



Mission-shaped Methodism and Fresh Expressions

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The Mission-Shaped Church report by the Church of England prompted the Methodist Church and the Church of England in the UK to respond to the dislocation being felt between the inherited model of church and the missiological challenges of the twenty-first century. The most significant ecumenical development arising from the report was the formation of the Fresh Expressions initiative, whose sole task was to release leaders and communities to found churches for the 'unchurched'.

Examples of Anglican fresh expressions are much researched, but Methodist contributions less so. This essay argues that Methodist people, as people of a holiness movement of mission and ministry, have much to offer to the current ecclesial debate. There is a need for fresh expressions to be denominationally distinctive before they can be distilled into something new.

EMERGING CHURCH • FRESH EXPRESSIONS • LEADERSHIP • METHODIST • MISSION • EVANGELISM • CULTURE

Introduction

Fresh Expressions and Methodism have a long and intimate history. This essay explores the context of this ecumenical relationship, before arguing that a rediscovery of denominational distinctiveness may enable Methodism to gain self-confidence afresh, and ultimately liberate the Fresh Expressions organisation from the threat of mediocrity.

The essay is structured in two parts. The first section explores the influence of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report of 2004, and the subsequent missional move of a 'mixed economy' which has flourished across the UK in the subsequent decade.¹ This rehearses the ongoing discourse surrounding the development and evolution of fresh expressions around the world. The second section takes seriously the underlying Anglican tone, tenor and behaviour within the charitable organisation, and offers four charisms by which Methodism is not only seen to be a significant contributory missiological and ecclesial partner to the initiative, but pushes still further to contest that Methodism always has been a fresh expression – a pragmatic missiological response to a contemporary context. It is no surprise that fresh expressions have gained traction – not only are they pragmatically attractive (they work), but the missional imperative is not alien to Methodists or Methodist missiologists and practitioners. The four charisms are: a history of tensions and schism; Central Halls as a model example of context-driven mission; small groups as a vehicle for formation, accountability and fundraising; and an open table which speaks of both inclusivity and Christology at the heart of what can occasionally be the province of independent-minded leaders.

This essay is a development from a DThM thesis awarded in 2012, entitled 'Challenging Leadership: Mission-Shaped Presbyters in Methodist Fresh Expressions'. Some of the evidence in this thesis has been anonymised to protect the identities of those involved in this particular piece of qualitative work.

Context

In 2004, the Archbishop's Council published the much-awaited *Mission-Shaped Church* report. It subsequently became a best-seller, and laid the foundation for the Fresh Expressions Initiative. The report itself was the result of a two-year consultation process responding to the challenges discovered during the

‘decade of evangelism’ and taking into consideration some of the challenges beginning to be heard via the emerging church debate in the UK and the USA. As such, it is the most significant piece of missional work done by the Church of England in the last 20 years, commanding a reimagining of ecclesial vision, a multimillion-pound budget for the Fresh Expressions Initiative, the development of Ordained Pioneer Missioner² training and the institution of Bishop’s Mission Orders³ in order to support the work of communities within the parish system. The report has subsequently influenced the missional strategy for many denominations and agencies, inspired a Pioneer Ministry Pathway in the Methodist Church, provided the basis for a canon of literature through two series of books: one themed on mission-shaped contexts, and the other on theological and ecclesiological discoveries from fresh expressions practitioners across the Global North. It was a report which stimulated (and still stimulates) a great deal of debate and discussion both about the current outcomes and the theological rationale within it.⁴

According to *Mission-Shaped Church*, the Church ‘must prepare for change. New expressions of church and mission will be needed, new ways of thinking on ethics, politics and evangelism.’⁵ The report outlined the contemporary cultural climate by drawing conclusions from data on social trends, and then further developing the changing themes of a networked society,⁶ consumer culture, and post-Christendom. ‘Church plants and fresh expressions of church represent the emergence of a diametrically different approach [to mission] that is both theologically appropriate and strategically significant.’⁷ The report notes the cultural shifts taking place in a UK context and offers a narrative which both takes these shifts seriously and offers the Church of England means and methods of response. The intention is a missiology based on an incarnational model of contextual theology, rather than the attractional model that inherently superseded the report.

