volume of the *History*, entitled “Since 1932,” and his Wesley Historical Society Lecture of 1982, published in the symposium *The Testing of the Churches 1932-1982*. Here, as elsewhere, Davies promotes an ecumenical agenda, arguing that Methodism’s evangelical passion and commitment to social justice would best be used as gifts offered to the “coming great church.”⁹ Very different in style and substance is George Thompson Brake’s massive survey of *Policy and Politics in British Methodism 1932-1982*, published in 1984. The particular strength of Brake’s work is an extensive and impressive acquaintance with Connexional documents and Conference decisions. The only general history which has appeared since the mid-1980s is *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1998*, by John Munsey Turner, which brings the story almost to the end of the millennium. Turner concludes his work with a chapter on ‘Methodism and the Future,’ listing “nine ways in which Methodism may have an important,

⁶ See, for example, the General Secretary’s report in the Agenda of the Methodist Conference, 2007, 17-29.

⁷ For general surveys of British political and social history in this period, see Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace: British History 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990); T. O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: History of the United Kingdom 1906-2001* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002 [5th edition]); Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2007) and A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986 [3rd edition]).

⁸ See Martin Wellings, “Methodism in the UK and Ireland,” in Charles Yrigoyen Jr., ed., *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 82-83.

⁹ Rupert Davies, “Methodism,” in idem., ed., *The Testing of the Churches 1932-1982* (London: Epworth, 1982), 57-58; compare to the thrust of Davies’ *The Church in our Times: An Ecumenical History from a British Perspective* (London: Epworth, 1979).

continuing role” in the twenty-first century.¹⁰

Beside these studies, Methodism features in general histories of British or English Christianity in the late twentieth century, notably in books by Adrian Hastings,¹¹ Callum Brown,¹² Hugh McLeod¹³ and Kenneth Hylson-Smith.¹⁴ The history of Methodism offers illustrative material to scholars of secularization, as will be seen later. Furthermore, Methodism’s social ethics and political engagements are considered in several dedicated studies, as well as in general surveys of the period.¹⁵

British Methodism in 1945

The position of the Methodist Church in Great Britain in 1945 may be summed up in six characteristics. First, the Methodist Church was numerically strong, although not as strong as it had been half a generation earlier. The Connexion was by far the largest of the Protestant Free Churches (as distinguished from the Established Churches of England and Scotland, and the Roman Catholic Church), and it maintained a nationwide presence in cities, towns and villages. In 1945, there were 752,659 members of the Methodist Church, 3,475 ministers in the active work, more than 26,000 Local Preachers and 10,967 Sunday Schools serving 706,000 scholars. Methodism’s 1,100 circuits and 15,000 chapels stretched from the Shetland Isles off the coast of Scotland to the Channel Islands of Guernsey, Jersey and Sark, close to northern France. Methodist places of worship included vast Central Halls in London and the industrial cities, imposing suburban churches with busy programs of activities, and chapels in market towns and rural villages.¹⁶ Against these impressive figures, however, may be set both the still more impressive statistics of 1932: 919,099 members, 31,600 Local Preachers, 13,000 Sunday Schools and 1,360,000 scholars,¹⁷ and also the Herculean challenge of reconstruction after the dislocation and physical devastation of the world war.¹⁸

Second, the Methodist Church of Great Britain was celebrating union, but

¹⁰ John Munsey Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1998* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998), 90-6.

¹¹ Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985* (London: Collins, 1986, with several revised editions thereafter).

¹² Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006).

¹³ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).

¹⁴ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*, iii (London: SCM Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Michael J. Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2008); G.I.T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁶ *Minutes of Conference* [hereafter *M/C*] (London), 1945, 54-95, 172, 176-177, 179.

¹⁷ Figures in *HMCGB*, iv (1988), 648-649. Successful amalgamation of local churches and Sunday schools may account for some of the reductions between 1932 and 1945.

¹⁸ The Department for Chapel Affairs published *Methodist Church Buildings: Statistical Returns including Seating Accommodation as at July 1st 1940* (Manchester, 1940). This indicates the extent of war damage less than a year after the outbreak of hostilities, with circuits in London and on the south coast reporting damage to almost every chapel.

still working to make it effective. In 1945, the united Church was only thirteen years old. For more than sixty years after John Wesley’s death in 1791, the amazing numerical growth of the Methodist movement was accompanied by a whole series of secessions and expulsions which left Methodism divided into seven competing Connexions. Relations between these bodies, nationally and locally, were often strained. The painful process of reunion began in the 1850s; three denominations united in 1907; and the Wesleyan,¹⁹ Primitive and United Methodist Connexions came together, after some twenty years of tortuous negotiations, in 1932.²⁰ Despite the enthusiasm of the Uniting Conference, the hopes for more effective witness and the combined strength of the new Church, much work remained to be done in amalgamating denominational bureaucracies, eliminating “overlapping” local circuits and churches, and healing more than a century of contentious and contested memories. By 1945, the central departments and regional structures of the Church had been re-organized, but union at local level was still patchy. In Oxford, for example, three circuits became two in 1933 and fully united in 1941, but in Northampton, where Primitive Methodism was strong, ex-Wesleyan and ex-Primitive Circuits continued until 1959, and the eventual amalgamation was described as nothing short of a “miracle.”²¹

Third, the newly united Church had a common authorized liturgy and hymnal, but also experienced some variations in styles of worship and delays in the reception of the authorized texts. Most Methodist churches would not follow a printed liturgy for Sunday services, except perhaps for monthly Holy Communion, but when a liturgy was needed, it was provided by the 1936 *Book of Offices*.²² More important, because used more regularly, the united Church had a common hymnal. Work on the new book had begun in 1929, and the *Methodist Hymn Book* was available by the end of 1933. Although some churches quickly invested in the new hymnal, there are indications that others were slow to adopt it, and other hymn books remained in use.²³ There were, moreover, differences in worship style across the Connexion. Some

¹⁹ Note that the original Connexion, from which other groups departed or were expelled, was called “Wesleyan” Methodism. In the British context, therefore, “Wesleyan” is as likely to refer to an ecclesiastical denomination as to a theological position.

²⁰ John Kent, *The Age of Disunity* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 1-43; Robert Currie, *Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), especially chapters 7 and 8.

²¹ *M/C*, 1933 and 1941; “Northampton Miracle,” *Methodist Recorder* [hereafter *MR*] (London), October 1, 1959, 1.

²² David M. Chapman, *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain* (Warrington: Church in the Market Place, 2006), 31-32; A.R. G[eorge], “Book of Offices,” in *A Dictionary of Methodism in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. John A. Vickers [hereafter *DMBI*] (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 36; Norman Wallwork, “Developments in Liturgy and Worship in Twentieth Century Protestant Nonconformity,” in *Protestant Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Alan P.F. Sell and Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 125-128.

