

METHODIST CHURCH REPORTS

Special Report

The role and Recognition of Evangelists in the Methodist Church

The past ten years have been marked by the Christian denominations as a Decade of Evangelism and this has put the evangelistic task firmly on church agendas. Its importance has been further underlined by the continuing decline in church membership across most of the major denominations. The Methodist Church at the beginning of the 21st century faces a situation different from that during most of its history. Society has changed, and the predominant culture is now a secularized, post-modern and post-Christian one in which we can no longer assume that people have any basic Christian knowledge or understanding. If the need in earlier years was to call people back to faith, the need today is for forms of primary evangelism which start much further back and assume nothing. We have entered a new missionary era which makes the importance of discovering, developing and deploying those within the Church who have evangelistic gifts a vital and urgent need.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE TASK

1.1 All mission is God's mission. The influential Conference report ***Sharing in God's Mission (1985)*** put it thus:

'There is only one mission to the world that matters and that is God's continuous activity of caring for and reaching out to all that he has made. By mission we mean any way in which Christians are sent to share in experiencing and expressing that love. It involves evangelism since God has declared his desire for all mankind to know and love him. It includes social caring for God's mercy reaches out especially for the poor and needy. It incorporates the political struggle for justice in our society because God intends men and women to live at peace together. These three do not exhaust the missionary task, neither are they alternatives in our mission, for they belong inextricably together. They are imperatives, not options.'

1.2 That holistic understanding of the church's mission has been echoed in many other Methodist reports since:

- ***The Ministry of the People of God in the World (1990)*** argued for forms of ministry focused more on witness and discipleship than on servicing the structures of the church.
- ***Dialogue and Evangelism Among People of Other Faiths (1994)*** put the mission task in its proper multi-faith context, but also recognised that 'God has called some to be evangelists, whose vocation is not only to share the story of Jesus but also to commend him to others as Lord and Saviour...The church must affirm that calling'.

• **A Statement of Purpose of the Connexional Team (1996)** expressed the task in the following terms: 'Methodism endorses many dimensions and methods of Christian mission. In particular it affirms that mission includes:

- Telling the good news of Jesus
- Calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and to Christian discipleship
- Caring for individual people and communities
- Sharing in the task of education and social and spiritual development
- Struggling for a just world
- Being alongside the poor
- Becoming friends with people of different cultures and faiths
- Caring for the earth
- Building partnerships with other churches and other groups who share some of our mission aims'.

Those different approaches are complementary strands of a seamless whole and they require a variety of gifts and emphases. We need people whose primary focus will be on one or other of these tasks, though we all go on affirming all of them to be important. Thus the first two clearly point to the need for some within the life of the church whose particular gifting and experience is in the area of evangelism. Indeed, that is the clear implication of one of the four major assertions about the purpose of the church contained in the new vision statement for the Methodist Church, [Our Calling](#), adopted at the Methodist Conference of 2000: 'The church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ'.

For discussion Look again at the things listed above in the Statement of Purpose. How many of them apply to your local church as well as to the Connexional Team, and who can you identify in your congregation who is particularly gifted and active in each of these areas of work?

1.3 Perhaps surprisingly, the word 'evangelism' does not appear in the Bible at all. However, 'evangelists' are referred to three times (Acts 21:8, Ephesians 4:11 and 2 Timothy 4:5); the verb *euaggelizein* (to 'evangelise') occurs frequently; and the related noun *euaggelion* ('gospel') is so fundamental that it crops up all over the pages of the New Testament. It is not entirely clear how 'evangelists' were defined, but what is beyond question is that in a variety of pioneering and innovative ways the early Christian leaders (whether termed 'evangelists' or not) and the whole Christian community (by their lifestyle and everyday witness) articulated God's good news in Jesus Christ with such conviction and commitment that many others were brought to faith.

1.4 It is clear that evangelists (alongside apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers and those with a variety of other gifts) were equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit for the church's mission and ministry, and

that their gifts were used both inside and outside the church. Passages like Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12:27-30 and Ephesians 4:11-13 make it clear that they were intended to function as part of a team, the Body of Christ, and not in isolation. Furthermore, whilst the Holy Spirit clearly gave some gifts as evangelists, the New Testament leaves us in no doubt that *all* Christians are called to bear witness to Christ and to share their faith with others. To argue for the recognition and use of evangelists in the contemporary church therefore in no way diminishes the calling of the whole church to be a witnessing community, any more than to suggest that to appoint some as deacons revokes the calling of every Christian to a servant ministry. On the contrary, evangelists focus, encourage and enable the vocation of all Christians to witness to God's grace and power in the gospel.