The influence of networks, globalisation and consumer culture can be seen in the suggested groupings of the then newly coined term ‘fresh expression’. Although the list of 12 groupings no longer forms a part of Fresh Expressions working definitions, it is important to note the influence of consumer culture and third-space literature with the inclusion of cafe-church;⁸ the contextual theology of liberation theology in the inclusion of base-ecclesial communities; the importation of American evangelicalism through the language of seeker church;⁹ and the liturgical rituals developed by alternative worship communities.¹⁰ The report attempts to provide the cross-sections of church life and experience being experimented with at the turn of the millennium. It is a report

which gives permission for creativity and intentional mission, theologically defended using *missio Dei* missiology as its foundation. It is significant that much of this early language, rich and broad theological reflection and global conversation regarding mission seems to have been lost in current practice. The World Council of Churches' statement on mission and evangelism, *Towards a Common Vision*, offers a significant pneumatological counterbalance to Fresh Expressions' pragmatism.¹¹

In 2009, 56 per cent of Methodist circuits had at least one self-defined fresh expression, totalling 846 fresh expressions of church occurring in association with Methodist churches. Fresh expressions of church are thus present in a majority of circuits and are becoming an increasing feature of church life. In turn, presbyters and deacons within these circuits are being asked to provide more and varied forms of worship and community for the various groups within the local circuit and church context. The statistics for the current quadrennial are yet to be released, but they nonetheless seem to maintain this trend towards self-identified missional experiments taking place in local contexts and churches. Fresh expressions are a vital part of twenty-first-century mission and ministry, and yet qualitatively may not be achieving what is expected of them.

According to the Fresh Expressions organisation,

A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.

It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.¹²

There is an argument, to suggest that many self-identified fresh expressions are extraordinary experiments in mission and ministry, but are not actually fresh expressions. They use *missio Dei* missiology as their theological framework, and they are beginning to engage in creative forms of mission and worship – but their outcome is not an ecclesial community in its own right. This is not to criticise what is happening in local contexts, but to suggest that new confidence and inspiration might be better placed not by seeing these

ventures as exotic, or even worse part of the mission-shaped bandwagon, but as expressions of Methodism in missional mode which does not need an external agency and language to justify their behaviour and existence.

Although much debunked in missiological literature and practice, one achievement of Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank's scorching criticism of Fresh Expressions, *For the Parish*, is to recognise that at its heart *Mission-Shaped Church* is about the preservation or evolution of the parish system. For Fresh Expressions as an ecumenical organisation at its inception, this remains a neglected outcome and yet a hidden agenda.

Mission-Shaped Church states that 'it explores how we are called to be and to do church, and the benefits and disadvantages of existing Church of England expressions of church'.¹³ As the strategies of Fresh Expressions have been invested in, this language of inherited church is still dominant. Fresh Expressions is not offering an ecumenical or 'deep'¹⁴ vision of ecclesio-missiology, despite the openness to intentional dialogue and funding from denominational and agency partners. I want to suggest, along with Roger Walton, that it is important for all Christian discipleship to 'dig deep into the traditions as we have received them, to read them critically and creatively and to be open to their readings of us'.¹⁵

Given that the report is from the Archbishop's Council, the Church of England terminology should not be over-critiqued. However, if the report is going to continue to challenge and renew all the Churches in strategic partnership with the organisation, the Anglican default for church and mission needs to be challenged. 'The Anglican calling, because of theological conviction, is to be a church for all ... To be a Church for the nation, the holes in our national network need to be filled'.¹⁶ Neither in ecumenical conversations and commendations of this report, nor in the subsequent missional development, has such a theological conviction been scrutinised, which given the assumption of a post-Christendom context seems somewhat naive.