²³ Andrew Pratt, *O for a Thousand Tongues: The 1933 Methodist Hymn Book in Context* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004), esp. 193 and 211. It is indicative of the relative importance of hymnody and liturgy in British Methodism that an entire book has been devoted to the 1933 hymn book, and only a few pages to the *Book of Offices*.

of these were due to the inherited traditions of the uniting denominations: ex-Wesleyan chapels which followed Wesley's Order of Morning Prayer, with chanted psalms and canticles, or ex-Primitive or United Methodist chapels where Local Preachers presided at the Lord's Supper as a matter of course. Many, however, reflected social context and aspirations. Affluent ex-Primitive chapels in urban areas might boast of robed choirs in grand Gothic buildings, while many ex-Wesleyan societies were humble village causes indistinguishable from their ex-Primitive neighbors.²⁴

Fourth, Methodism enjoyed considerable doctrinal and theological homogeneity. A focus on the debates preceding the 1932 Union might suggest otherwise, with arguments over the status of the ministry, eucharistic presidency and the value and authority of John Wesley's *Forty Four Sermons* and his *Notes on the New Testament* as doctrinal standards for the new Church. A working agreement was reached on these points, however, enshrined in the doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union. More important, robust exchanges between Wesleyan defenders of ministerial prerogatives and Primitive Methodist champions of the rights of the laity should not be allowed to distract attention from the shared heritage of evangelical Arminianism across the Connexions. This heritage derived from the Wesleys, even if this was not always acknowledged. Furthermore, between about 1890 and 1920 most theologians and many preachers of all Methodist traditions had come to an accommodation with biblical criticism, modern science and contemporary culture, transposing their evangelicalism into a broadly liberal evangelical key. Methodism was officially proud to be evangelical, but it eschewed fundamentalism, at least at the level of formal theology: in the circuits, staunch conservatism and "folk fundamentalism" could still be encountered.²⁵

Fifth, Methodism combined a strong social conscience with an evolving understanding of holiness. The 1932 Deed of Union affirmed that the Church "ever remembers that in the Providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread Scriptural Holiness through the land."²⁶ Behind the familiar phrases, however, lay three quarters of a century of theological development which saw some Methodists emphasizing steady growth in grace and love, and others advocating an experience of sanctification by faith.²⁷ In private life, Methodist ethics had been influenced by pan-evangelical Victorian respectability and then softened by the liberalization of the late nineteenth century; the temperance movement remained powerful across the Connexion, and a commitment to total abstinence from alcohol was seen as

²⁴ See examples in Turner, *Modern Methodism in England*, 12-13.

²⁵ Martin Wellings, "Evangelicalism in Twentieth Century Methodism," in *British Evangelical Identities*, ed. Mark Smith (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

²⁶ *M/C* 1932, 302.

²⁷ David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth Century England* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), chapter 3, explores these developments; John Munsey Turner, "Calvinism and Arminianism—again!," *A Thankful Heart and a Discerning Mind*, ed. Mervyn Davies (Lonely Scribe, 2010), 157-158.

a hallmark of Methodist morality.²⁸ Connexionally, however, Methodism’s social conscience in 1945 had widened considerably since the days when temperance and social purity were its chief concerns. To these traditional evangelical emphases, reflected in Conference statements on total abstinence (1933), gambling (1936), leisure (1935), and the use of Sunday (1939), were added reflections on industry, the social order (1934) and war and peace. In its teaching on marriage and family life the Conference acknowledged the possibility of marriage after divorce.²⁹ Active engagement with social issues remained a feature of the Connexion throughout the twentieth century, although the outlook of the Temperance and Social Welfare Department, later the Christian Citizenship Department and still later the Division of Social Responsibility, did not always accord with grassroots Methodist opinion and prejudice.

Sixth, Methodism was committed to mission, although denominational leaders were exercised about how to mobilize the broader membership in this cause. According to the Deed of Union, Scriptural Holiness was to be spread “by the proclamation of the Evangelical Faith.” The careful recording of membership statistics every year and their tabulation by circuits and Districts reflected an assumption that the Connexion should grow, principally through evangelism. Plans for a new “forward movement” of evangelistic endeavor to follow on from Methodist Union were disrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939, but the Home Mission Department ran a series of “Christian Commando Campaigns” between 1941 and 1947, taking the gospel to factories, canteens, offices, shops and cinemas.³⁰ Cliff College, absorbed into the Wesleyan Connexion in 1903, continued to train lay evangelists and to send its students to lead missions in local churches. Open-air preaching was expected of the ministers of the urban central missions and was practiced by theological college students. British Methodism retained the structure of class meetings inherited from John Wesley and adopted by every branch of the divided movement in the nineteenth century, although this tool for Christian nurture had lost much of its cutting edge and had been supplemented by newer groups like the Wesley Guild and Christian Endeavour. In *The Message and Mission of Methodism* (1946) an influential Conference committee acknowledged “the efforts that are being made in this country to win Christian disciples” but also expressed concern that “our churches are not consumed by a passion to constrain men and women to walk with God in

²⁸ George Thompson Brake, *Drink: Ups and Downs of Methodist Attitudes to Temperance* (London: Oliphants, 1974), including the reminder on page 113 that the prohibition of intoxicating liquor on Methodist premises was only introduced in 1942. For the image of British Methodists as teetotalers, see Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity according to the Wesleys* (London: Epworth Press, 1956), 32.

²⁹ George Thompson Brake, *Policy and Politics in British Methodism 1932-1982* (London: Edsall, 1984), chapters 10 and 11 on “The Social Witness of the Methodist Church”; Turner, *Modern Methodism in England*, 30.

³⁰ Colin A. Roberts, ed., *These Christian Commando Campaigns* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), esp. 7-10.

the light and by the power of Christ.”³¹

British Methodism in 1945, then, was numerically strong, rich in resources and heir to a great tradition of spirituality and action. Perceptive leaders recognized, however, that it was also in need of energy and direction if it was to face the challenges of the post-war world. It is to that world that attention will now turn.

Reconstruction, Revival and Reunion, 1945-1963

Reconstruction was a key theme of post-war British politics and society. This involved not just the physical rebuilding of shattered towns and cities and the re-establishment of a peace-time economy, but the reshaping of society and international relations.³² Arguably the war generated a new social consensus and produced a determination to forge a new social order. The Attlee administration—Britain’s first majority Labour government—has been described as “the most competent, effective and honorable reforming administration in modern British history.”³³ It built on the legacy of social policy going back to Lloyd George, took forward the proposals of the Beveridge report and inaugurated the Welfare State. Key industries were brought into State ownership. Overseas, the Indian empire was given independence (1947).

Of course there were problems. At home, there was economic exhaustion, continuing austerity and a degree of political tension over the government’s reform program. In Europe, political changes foreshadowed the outbreak of the “Cold War,” bringing Britain into ever-closer and controversial alignment with the United States and into opposition, politically and ideologically, to the Soviet Union and its satellites. These broad lines of development continued under the Conservatives after 1951, with the gradual replacement of post-war austerity by the affluence of the 1950s, the era epitomized by Harold Macmillan’s slogan: “You’ve never had it so good,”³⁴ and the consensus politics of Butskellism.³⁵ David Kynaston sums up the late 1950s in terms of plentiful food, full employment and well-furnished homes, providing “a widespread, almost wholly welcome sense of security after the tumultuous upheavals and painful privations of the 1940s.” Kynaston also notes a tension between the majority, looking forward to a future which was “indis-

³¹ *The Message and Method of Methodism* (London, 1946), vii.