For discussion Look up the three scripture passages which mention 'evangelists' (listed in 1.3 above) and share what you think their task would have involved. Do we still have such people in the church today, and if so how might they be used?

2. THE METHODIST CONTEXT

2.1 Methodism began as a missionary movement. John Wesley, in addition to his many other gifts as theologian, writer, educator, philanthropist, organiser and leader, was arguably one of the greatest evangelists the Church has known. Many of the early Methodist preachers, both itinerant and local, were also gifted evangelists. In subsequent Methodist history that tradition was continued through people like Thomas Champness and Samuel Chadwick, the establishment and continuing ministry of Cliff College and the appointment of Home Mission evangelists such as Herbert Silverwood and Tom Butler. The old Home Mission Department appointed caravan missionaries, and the Wesley Deaconess Order also played a significant role in pioneering evangelism both through caravan work and church planting. The growth of Central Halls was a further evangelistic strategy, and their superintendents (such as W E Sangster and many others) saw their role as both social and evangelistic. When 'separated Chairmen' were appointed to some Districts part of their role was seen as that of a 'District Missionary'. More recently the appointment of Rob Frost as a connexional evangelist has made a significant contribution to Methodism's evangelistic outreach. Thus the role of the evangelist has repeatedly been recognised by the church, and this report simply argues for a further development in this process.

2.2 Over the past decade the 'evangelist' has come to be seen less as an individual standing outside the local church (a model dominant in the 19th and early 20th centuries) and more as someone who helps a missionary-minded congregation to focus and fulfil its evangelistic task. There has been considerable growth in the number of people serving as evangelists or evangelism enablers at local, circuit and district levels. The Methodist Conference in 1993 urged every Methodist district 'to consider appointing a District Evangelist/Mission Enabler/Team to encourage and assist churches in their evangelistic task', and in 1995 set aside connexional start-up funding for such appointments. Currently about a third of Methodist districts have people or teams in post and others are being considered. Provision is already made in Standing Order (SO)405 'to appoint a lay person to undertake pastoral, evangelistic or administrative work' at District level; and SO570 makes parallel provision for such appointments at circuit level.

For discussion Do you know of people appointed under either of these Standing Orders to work in the area of evangelism in your district or circuit? If so, what are their responsibilities? If not, could such an appointment be useful?

2.3 The Methodist Church has increasingly recognised a wide variety of gifts and callings and made provision for appropriate training and recognition:

- **Local Preachers** have always played an important part in Methodist life and worship, and the *Faith and Worship* material is only the latest in a succession of training courses to equip them for their task.
- For many years training has been provided for **Sunday School teachers** and other workers among children (notably through *Kaleidoscope*) and theirs has been recognised as a distinctive and important ministry.
- More recent years have seen the development of the *Spectrum* training course and official recognition for **youth workers**.
- The **Worship Leaders' Training Pack** is being increasingly widely used and found helpful.

All this is a welcome recognition of the fact that God gives different gifts to different people. The recognition and training of **evangelists** in the life of the church is simply a logical extension of this process whose time has surely come. It has been well said that what a church truly values can be deduced from what sort of people it trains.

2.4 In 1997 a major report was presented to the Methodist Conference entitled *The Making of Ministry* which opened the way for a much more flexible understanding of ministry, both lay and ordained, and underlined the importance of a variety of Christian callings. It asserted that 'theological education should be rooted and grounded in the mission of the church... and supportive of many kinds of Christian vocation, lay or ordained' and that the theological resources of the church should 'provide training for those called to specific ministries'. The report has been widely welcomed within Methodism, and the concept of ministry it contains for leaves room for the exercise of particular gifts (including those of the evangelist) in new and exciting ways.

2.5 In 1998 a further Conference report on *Connexional Training Strategies* proposed a totally new process of theological education and training. This provides for a basic **Foundation Training** course which is valuable and complete in itself but may also lead on to subsequent candidature and further training for presbyteral or diaconal ministry. These new strategies aim to make provision for people to explore their vocation and gifts in much more specific ways, enabling those gifted as evangelists to be identified, trained and used.

2.6 The evangelist's calling is an honourable one in its own right and the church needs to make room for those so called whether as lay workers, presbyters or deacons. Nor is the concept of the 'evangelist' to be limited to those working among younger people. Evangelists are needed to work with every age group. Indeed, faith development theory and the research published in *Finding Faith Today* (Bible

Society 1992) underline the need for the evangelistic process to be an ongoing one incorporating teaching as well as challenge. For most people conversion is a process rather than a crisis.