The relegation of denominational DNA to something that is secondary to the debate could be seen as a manoeuvre made from a position of organisational power. Denominational DNA after all does not matter if the presumed model is that which is already known, cherished and held in esteem. Fresh Expressions has an Anglican default setting which transfers into all parts of the organisation, often without critique or comment. One anonymous conversation revealed that Methodists often feel like 'second-class citizens' to both the Methodist circuit and to the Fresh Expressions organisation. It may well be that once again,

one of Methodism's inheritances is the ability to question assumed authority structures and thus give the opportunity for other denominations and parachurch partners and associates to begin to share their codes of DNA in the theological reflection too. Although not meant to be complimentary, it is no bad thing that 'our [Anglican] doctrine of the Church has leapt, not drifted, in the direction of Free Church Protestantism'.¹⁷ The DNA metaphor is useful as it also provokes the potential for shared genes and identity markers, and for offspring to evolve who resemble their parents but who have a unique identity all of their own, just as Methodism evolved out of Anglicanism and Anglicanism out of the Reformation. An unappealing alternative vision to this is that fresh expressions merely evolve from the known gene pool of theological and ecclesiological knowledge and reproduce the congenital substance of what has been before.

For the Parish sees no irony in critiquing the ecumenically diverse Fresh Expressions initiative on not being parish based, 'they are not intended to be out-workings of the mission of the local church but independent entities without any relation to the parish in which they operate'.¹⁸ *Mission-Shaped Church* indicated that missional ecumenism was aspirational. The cross-denominational constituency of Fresh Expressions (the organisation) means that it is impossible to suggest that a parish model will now universally work for fresh expressions (local communities and contexts).¹⁹ Yet the felt sensibility is that an ecumenical missiology is still aspirational in policy as well as in practice.

More recent works in the fresh expressions canon are willing to be more critical of the Anglican bias to the organisation, with Mike Moynagh beginning to advocate for a progression in understanding and practice which demonstrates that 'churches are not bringing something entirely novel into the church. Nor are they just repeating the past. They are opening a chapter that carries the church's story forwards'.²⁰ However, there is little strategic policy or even accidental engagement with the many denominational and parachurch partners who now make up the core supporters (numerical and financial) to the fresh expressions corpus, regarding how their theological and ecclesiological contributions can challenge and evolve Fresh Expressions.

The intention of this essay is not to fuel more of the binary debate about the effectiveness and success of fresh expressions (or otherwise) – but instead to inspire a dwindling Methodist Church to take the challenge of contextual mission and faithful discipleship seriously, and to press deeper into the

potential of Methodism to once again be a community of people who are socially and biblically literate and engaged, and who invite people to participate in the kingdom of God wherever it is discovered. Methodism has certainly not got it all together, and the current statistics about terminal decline indicate that there are many things which are failing to connect with those inside and outside of the Methodist fold. Methodist people can still transformatively contribute to the ecumenical landscape of mission in a postmodern context.

Denominational distinctiveness and contributory DNA

The missiologist Stuart Murray Williams notes, 'For the church to understand itself as a movement, not an institution, it needs to know its history and destiny. Movements are dynamic, people sharing history and traditions and journeying together towards a longed-for future.'²¹ If, as I suspect, he is right, then the contemporary challenge for Fresh Expressions (the organisation) and fresh expressions (the local context-driven examples of missional communities) is to become more confident in the wider Methodist identity narrative, and to begin to incorporate their own practice and understanding into their community stories. This is a zeitgeist moment for Methodist people to reclaim and rehearse some of our history and experience, and to live confidently in the reality and challenges of being a Church with a mission-shaped praxis at our heart.

Methodism has a narrative to contribute to the mission-shaped picture, which risks being drowned out in the prevailing societal consumer desire for all things new and better. Jane Craske comments: 'Given Methodism's origins, it should be at the forefront of mission ... Methodism should equally be at the forefront of enabling British Christianity to see what the contemporary equivalent of that past Methodist calling should be in its mission.'²² In this subsection, I want to suggest four themes (or charisms) that could enable Methodism to contribute to the prevailing mission-shaped agenda: a history of tensions and schisms; Central Halls as a model of context-driven mission; the discipling role of small-group fellowship; and an open sacramental table. A rediscovery of these, and an intentional focus on some of our expectations and deployment of leadership at all levels of the Methodist Church would, I argue, increase Methodist confidence at a time when denominational identity is treated in a

lacklustre and apathetic spirit, and when this ambivalence is assumed to be post-denominationalism rather than lack of clarity.