³² Among recent studies of the period, see Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) and *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) and *Family Britain 1951-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), and Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1982; 4th ed. 2003).

³³ Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, 403.

³⁴ Hence Hennessy and Sandbrook’s titles. The quotation from Macmillan’s 1957 speech may be found in Hennessy, *Having It So Good*, 1.

³⁵ Derived from a phrase coined by *The Economist* in 1954 to express the common ground on Keynesian economics and support of the Welfare State between the Conservative R. A. Butler and the Labour moderate, Hugh Gaitskell: Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 383.

putably modern—yet . . . within a familiar, reassuring setting” and those who wanted to break decisively with social conservatism.³⁶ Security, affluence and opportunity created the conditions for radical change in society, and this became apparent in the 1960s. In the 1950s though, the instincts of a more traditional and deferential society remained strong, and the pace, extent and direction of change were up for discussion.

Before turning to Methodism in this period, it may be noted that there is lively debate among historians about the state of the churches in Britain in the 1950s. As part of the backdrop to his thesis arguing for sudden and catastrophic decline in the 1960s (itself a challenge to older theories of secularization stretching back into the nineteenth century), Callum Brown has accentuated the strength of Christian believing and behaving in the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that these two decades “witnessed the greatest church growth that Britain had experienced since the mid-nineteenth century.”³⁷ In Brown’s view, “The 1950s were about perfecting Victorian values and finally distributing their fruits.”³⁸ This reading has been challenged by other historians who have drawn attention to the erosion of popular religion at least since the 1930s.³⁹ Without endorsing a theory of inevitable secularization from the 1880s, if not earlier, it is possible to argue that religious belief and practice in post-war Britain were facing major challenges.

Turning to British Methodism, between 1945 and 1963 the Connexion set to work to repair war damage and to respond to the relocation of population to the “New Towns” launched by the Labour government in 1946. The same year saw the publication of *The Methodist Church Builds Again*, part-manifesto and part-handbook, written by the Connexional Chapel Department Secretaries, Benson Perkins and Albert Hearn. Faced with unprecedented shifts in population, the rapid development of new communities and the consequent decline of city centre and urban “inner belt” churches, Methodism responded with a vigorous program of church building and church planting. War damage helped the process, as redundant buildings were not repaired and compensation from the War Damage Commission was used to fund new work. Albert Hearn, making his final report to Conference on behalf of the Chapel Committee in 1958, claimed that Methodism was spending £2 million per annum on new buildings. Three years later, Hearn’s successor, Oliver Phillipson, reported that the Connexion had disposed of 2,810 properties since 1932 and had carried through a £12 million building program over six years. In the London suburban circuits, for example, Ealing and Acton saw five building schemes in six years and Harrow eight schemes in ten years. At Little Chalfont, in the Buckinghamshire commuter belt, a typical new

³⁶ Kynaston, 697.

³⁷ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 170.

³⁸ Brown, 175.

³⁹ See, for example, S. J. D. Green, “Was There an English Religious Revival in the 1950s?,” *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 7.9 (Cambridge: URCHS, 2006): 517-538, and Richard Sykes, “Popular Religion in Decline: A Study from the Black Country,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge): 56.2 (April, 2005): 287-307.

church was opened a stone's throw from the Metropolitan line tube station, to accommodate a Methodist society less than ten years old. A cluster of new churches, some of them dual purpose halls, was constructed to serve the expanding towns of Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. In Manchester, the vast new estate at Wythenshawe, built to house 100,000 people, was provided with a new church costing £60,000: significantly, the Methodist dignitary who laid the foundation stone was also Lord Mayor of Manchester and chair of the Corporation's Housing Committee.⁴⁰ Almost every issue of the *Recorder* in the 1950s carried reports of buildings refurbished, extended or constructed on new sites as Methodism sought to reposition its plant for the post-war world. This redevelopment could materially assist the local union of Methodist churches: the new Spring Bank chapel in Hull, for example, opened in October, 1959, replaced four older buildings, two ex-Wesleyan and two ex-Primitive, from three different circuits.⁴¹

At the same time Methodism engaged in evangelism and looked for revival. The World Methodist Council met in Oxford in 1951, and suggested a "simultaneous mission in World Methodism," beginning with a year of preparation in 1952, leading to a worldwide campaign in 1953.⁴² The WMC's idea caught the imagination—or raised the hopes—of British Methodist leaders, and 1952-1953 saw plenty of encouragement given to evangelism. The campaign was commended by the President and Vice-President of the Conference, Howard Watkin-Jones and Cecil Pawson. The President-designate, Colin Roberts, was known to be an effective strategist for evangelism, and he brought the resources of the Home Mission Department to bear on the preparations. Vincent Taylor wrote a series of articles on "Doctrine and Evangelism" for the *Methodist Recorder*. Above all, however, W. E. Sangster devoted his energies and enthusiasm to the cause, in a stream of articles and pamphlets. As Donald Soper commented in his Presidential address, despite these efforts, the results of the year were disappointing: Methodism had seen "a thin but steady trickle of converts," but "whatever has happened revival has not come, at least in the time-honored sense of that much used and much abused word."⁴³ The major impact came, not with the WMC simultaneous mission of 1953 but with the visits of Billy Graham in 1954-1955. This proved controversial in Methodism, with Soper notoriously describing Graham's understanding of the gospel as "spiritual

⁴⁰ *MR*, 17 (July, 1958): 6; "Look on Credit Side," *MR*, 5 (January, 1961): 1; "Greater London Needs Churches Now," *MR*, 20 (November, 1958): 1; "Builders' Log," *MR*, 8 (October, 1959): 12. Mention should be made of the guidance offered by the Department for Chapel Affairs as early as 1946 in E. Benson Perkins and Albert Hearn, *The Methodist Church Builds Again* (London: Epworth Press, [1946]).

⁴¹ "Fourfold Union for Hull," *MR*, 5 (February, 1959): 5 (and October 1, 1959, 2).

⁴² W. E. Sangster, "The World Methodist Mission: How it Began," *MR*, 10 (January, 1952): 4.

⁴³ H. Watkin-Jones, "Do Not Wait Until 1953," *MR*, 3 (April, 1952): 3; W. E. Sangster, "So Far, so Good," *MR*, 5 (June, 1952): 4; *MR*, 17 (July, 1952): 3 (Roberts' Presidential Address); Vincent Taylor, *Doctrine and Evangelism* (London, 1953), based on twenty articles in the *MR*; *MR*, 16 (July, 1953): 3. Others were more positive: thus Leslie Davison wrote of "grand work for God" in the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District, *MR*, 3 (December, 1953) 1.

fascism,”⁴⁴ but many Methodists were touched by the Graham “crusades.” Meanwhile, local churches continued to undertake programs of evangelism in their neighborhoods.