2.7 Some ordained ministers and deacons with evangelistic gifts and are keen to use them more fully, but further thought needs giving to how they might be appointed to specifically evangelistic forms of ministry without being squeezed into a purely or predominately pastoral role. The 1999 report on ***Flexible Patterns of Ministry*** spoke of the need for the church to be 'more imaginative and creative in its mission and ministry'.

2.8 **Deacons** appointed to work as evangelists will do so as an outworking of the diaconal roles outlined in the ordinal, and in particular of their vocation to serve people at the interface between the Christian community and the wider world: 'Gather in the outcasts, welcome the stranger, seek the lost'.

2.9 As for **ministers**, they are ordained to exercise a leading and directing role in enabling the church to fulfil its purposes of worship and mission. Their work is focused in the oversight of the ministry of the Word and sacraments and of pastoral charge, and they exercise that oversight by performing some functions of mission, worship and pastoral care themselves. Being an evangelist comes primarily into the area of the ministry of the Word, and it ought to be possible for ministers to be appointed to that role as their primary function whilst still fulfilling some sacramental and pastoral responsibilities.

2.10 All of this needs to be set in its ecumenical context. The Church of England has formally established a College of Evangelists (a 'fellowship' or 'network' rather than an institution) with the first 25 evangelists commissioned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in October 1999. Representatives of the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed churches as well as the Churches Together in England Group for Evangelisation have kept in close touch with the Anglican Board of Mission over these developments. There are also lessons to be learnt from our world church partners: a number of Methodist Churches overseas, particularly in Africa, have both lay and ordained 'Evangelists' - sometimes even an Order of Evangelists - and we might learn from their experience.

For discussion What examples do you know of ministers or deacons whose gifts as evangelists or evangelism enablers are being imaginatively and effectively used used by the Church? In what ways could we be more creative in the use of such gifts in our own circuit staff?

3. QUESTIONS TO BE EXPLORED

Mention of the word 'evangelist' unfortunately opens the flood-gates for all sorts of stereotypes, misconceptions and caricatures - some of which, indeed, have resulted from over-zealous and inappropriate approaches to evangelism by the evangelists themselves. During much of the 20th century the word was perhaps predominantly associated with mass evangelism and well-known names which resulted in local evangelists, especially those gifted in reaching people on a more one-to-one basis, being overlooked or marginalised. A further problem has been that evangelists, finding little opportunity for employment within the denominational structures, have often gone to para-church agencies or become freelance entrepreneurs. Those called and gifted in this way represent different theological persuasions (we must resist the idea that one has to be an evangelical to be an evangelist) and a wide

variety of approaches: some are preachers, others are more at home in visitation, pastoral evangelism, leading groups, personal faith sharing or working alongside young or older people. Some evangelists travel widely whereas others function within a church or circuit and are unknown beyond it.

For discussion Share frankly how you react to the word 'evangelist' and why. How can we avoid its more negative overtones in the way we use evangelists in the Methodist Church?

The role and use of evangelists in the Methodist Church undoubtedly raises many questions, therefore, and these need to be faced. In particular, we identify the following specific issues:

a) **Calling**

The question of calling is linked with that of definition. What is an evangelist? The Anglican report **Good News People** understands the word 'evangelist' in the following terms:

"Someone, man or woman, lay or ordained:

- *who goes where the church is not.*
- *who proclaims and lives the gospel: the way in which this 'proclamation' takes*
- *place is essentially contextual - and is by no means limited to preaching or even to verbal communication.*
- *who interprets the church to the world and the world to the church.*
- *who comes from the centre of the church and feeds from its riches and is accountable to it as well as challenging it.*
- *who encourages the whole church in its work of evangelism, not least by communicating the gospel to those inside as well as outside the church."*

We would endorse that description, though would want to sharpen it in two particular ways. First, we need to recognise the importance of *giftedness*: being an evangelist is not simply the exercise of a personal interest or enthusiasm, but a response to the calling and equipping of the Holy Spirit. Second, we would want to add something about the importance of *fruitfulness*: an evangelist is not only one who proclaims the gospel, but who is used by God in leading people to respond to it. An evangelist whose ministry leads no-one to faith is like an angler who never catches any fish!