Methodist work with children and young people changed and expanded in these years. For more than a century Sunday Schools had been at the heart of local youth work. In the last decade of the nineteenth century Wesley Guild and Christian Endeavour groups were set up to cater to young adults, but by the 1930s both organizations were in decline. The post-1945 world, however, saw a massive expansion in State-funded youth clubs and in higher education. Methodism already had successful local clubs, but with the creation of the Methodist Youth Department in 1943 and the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs (MAYC) two years later, a central structure was provided which was able to resource national events on a large scale, with MAYC’s annual London Weekend bringing thousands of young people to the capital. By 1963, MAYC comprised 3,400 clubs, with a total membership of 110,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 20.⁴⁵ In the meantime, groups for university students, launched with small numbers in the 1930s, grew exponentially in the 1950s and 1960s to be among the largest organizations in the universities.⁴⁶

Methodist overseas missions were also reshaped in these years, partly in conjunction with the process of decolonization as the British Empire was gradually dismantled.⁴⁷ Indian independence in 1947 coincided with the inauguration of the Church of South India, after twenty eight years of preparation and ecumenical negotiation. British Methodism gave full support and recognition to the CSI and its ministers. The Conference of 1953 appointed a commission to consider “the profound changes now taking place in the political, social and economic structure of the nations” and “the effect of these changes upon the missionary work of the Church.”⁴⁸ The commission’s report of 1955 advocated greater autonomy for the Overseas Districts, and set out the aim of moving towards a series of autonomous Churches, each with its own Conference. An Overseas Consultation at Skegness in 1961 reaffirmed this decision, and the process of granting autonomy to Methodist Churches overseas began with Ghana in 1960. It was hoped that the newly autonomous Churches would be able more easily to enter into ecumenical partnerships.⁴⁹

On a similar ecumenical note, the Methodist Church itself began to engage in a process of “Conversations” with the Church of England. The im-

⁴⁴ “The President and Billy Graham,” *MR*, 4 (March, 1954): 13.

⁴⁵ M. J. Seaton, “Baby or Bathwater: What Might the Birth of Methodism and Methodist Youth Work Offer Christianity in the 21st Century?,” MA diss., King’s College, London, 2003, esp. 34. I am grateful to Mike Seaton for a copy of his unpublished dissertation.

⁴⁶ Turner, *Modern Methodism in England*, 76-78.

⁴⁷ The chapter on Overseas Missions in *HMCGB* iii finishes in 1932; a new history of Methodist missions is still in preparation. This section draws on Brake, *Policy and Politics*, chapter 17.

⁴⁸ Brake, 781.

⁴⁹ Brake, 790-791.

mediate cause was Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher's 1946 Cambridge University Sermon, "A Step Forward in Church Relations," in which Fisher invited the Free Churches to consider taking some form of the historic episcopate into their systems as a way of facilitating intercommunion.⁵⁰ The archbishop's initiative produced a positive response, and the resulting discussions between representatives of the Free Churches and the Church of England led to the report *Church Relations in England*, published in 1950. In 1952 and 1953, the Methodist Conference, alone among the Free Churches, declared its readiness to proceed with the Conversations provided certain conditions were met, although concern was expressed from the floor of Conference that Methodist leaders might be out of touch with the rank and file of the Connexion on episcopacy. In 1955, the Convocations of Canterbury and York also agreed to proceed, and a committee was set up, with broad membership but somewhat ambiguous terms of reference. This committee published its first report, the *Interim Statement*, in the summer of 1958.⁵¹ Despite some acrimonious correspondence in the *Methodist Recorder* and a dozen critical memorials from the circuits, the 1959 Conference voted in favor of continuing with the Conversations.⁵² Dialogue continued for another four years until the publication of *Conversations between The Church of England and The Methodist Church. A Report* in 1963. This document, containing substantive proposals for a two-stage scheme of reunion between the two denominations, ignited a controversy which lasted for almost a decade, and which will be considered in the next section of this paper.

It is difficult not to indulge in the luxury of hindsight when describing the 1940s and 1950s. There was plenty of anxiety around in this period, both about the threat of the Cold War and the shadow of nuclear weapons, and about the effectiveness of the Churches in a changing society. Christopher Driver's provocative book *A Future for the Free Churches?* appeared in 1962, arguing that "the decline of the Free Churches has gone . . . too far to be retrievable" and advocating a process of reunion among British denominations.⁵³ Donald Soper had already angered the Methodist Conference by suggesting that Methodism was "a dying Church."⁵⁴ It is easy to see Soper and Driver as prophets of the cataclysm which struck the Churches in the 1960s and which made even their gloomiest predictions look sanguine, but it needs to be remembered that the years immediately after the war saw considerable achievements, and that Methodism's statistics in 1963 (719,286 mem-

⁵⁰ This section of the paper draws on John Munsey Turner, "The Walk to the Paradise Garden," in his *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England 1740-1982* (London, 1985).

⁵¹ Turner, 193-196; John A. Newton, "Protestant Nonconformists and Ecumenism," in Sell and Cross, *Protestant Nonconformity*, 366; Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 99-103; *MR*, Conference Sketch, 30 (July, 1953): 9.

⁵² "Conference: The Conversations Will Go On," *MR*, 23 (July, 1959): 7.

⁵³ Christopher Driver, *A Future for the Free Churches?* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 151, 155-156. Driver was a Congregationalist, and a journalist.

⁵⁴ *MR*, 17 (July, 1958): 6-8.

bers, 3,395 ministers and 21,788 Local Preachers) were not too far below those of 1945.⁵⁵ Things were to change dramatically in the next few years, however, as will be seen below.

Prosperity, Permissiveness, and Pluralism, 1963-1975

The 1960s and 1970s were a roller-coaster in British political and social life.⁵⁶ Harold Macmillan’s Conservative administration collapsed in a welter of scandal and intrigue, and October, 1964, saw the advent of a Labour government led by Harold Wilson. The change of administration seemed to mark the end of an era: the final defeat of a complacent, backward-looking, patrician Establishment, resting on a culture of deference and repression, and the inauguration of a new regime championing modernization, enterprise and personal freedom. Under Labour, capital punishment was abolished, the abortion and divorce laws were liberalized, homosexual acts were decriminalized, and State censorship of the theatre ended. A new system of “comprehensive” education was promoted, and the university sector continued to expand. At the same time, the world of popular culture was revolutionized by new music and by competing youth movements. Although the direct impact of many of these changes on ordinary people was distinctly limited, there was a new mood in British society, as the affluence of the 1950s evolved inexorably into the consumer culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Social diversity, encouraged by economic prosperity and changing attitudes, was also increased by immigration from the Commonwealth, prompting racial tensions and unrest. As Britain retreated from Empire and sought a new role in the world, links were cultivated with the European Economic Community. Britain was rebuffed in 1963 by General De Gaulle’s veto, but the Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, took Britain into the EEC in 1971, and this was confirmed by a referendum in 1975.

What impact did the 1960s have on the British Churches?⁵⁷ Numbers fell, in all denominations, as affluence, leisure and changing patterns of family life eroded church attendance,⁵⁸ and as what Callum Brown calls “the institutional structures of cultural traditionalism started to crumble.”⁵⁹ Some Christians welcomed the new freedoms, and sought to recast theology and ethics for the new world. Old orthodoxies in biblical and systematic theology were rejected, and sections of the Church embraced liberation movements in South Africa and Latin America. At the same time there was a revival of traditional Evangelicalism, accompanied by the spread of neo-pentecostal or

⁵⁵ *M/C* 1963, 95, 100-101.

⁵⁶ For this period, see the works listed in note 7 above, and also Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years: Britain in the Sixties* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), and Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006).

⁵⁷ Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, part vi, offers a magisterial summary.

⁵⁸ David Bebbington, “Evangelism and Spirituality in Twentieth-Century Protestant Nonconformity,” in Sell and Cross, *Protestant Nonconformity*, 203.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 176.

charismatic teaching and exuberance across the denominations. Meanwhile, pastoral and liturgical reform was undertaken, with increasing ecumenical sharing of texts and resources. Ambitious goals were set for the reunion of the historic denominations, while local ecumenical projects (LEPs) were encouraged as precursors of “the coming great church.”

In Methodism, the 1960s have come to be associated supremely with the “Conversations” with the Church of England.⁶⁰ Adrian Hastings is scathing in his summary: “Methodism in the 1960s, while awaiting union, had little history, except for an unprecedented rate of numerical decline. At the end it was left with only a smack in the face.”⁶¹ In terms of what was happening in Methodist churches up and down the country between 1963, when the first formal *Report* was published, and 1972, when the General Synod of the Church of England failed to give the scheme sufficient support to enable it to proceed, this judgment is unfair and inaccurate: the real work of Methodism, arguably, was focused in local congregations and in the spiritual experience of the denomination’s 700,000 members.⁶² Nor were the “Conversations” the sole business of the Connexion or of the Conference. The debate did, however, grab headlines, generate considerable passion and reveal tensions within the Methodist Church. Hastings’ comment that Methodism was “awaiting union” accurately reflects the overwhelming support given to the scheme in its different versions by the Conference in 1965, 1969, and 1970, but it does not give due weight to the vocal opposition at Connexional level, nor does it pick up the disquiet felt in the circuits. The sense that the Conference was out of touch with the grassroots of the Church, expressed as early as 1953, was manifested again in secessions from the Connexion in the early 1970s by disgruntled evangelicals,⁶³ and has become a recurring feature of Methodist life.

One political consequence of the protracted negotiations with the Church of England was a delay in the ordination of women in the Methodist Church. The Conference accepted as early as 1933 that there was no reason in principle why women should not be ordained to the presbyterate, and this was reaffirmed in 1938 and 1945. In 1948, Conference backed away from its previous commitment. The question was reopened in 1959, and after five years of inconclusive reports, it was agreed in 1965 not to proceed unilaterally while the Conversations were under discussion. The failure of the Conversations opened the way for the admission of women to the ministry, and the first ordinations took place in 1974.⁶⁴

It has already been noted that liturgical reform was a feature of many de-

⁶⁰ Full accounts of the debates may be found in Turner, “Walk to the Paradise Garden,” 194-214, and Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 104-144.

⁶¹ Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, 549.

⁶² The membership stood at 719,286 in 1963, and 651,139 in 1969 (*M/C* (1963), 95 and (1969), 105). After 1969, annual returns of membership were no longer published in the *Minutes of Conference*.

⁶³ Wellings, “Evangelicalism in Twentieth-Century Methodism,” 46, 59.

⁶⁴ Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 314-328; P. M. W[ebb], “Women,” *DMBI*, 399;

nominations in the 1960s and 1970s. The Methodist Church undertook a revision of the 1936 *Book of Offices*, a process which began with a Conference committee in 1957 and a report in 1960, and which finally produced *The Methodist Service Book (MSB)* in 1975.⁶⁵ Key features of the *MSB* were the modernization of language in the services and the influence of the Liturgical Movement on the shape of the liturgy, particularly the liturgy of the eucharist.⁶⁶ The use of more contemporary language, echoing the availability of modern translations of the Bible, reflected the changing style of worship in general, with its quest for accessibility. The lectionary in the *MSB* anchored Methodist preaching more firmly in the ecumenically approved cycle of readings drawn up by the Joint Liturgical Group. The statement that Christian worship “in its fullness . . . includes the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion” marked a change of emphasis from the traditional Methodist preaching service, and indicated the cross-fertilization of ideas among liturgical scholars.⁶⁷ It remained the case that most Methodist services were non-eucharistic and that most were conducted by Local Preachers, but developments in the 1960s and 1970s, reflected in the thinking behind the *MSB* and in revised training material for Local Preachers, steered Methodist worship towards more lectionary-based preaching, greater use of printed resources, and a service structured around a three-fold form of approach, word and response. This pattern gradually took over from a model dominated by the sermon as the concluding climax of worship. It is also worth mentioning here that afternoon Sunday Schools declined sharply in the 1960s, leading to a new emphasis on all-age worship as part of Sunday morning services, with a renamed “Junior Church” following an experiential approach to Christian education through *Partners in Learning*, a teaching program based on the JLG lectionary.⁶⁸

Another significant development in Methodism in this period was the gradual acceptance of diversity and pluralism in the Church. As a matter of stubborn fact, there had always been “many Methodisms,” but Methodist rhetoric, with its cherished imagery of “the Body” and “the Connexion,” its emphasis on “our doctrines” and “our discipline,” and its sometimes complacent extolling of the superiority of Methodist “fellowship” over the *koinonia* of other denominations refused to recognize the possibility of tolerating serious disagreement. The strength of the Connexional machinery, moreover, particularly in the selection of candidates for the ministry and in controlling the itinerancy, could make life very uncomfortable for those who strayed beyond the narrow bounds of acceptable variety. Conservative evangelicals in the 1930s, for example, were nervous about forming an organization

⁶⁵ Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 356-357.

⁶⁶ Neil Dixon, *At Your Service: A Commentary on the Methodist Service Book* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 11-13.

⁶⁷ *Methodist Service Book*, 45 (citing the 1984 edition).

⁶⁸ Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 604-607; Martin Wellings and Andrew Wood, “Facets of Formation: Theology through Training,” *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, ed. Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones and Helen Wareing (London: Continuum, 2004), 71.

which might be seen as dissenting from the mainstream liberal evangelical orthodoxy, while the fledgling Methodist Sacramental Fellowship attracted criticism for being sectional and divisive.⁶⁹ During the 1960s, however, the consensus which had dominated Methodist theology for half a century collapsed. Liberal evangelicalism in all Protestant denominations buckled under the pressures of neo-orthodoxy, resurgent conservatism, charismatic renewal and the new radicalism represented variously by *Honest to God*,⁷⁰ New Testament demythologization and Liberation theologies. Methodism had its conservative evangelicals, organized from 1955 in the Methodist Revival Fellowship and drawing on the older traditions of Cliff College and the Southport Convention. A new group, Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism (CEIM) was set up in 1970, largely through the initiative of Donald English. From the early 1960s there were Methodists involved in the growing charismatic movement. Meanwhile, theological and political radicals coalesced in the Renewal Group (1961) and the Alliance of Radical Methodists (1970). Rupert Davies, President of the Conference in 1970, made an appeal for theological reconciliation, and although this did not restore harmony or uniformity—as the controversy over the Local Preachers’ textbook *Doing Theology* in 1972 demonstrated—it moved Methodism from a spurious rhetoric of unity to an honest acknowledgment of pluralism.⁷¹

It was to be expected that the social changes of the 1960s would call forth a response from the Churches. Three aspects of Methodist thinking may be identified. First, the Church, through its Christian Citizenship Department, broadly welcomed the liberalization associated with the Labour government of 1964-1970, for instance the decriminalization of homosexual acts and the legalization of abortion. Second, a raft of statements adopted by the Conference in the 1930s (on Sunday observance, gambling, marriage of divorced persons, alcohol and drugs) were revisited in the light of changed social conditions. In most instances the Church did not relax its position, although it perhaps moved from a campaigning or declaratory attitude to a more persuasive one, aimed at influencing policy-makers in government and the media. Third, new issues came into greater prominence, particularly aid to the developing world, the debate around nuclear weapons and the “just

⁶⁹ Martin Wellings, “The Methodist Revival Fellowship 1952-1987,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (Birmingham), 57.3 (October, 2009), 94; Martin Wellings, “Discipline in Dispute: The Origins and Early History of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship,” *Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, Studies in Church History, Vol. 43 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), 388-398.