The need for evangelists in the church remains, and the fact that people are still being gifted in that way in the contemporary church cannot be denied. We need therefore to devise ways of testing those called as evangelists, perhaps in ways parallel to the testing of those called as local preachers, worship leaders or lay workers. For them the testing takes place largely at local church or Circuit level and this would seem to be appropriate for evangelists also. Even if they go on to serve at district or connexional level their calling needs first to be tested locally. A distinction needs to be drawn between those who are formally employed within the church (whether as Lay Workers under SO405 or 570, or as ministers or

deacons) and those who will serve in a purely voluntary capacity. Yet for both the same criteria will need to be applied. These might include:

- i. Active membership of the local church and involvement in its life, worship and witness.
- ii. A genuine personal experience of Jesus Christ and a disciplined spiritual life.
- iii. A self-evident commitment to the work of evangelism and some understanding of the breadth of approaches and methods which might be adopted.
- iv. A mature understanding of the gospel and the way in which it relates to and interacts with individuals and contemporary society.
- v. The ability to relate naturally and easily to other people both within and beyond the church.
- vi. Proven gifts as a communicator of the gospel and the ability to express its message in a variety of imaginative ways, especially to those unused to Christian insights and vocabulary.
- vii. Evidence of some fruitfulness in terms of effectiveness and the response of others to their previous evangelistic work.

It has been increasingly recognised in recent years that every local church needs a pastor. Perhaps it is equally important for every local church to have an evangelist. If the decline of the church is to be reversed and the gospel is to be spread effectively this possibility certainly needs to be explored further. Yet it should not simply be the prerogative of the evangelist to announce his or her availability to the Church. There is much to be said (and clear biblical precedent - see Acts 13:1-3) for the local church taking the initiative, identifying and calling out those within its membership who have evangelistic gifts.

For discussion Do you agree with what is outlined above about how an evangelist's calling might be tested? Have you alternative suggestions to make? How formal should the process be made?

b) Training

Just as the Methodist Church has provided training for other forms of service so, too, adequate provision needs to be made for those called as evangelists. There is already a great deal of training on offer through colleges and courses both within and beyond Methodism. Most of it, however, is on the subject of 'mission' understood very broadly, rather than specifically on evangelism, and is of a biblical, theological and historical nature without offering the more practical training which is also required by those serving as evangelists. Other training is available from:

- i. **Cliff College:** Foundation, certificate, diploma, degree and post-graduate courses in Biblical and Evangelistic Ministry.
- ii. **The Open Learning Centre** at Cliff College: a diploma course in evangelism developed in collaboration with St John's College, Nottingham.

- iii. **Other Bible colleges:** courses in evangelism at St John's College, Nottingham, Spurgeons College, London Bible College and other institutions.
- iv. **Other organisations and agencies:** published material suitable for basic training in evangelism includes resources from the Church Pastoral Aid Society, Scripture Union, the Bible Society, Grove Books and others.

Since evangelists are likely to be working in different ways and at many different levels within the Methodist Church it is probably unnecessary to insist on any one form of training, although there would be great value in producing a basic training course parallel to *Kaleidoscope*, *Spectrum* and the *Worship Leaders' Training Pack*. For now, some way needs to be devised of assessing individual needs and pointing people in the direction of existing training which is appropriate to them and the work they are to do. Such training should include the theology and practice of evangelism, apologetics, cultural awareness (including the inter-faith perspective) and communication skills.

Training needs to be both initial and continuing. The twice-yearly meetings of the Forum for Methodist Evangelists can play an important part here by providing fellowship and support networks, information and training; but training should also be available within the Districts as is currently the case for Lay Workers.

For discussion Do you think the various sorts of training outlined above are adequate? Have any members of your congregation/Circuit/District been trained in any of these ways? Are there others whom you might encourage to seek such training, and what would be most appropriate for them?

c) Recognition

A specific 'Order' of evangelists is unnecessary, but some means is needed of enabling evangelists to be affirmed and formally recognised by the Church. This is perhaps easier for those who are to be officially employed whether at circuit, district or connexional level; but the need applies to all who are called to work as evangelists in whatever capacity. It would be appropriate for an evangelist to be formally recognised at the level of church life in which he/she was to work, but there would need to be some standard form of recognition and authorization which applied to all. This might be helped by devising and authorizing a commissioning service parallel to those now available in the *Methodist Worship Book* for lay workers, pastoral visitors and workers with children and young people, and perhaps also a new Service of Commissioning for special periods of evangelistic outreach by the church. This would have the effect of raising awareness of the appointment and work of evangelists and affording them recognition within both the structural and liturgical life of the church.