⁷⁰ A popularization of modern theology by John A. T. Robinson, then bishop of Woolwich; published in 1963, it became a bestseller and a *cause célèbre* (Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, 536-539).

⁷¹ Wellings, 103-104; on the *Doing Theology* controversy, see Wellings and Wood, “Facets of Formation,” 70, Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 367-369, and especially John Stacey, “Local Preachers and Theological Change,” *Workaday Preachers*, ed. Geoffrey Milburn and Margaret Batty (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1995), 283-289.

war,” and support for the anti-apartheid and other liberation movements.⁷² As noted above, there was some disagreement within the Connexion over the approach and emphases of the Department, and the World Council of Churches’ Program to Combat Racism (1969) proved particularly divisive.⁷³ Work remains to be done on the attitudes and behavior of ordinary Methodists in this period, but the move from promoting temperance to actively supporting overseas aid charities would seem to have been reflected in the priorities of church members as well as in departmental policy.

Finally, a major restructuring of the Church was undertaken between 1969 and 1975. The Conference was reduced in size; central departments were reorganized into seven Divisions; Circuit Quarterly Meetings were replaced by twice-yearly Circuit Meetings; and the local structure of separate Trustees’ and Leaders’ Meetings was replaced by a single Church Council for each local church.⁷⁴

The years between 1963 and 1975 were not entirely negative for British Methodism. The Church renewed its worship, sustained its youth work, fulfilled its commitment to ordain women, continued its social witness and introduced a more efficient national and local structure. However, in little more than a decade Methodism had lost tens of thousands of members, and, with a steep decline in candidates offering for the ministry, four of its theological colleges.⁷⁵ The ecumenical dream of the 1960s had turned sour, and the Connexion was certainly smaller, and probably more disunited, than it had been at any time since 1932. It was apparent, moreover, that further challenges lay ahead, for the vexed issues of the late 1960s had not yet been fully resolved.

Years of Conflict, 1975-1993

The boundaries of this section of the paper have been set by a Methodist chronology: from the Connexional restructuring and the publication of the *MSB* in 1975 to the Conference of 1993, which established a *modus vivendi* on the thorny question of human sexuality. In relation to wider British social and political history, the dates are arbitrary.⁷⁶ In 1975, a minority Labour government was one year into its term of office; for the next four years it eked out a precarious existence before being decisively defeated by the Conservatives in 1979. Labour’s fate was largely sealed by popular frustra-

⁷² Summarized in Brake, *Policy and Politics*, chapters 10-12. A personal perspective is offered by Kenneth G. Greet, *Fully Connected* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1997), chapter 3, and an insightful critique by Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict*, chapter 7.

⁷³ Turner, *Modern Methodism in England*, 33-35.

⁷⁴ Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 77-95.

⁷⁵ Headingley (Leeds) in 1967, Handsworth (Birmingham) in 1969 [merged with the Anglican Queen’s College], Richmond (London) and Hartley Victoria (Manchester) in 1972, latter to join a federation, based at the Northern Baptist College.

⁷⁶ Background sources for this period are Marr, *History of Modern Britain*, Morgan, *The People’s Peace*, Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe*, the political orientation chapters of Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, and Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

tion at endemic industrial unrest, culminating in the “winter of discontent” of 1978-1979. From 1979 until 1997, Britain was ruled by a Conservative government, and until 1990, Margaret Thatcher, raised a Methodist,⁷⁷ presided over a radical assault on the post-war economic, social and political consensus.⁷⁸ Supported by a surge in popularity and patriotism after the successful recovery of the Falkland Islands from an Argentine invasion in 1982, and assisted by the implosion of the Labour Party, Thatcher pressed forward, championing free market economics and repudiating Keynesianism. In the name of advancing individual liberty and rolling back the frontiers of an interfering and inefficient “nanny State,” she centralized power in Whitehall to an unprecedented degree, emasculating a range of public bodies which might challenge or obstruct her reforming agenda: local councils and other elected intermediate authorities, trade unions, public utilities, and even Churches. Industries in public ownership were privatized, widely extending share ownership; local authority tenants were given the right to buy their social housing, boosting the property market; the ability of workers to take industrial action was severely circumscribed, and once-powerful trade unions saw their strength and influence wither. A broad swathe of the British population prospered under Conservative rule, benefiting from economic growth and deregulation, and enjoying a boom in consumer spending. There were fears, however, that a significant minority was in danger of becoming a permanent under-class, as the gap between rich and poor widened.

In the Churches, these were years of dignified protest against a government which apparently did not believe there was such a thing as “society.” The mainstream denominations continued to decline in numbers, and to work on ecumenical relationships, nationally and locally. Evangelical and charismatic influence grew, both within the older denominations and in a plethora of new churches, some in loose networks and some totally independent. Even where the theology of the new evangelicalism was repudiated, the worship style of contemporary songs supplementing—or supplanting—traditional hymnody proved hard to resist.

Despite the disappointment of the Conversations, Methodism did not abandon the ecumenical agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷⁹ At local level, Local Ecumenical Projects continued to develop, generally in partnership with the Church of England or the newly-formed United Reformed Church. National negotiations produced a scheme of “covenanting for unity” in 1980, but once again the proposals, although supported by four denominations, failed to secure a sufficient majority in the Church of England’s General

⁷⁷ Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Pan, 1990), 6. Young offers perceptive comments on the enduring influence of Methodism on Margaret Thatcher on 418-419.

⁷⁸ The vocabulary used by analysts and historians is telling: Hastings writes of “counter-revolution” (*History of English Christianity*, 595), Marr of “The British Revolution” (Part Four of *A History of Modern Britain*), Lloyd of “the government attack on the collectivist state” (*Empire, Welfare State, Europe*, 435-443).

⁷⁹ Newton, “Protestant Nonconformists and Ecumenism,” 368, 374-376, 379.

Synod. Ten years later, a new set of “ecumenical instruments” replaced the British Council of Churches, establishing national Churches Together bodies in England, Scotland and Wales. These agencies, seeking broad membership beyond the older denominations, were matched by regional, county and local groups. Methodists supported national and local ecumenism, sometimes discovering over time that better relations with ecumenical neighbors raised conflicts of loyalty with their commitments to their circuits: it was easier to worship with the Anglicans down the road than to travel to a circuit event in another village or town.

Methodism was touched by the renewal of evangelicalism and by the influence of charismatic worship. The membership of the Methodist Revival Fellowship continued to grow, and in 1987 it joined forces with CEIM to form Headway, “a movement of Methodists for prayer, revival and witness to the evangelical faith.”⁸⁰ With a network of contacts in the Districts and a recognized representative place in Conference and Connexional bodies, Headway was well positioned to lobby for traditional evangelical interests. It may be noted, however, that evangelical perspectives were now only one voice in the counsels of the denomination, whatever the wording of the Deed of Union.⁸¹ There was a tendency, moreover, for Methodist evangelicals to seek kindred spirits in other denominations, and therefore for the distinctive note of Wesleyan evangelicalism to become muted. On the other hand, the spread of modern worship material beyond the evangelical constituency, both contemporary worship songs and resources from the Taizé and Iona Communities, had a wider effect, working to dissolve the cement of traditional Methodist hymnody, hitherto a unifying force in the Connexion. *Hymns and Psalms*, a replacement for the 1933 *Methodist Hymn Book*, appeared in 1983, just before the explosion of new worship material hit the British Churches. As the decade wore on, and into the 1990s, local churches increasingly added their own selection of songs and hymns to the authorized collection, and much of the Wesley corpus began to fall into serious disuse.⁸²

In its social witness Methodism continued to revise and restate traditional teaching, for instance on abortion (1976) and race relations (1978), and to promote the newer agenda of international aid and development.⁸³ There was sharp conflict with the government over a range of issues. The Conference was invited, for instance, to condemn the Community Charge, a new tax on all citizens, as “grossly unfair” and “a threat to civil liberties.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Wellings, “Methodist Revival Fellowship,” 106.

⁸¹ This could make use of the word “evangelical” contentious, with some Methodists claiming to be evangelical by virtue of their Methodism.

⁸² A survey of the use of hymns and songs in Methodism, as distinct from the lyrics printed in hymnals, is much to be desired.

⁸³ See *Methodist Church Statements on Social Responsibility 1946-1992* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

⁸⁴ Agenda of Conference 1990, 472. The Community Charge, popularly known as the “poll tax,” sought to replace local property taxes (“rates”) as a source of revenue for local government: Marr, *History of Modern Britain*, 466-469.

Church and State also clashed over the Falklands War, over the purchase of the Trident nuclear weapons system, and over the first Gulf War of 1991—although in each case the attitude of the Conference, or of the officers of the Division of Social Responsibility (DSR),⁸⁵ was not necessarily endorsed by all Methodists, as letters to the *Methodist Recorder* demonstrated.⁸⁶

The ethical issue which prompted the most anguished debate, however, was that of human sexuality, particularly homosexuality. Between 1976 and 1982 the DSR produced a number of draft statements on a Christian understanding of human sexuality. The drafts accepted the existence of homosexual orientation, and argued for the legitimacy of a physical expression of this orientation in appropriate relationships. Debate in the Conference, and consultation with Districts and circuits, revealed a range of opinions on these issues, and on the underlying question of the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Eventually the Conference of 1982 voted to “take note of” the DSR statement, rather than to endorse it by “adopting” it.⁸⁷ Within weeks of the 1982 Conference, Terry Higgins, one of the first British victims of AIDS, died in a London hospital.⁸⁸

For the rest of the decade, and beyond, the rights, risks and lifestyles of “gay” people were much in the news. Inevitably, the question of the Church’s attitude to the expression of human sexuality was raised again. A Conference commission produced a report in 1990, acknowledging the diversity of views in the Church and recommending that homosexual orientation and practice should not be a bar to ordination. This ignited further discussion and controversy, culminating in a tense debate in the Conference of 1993.⁸⁹ Conference passed a series of resolutions, affirming sexuality as a gift, condemning promiscuity, reaffirming “the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it,” and celebrating “the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church.”⁹⁰ Despite its ambiguities, or inherent contradictions, this set of resolutions gave the Connexion a working compromise which enabled British Methodism to avoid the conflicts which devastated other Churches during the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century.

Mapping a Way Forward, 1993-2010

The Conservatives, in power since 1979, remained in government until 1997. The early 1990s were dominated by economic problems, by the

⁸⁵ The DSR replaced the Christian Citizenship Department in the reorganization of the mid-1970s.

⁸⁶ Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict*, 188-1891, 195-199, 218-221.

⁸⁷ Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 468-475.

⁸⁸ Marr, *History of Modern Britain*, 407.

⁸⁹ The Commission report may be found in Agenda of Conference 1990, 122-154. Responses to the report in memorials from circuits appear in the Agenda of Conference 1991, 622-623 (1 favorable, 7 critical).

⁹⁰ *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2009), ii, 770.

first Gulf War, by the internecine feuds within the Conservative Party over Britain’s membership of the European Union and by persistent accusations of “sleaze” affecting ministers and MPs. A revived Labour Party swept to victory in May, 1997, with the slogan “Things can only get better.” The next thirteen years witnessed the flowering, flourishing and then crumbling of those bright hopes. A buoyant economy enabled “New Labour” to invest heavily in public services. Promises to grant devolved government to Scotland and Wales were fulfilled. A forty-year conflict in the North of Ireland was largely resolved. Government rhetoric claimed that Britain wished to be at “the heart of Europe.” With the turn of the millennium, however, cracks began to appear in the New Labour project. Following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September, 2001, Britain stood firmly with the United States, and became embroiled in increasingly messy and controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The discovery of Islamic extremists in British cities raised questions about policies on immigration and multi-culturalism, and fears about a loss of national identity. New Labour deliberately continued the credit-fuelled consumer culture and economic deregulation of the 1980s and 1990s, but found itself taking the blame when a global credit crisis devastated the economy in 2008. Meanwhile, popular enthusiasm switched from party politics to single-issue campaigns: debt relief for the developing world, opposition to the Iraq war, and action to tackle climate change.⁹¹

For the British Churches, the 1990s and early years of the next century saw a continuation of the trends of the previous decades: declining attendance, shrinking influence in the wider culture, ecumenical endeavor, greater denominational diversity, and tensions generated by theological and ethical pluralism. In this context, Church leaders sought to chart a course towards renewal and effective engagement with society. The Methodist Church was no exception, witnessing a steady fall in membership, the collapse of MAYC and student Methodist societies and a continuation of doctrinal, ethical and liturgical pluralism within the denomination. Key themes in these years were regrouping in the face of shrinking resources, new ventures in mission and evangelism, living with diversity within the Church, and pursuing ecumenism.

In *A Future for the Free Churches?* (1962) Christopher Driver mocked the “whistling in the dark” of denominational assemblies, reluctant to face “the real situation.”⁹² Forty years on, Methodism was much more realistic. Although rejecting the prophecies of extinction drawn from the “meltdown” statistics of 1995 and celebrating signs of growth and progress in many local churches, the Connexion took a robust view of the challenges before it. Even

⁹¹ Marr, *History of Modern Britain*, Part Five; Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe*, chapter 17. For a critique of New Labour in power, see Andrew Rawnsley’s *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour* (London: Penguin [revised ed.], 2001) and the sequel, *The End of the Party* (London: Viking, 2010).