For discussion Are the suggestions outlined above appropriate and adequate? In what other ways do you think the Methodist Church might give formal recognition to those called and trained as evangelists or evangelism enablers?

d) Accountability

With official recognition comes the need for ensuring some form of accountability for evangelists. Since this report envisages evangelists as working within the structures of the church at local, district or connexional level rather than independently, this makes the matter of oversight rather more straightforward. It is important from the evangelist's point of view to have adequate structures for support, guidance and accountability; and it is important from the Church's point of view to have a clear set of procedures for oversight and, if necessary, discipline. Thus for an evangelist working in a local church context, the Church Council would be the appropriate oversight body; in a circuit it would be the Circuit Meeting; district evangelists or evangelism enablers would be accountable to the District Policy Committee; and for evangelists working at connexional level (currently only Rob Frost and the staff evangelists at Cliff College) accountability would be through the Methodist Council or the Cliff College Committee.

Evangelists who are ordained ministers or deacons would have the normal forms of accountability through their District Synod and any other oversight and support structure which was devised in connection with their work. Those employed by the church as lay evangelists should have contracts in line with the terms and conditions laid down for Lay Workers in the Methodist Church together with support and oversight groups appropriate to their particular context. The Forum for Methodist Evangelists might well take on a more significant role in terms of establishing common standards of practice and offering a network for mutual accountability.

e) **Role**

In arguing for the recognition of evangelists in the Methodist Church it is important to reiterate and underline two points made earlier:

- The task of evangelism is only part of the overall mission of the church (see 1.1) and those engaged in it must see their role in that wider context.
- Evangelism is the task of the whole Church (see 1.4). Every local church is called to be a missionary congregation and every Christian is called upon to be a witness to Jesus Christ. Evangelism must not simply be left to the evangelists.

The evangelist, however, is one who is especially gifted in sharing the Christian gospel with others so as to win a response of faith, and has been released and authorised to exercise those gifts. In so doing he or she might act both as an evangelist and as an evangelism enabler - encouraging, training and resourcing others to engage in the church's evangelistic task. This raises the question of whether the 'Evangelism Enabler' comes within the purview of this report, and whether it is essential for such an Enabler also to be an Evangelist. We believe both roles to be important and complementary, and would want both to be embraced in the provisions outlined in the preceding pages. A further question is whether it would be expected that an evangelist was a Local Preacher, but we do not envisage that being a requirement. There are many other forms of evangelism besides preaching.

The precise work of an evangelist (or evangelism enabler) will vary with the nature of the appointment, but some or all of the following may well be part of that role.

- i. Helping local churches to develop holistic outreach strategies
- ii. Advising on formulating mission statements
- iii. Leading faith-sharing training courses
- iv. Offering guidance on youth and children's outreach
- v. Running a Holiday Bible Club
- vi. Organising circuit evangelistic events
- vii. Evangelistic preaching and speaking
- viii. Suggesting books and training materials on evangelism
- ix. Sharing stories about effective evangelism elsewhere
- x. Providing information about national evangelism initiatives
- xi. Developing, training and leading mission teams
- xii. Outreach visitation
- xiii. Baptismal preparation
- xiv. Running an Alpha or Emmaus course
- xv. Developing contemporary alternative worship services
- xvi. Planting a new congregation

This is not to provide an exhaustive list, but to indicate some of the different ways in which evangelists might be used. There is growing evidence that many churches want to take evangelism seriously but do not know how to set about it. The appointment of more evangelists and evangelism enablers would be a significant step in providing the help they need and equipping the church to face the urgent missionary challenge of the 21st century.

For discussion How do you react to this report as a whole? Do you agree with its basic thrust? Have you specific comments (either positive or negative) to make on its contents, or suggestions to offer about its implementation? How do you think it might apply to the missionary challenge you face, and what difference might it make to the ways in which you tackle it in your situation?

RESOLUTIONS

The following resolutions were agreed by the Methodist Conference of 2000:

The Conference

- 1. recognises the urgent missionary challenge facing the church at the start of the 21st century, underlines the need identified in *Our Calling* to make more followers of Jesus Christ, and affirms the importance of evangelism for the church and its ministry at every level;**
- 2. directs the Evangelism Enabling Group to publish and circulate to the Districts and Circuits a popular version of this report* for discussion and response by 31 December 2001, so that a final report with firm recommendations can be brought to the Conference of 2002;**
- 3. acknowledges the need for identifying, training and appointing those with evangelistic gifts in presbyteral, diaconal and lay ministry, and directs the Formation in Ministry Office to explore more effective ways of meeting that need and report to the Conference of 2002;**
- 4. directs the Evangelism Enabling Group in consultation with other appropriate groups and officers to develop a basic training course for evangelists and evangelism enablers and report to the Conference of 2002;**
- 5. invites the Faith and Order Committee to consider what new services might need to be devised in the light of this report, and to prepare them for consideration by the Conference of 2002.**

**The above report is the 'popular version' referred to. The version printed in the Conference agenda has been slightly shortened and questions for discussion have been added.*