⁹² Driver, *Future for the Free Churches?*, 15-16.

before the launch of the program “Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission” in 2007, it was clear that the Connexion could not sustain structures designed for a Church with a much larger membership base, income, and pool of volunteers. Thus the divisional structure was replaced by a single Connexional Team, with the aim of enhancing co-ordination and efficiency across the Church’s central bureaucracy. This was followed by a process of slimming down the staffing, workload and cost of central services, devolving responsibility to the Districts. Greater freedom was given to Districts, circuits and local churches to order their own activities, sweeping away the structure of mandatory committees and prescribed agendas imposed in the 1970s. Conference urged a redrawing of the Connexional map, and in some areas numbers of circuits were drastically reduced by wholesale amalgamation.⁹³ Changes were driven, in part, by the need to reform a top-heavy and cumbersome system which the Church no longer had the money or the volunteers to operate effectively. It remains to be seen, however, whether the disbanding of local and regional networks of volunteers, devolution of significant responsibilities to District officers and creation of a slimmer central administration will serve Methodism well in the future.

As noted above, the stated purpose of “Mapping a Way Forward” was “regrouping for mission.” In common with ecumenical partners, British Methodism was good at admitting the challenge of communicating the Christian message in what was increasingly described as a post-Christian society, a context in which “spirituality” was well-regarded, but organized religion, with its structures and dogmas, was not. Strategies for meeting the challenge, however, varied considerably. Connexional initiatives (and funds) focused on “fresh expressions of church,” projects to create communities of support and faith exploration outside the physical structures of local churches. Meanwhile, congregations experimented with new styles of worship to attract people to “inherited church.” Some Methodists used resources like the Alpha course for evangelism; many sustained programs of community service and youth work. In Rob Frost, British Methodism found a missionary entrepreneur who combined a traditional evangelical gospel with innovative methods of communication.

The Conference of 2006 received a report entitled “Living with Contradictory Convictions.” Prompted by the continuing debate over human sexuality, the report also acknowledged the plurality of opinions, beliefs and preferences in the modern Methodist Church.⁹⁴ During this period Headway was rebranded as “Methodist Evangelicals Together” (MET), while the Alliance of Radical Methodists disbanded. Perhaps attempts to control the agenda of the Conference became less significant, with energies devoted to (or required for) local church and community activities.

The ecumenical quest, launched by Archbishop Fisher’s Cambridge

⁹³ For example, the Bristol District, which was reduced from twenty-two to ten circuits between 2007 and 2010, by amalgamation.

⁹⁴ Agenda of Conference, 2006, 237-250.

University sermon of 1946, reached a new stage with the signing of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant in 2003. The Covenant was the result of a long process, beginning with informal talks in 1994, developing into “formal conversations” in 1996-1997 and producing a “Common Statement” in 2001. Reflecting a new ecumenical methodology, the Common Statement sought to define the conditions for full, visible unity, to identify the extent of agreement between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, and to assess the extent and significance of continuing areas of difference.⁹⁵ By adopting the Covenant, signed by the President of the Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury in November, 2003, the two Churches confirmed their common ground and undertook to work together on their remaining differences. A Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) was set up to facilitate this task, and it issued reports in 2005, 2007, and 2008. Ironically, given that the thrust of Fisher’s sermon was an invitation to the Free Churches to consider taking episcopacy into their systems, a Connexional consultation on possible forms of episcopacy in the Methodist Church in 2005-2006 revealed a distinct lack of enthusiasm at the prospect. The JIC was not slow to register its surprise and disappointment.⁹⁶ By the end of the decade, however, Anglican leaders were more preoccupied with the precarious covenant holding their global Communion together than with domestic negotiations with the Methodists.

Conclusion

From the vantage point of 2010, concerned about struggling village chapels, over-stretched Connexional Team members and the problems of sustaining Christian life and witness in a post-modern and post-Christian society, it is easy to overlook the massive achievements of British Methodism since 1945.⁹⁷ The Methodist Church in Great Britain eventually accomplished reunion, locally as well as nationally. It maintained an impressive network of local churches and circuits, serving countless communities. It developed innovative programs for work with children, young people and students, and with the elderly. It engaged with the social and political issues of the day, both in Britain and overseas. It resourced and reshaped its worship. It played a leading part in the ecumenical movement. It contributed significantly to theological and biblical scholarship.

And yet, despite these achievements and the heroic efforts of so many, an overview of the period from 1945 to 2010 cannot but admit to decline. The statistics speak for themselves: a fall in membership from 752,000 in 1945 to 267,000 in 2007, with a corresponding loss of physical presence in many

⁹⁵ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 22-25.

⁹⁶ *Living God’s Covenant* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2007), 5-7.

⁹⁷ Turner, *Modern Methodism in England*, provides a summary of achievements.

communities, of resources, and of effectiveness and influence.⁹⁸ Behind the bald statistics may be discerned a deeper problem. Drawing on Callum Brown's thesis,⁹⁹ it might be argued that nineteenth-century Methodism inherited and developed a supremely successful organization for Christian evangelism and nurture, and for guiding a nationwide denomination. This organization, despite tinkering, adaptation and even drastic remodeling, has become progressively less effective, at least since 1945, but has yet to be replaced. The traditional tools for making disciples seem ineffective or inappropriate, so as a missionary movement, Methodism in Britain today struggles to make an impact, and has lost confidence.¹⁰⁰ And assumptions and institutions which hitherto held Methodism together—a single authorized hymn book, ministerial itinerancy, the structures and sinews of the Connexion, a commitment to “our doctrines” and “our discipline” and a sense of Methodist identity—have been eroded by the pressures of individualism, pluralism and ecumenism. Thus, by contrast with the comparative homogeneity and discipline of Wesley's Connexion, in theology, spirituality, ethics, ecclesiology and preferred style of worship, British Methodism today is hugely diverse.

One theme of Diarmaid MacCulloch's monumental survey, *A History of Christianity*, is the ability of the Christian Church to develop and to mutate, adapting to changing circumstances.¹⁰¹ Methodism in Great Britain has certainly displayed that quality over the last two centuries. It remains to be seen whether it can continue to do so as the twenty first century unfolds, and if it can, what will be the result.

⁹⁸ *M/C* (1945): 172; Agenda of Conference, 2008, 580. The practice of presenting triennial returns, rather than annual figures, makes these the latest statistics readily available.

⁹⁹ Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, especially chapter 2, with its description of the “salvation economy” and reference to “this vast machinery of Christian ‘agency,’” 57; and compare the section on “moral machinery” in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 385-398 [citing reprint of 1982]. It should be noted that Wesleyan theologians were clear that Methodism was not a “machine,” but a spiritual fellowship, and a product of evolution and experience, not design: James H. Rigg, *A Comparative View of Church Organizations, Primitive and Protestant* (London: T. Woolmer, 1887), 228, and Benjamin Gregory, *The Thorough Business Man: Memoirs of Walter Powell* (London: Strahan & Co., 1872), 62-63.

¹⁰⁰ “Renewing confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the church” was the first of the “priorities of the Methodist Church” identified in 2004.

¹⁰¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 9. MacCulloch's more modest textbook, *Groundwork of Christian History* (London: Epworth Press, 1987) was written while he was teaching history at Wesley College, Bristol.