Tensions and schisms

In a context of profound cultural and philosophical shifts, it is no surprise that current missiological endeavours are faced with tensions and conflict. This subsection identifies three key areas of tension and conflict: the tensions between church and state authority – and why Methodism may have a powerful influence in the wider Fresh Expressions evolution because of its dissenting history; the tension between inherited forms of leadership and mission; and finally the real and present danger that communities which are authentically fresh expressions may need the freedom and permission to schism well. Methodism is no stranger to tensions, conflict and schism – indeed we are less than a century from the 1932 Deed of Union which sought to respond to the increasing fragmentation of the Holiness movements of the Evangelical Revival. It is this history, therefore, that can be part of Methodism's contributory DNA into the Fresh Expressions agenda: how to approach conflict, dissention, power and schism without fear or heavy-handed bureaucracy.

1. Tension between Church and State

Murray-Williams asks 'whether we can re-imagine Christianity in a world we no longer control'.²³ Reimagined Christianity will need to understand power in a way not experienced by Anglicanism. Individual examples of fresh expressions offer examples of what 're-imagined Christianity' might look like in a post-Christian environment from a denomination that has never sought to be in political or ecclesiological control. Steve Bruce goes so far as to conclude that the very reason for Methodism's success was that it was a movement of social protest,²⁴ and Malcolm Gladwell uses Methodism as an example of the transformation that can come about with a small group of people committed to change.²⁵ Methodism is positioned in such a place that as a denomination it has a history of schism and unity, small units of class meetings which are intentionally outward-focused for the purpose of mission, and a passion deep within its DNA which is about enabling people of every social class within society to have an identity and a respectability that other power structures have been and are keen to prevent. Even within a secularised society, therefore, this juxtaposition between a corporate missional unit and personal esteem means that Methodism is implicitly able to adapt and adjust for the priority of mission in a way that other more powerful organisations fail to do.

Furthermore, Methodism offers a continuing model of a renewal movement, with all the pervading features that that entails. Howard Snyder identifies the markers of a renewal movement as including tensions that appear between the institution or denomination and the new movement. This tension consequently means that the movement also finds itself in conflict with the world, and subsequently calls people to greater radical commitment. Renewal movements are also noticeable because of the significant number of lay people who take on positions of leadership. Radical engagement with and against the world begins to evolve in working on behalf of the poor and those who are marginalised for whatever reason. Renewal movements have a strong sense of justice. The final mark of a renewal movement is the energy it creates as more and more people are enlisted.²⁶ Conflict, justice, lay leadership and energy are all features of renewal movements and could provide the language to describe what is happening in fresh expressions of church in a more Methodist-friendly language. By maintaining the language of renewal, there is also the implication to underpin missional activity with a pneumatological source – which, although inherent in Fresh Expressions ideology, can often be neglected.

2. Tension of missional and inherited forms of leadership

There is a subversive undercurrent within much missional experience in the Methodist Church, especially for ordained colleagues who are engaging in missional and fresh expressions forms of ministry, that they are doing so at the cost of a circuit appointment. Financially, this may well be true – many fresh expressions are expensive projects to facilitate and run in the long term – although this does not make them any less significant. Anecdotally, one Messy Church participant was overheard to say, ‘I like Messy Church. This is the only hot meal my child has all week.’ Needless to say, that context improved the quality of food provided in light of that disclosure.

What becomes more problematic, however, is where leaders involved in fresh expressions – either lay or ordained – begin to be publicly exposed as those who are predisposed to doing the ‘fun parts’ of ministry at the cost of what is expected within inherited models. One practitioner has reflected, ‘I am treated as though my leadership of a fresh expression is the cherry on a cake the circuit never asked to be iced in the first place.’ Fresh expressions leaders are often seen as rebellious, entrepreneurial – or even infantile – in their opinion and behaviours, with their exuberance and questioning seen as threatening to the status quo. On more than one occasion, comments have been made about leaders needing to ‘grow up’; a sentiment towards their childish behaviour

rather than a discipleship desire. In turn, and anecdotally, the risk is that these leaders become over-managed, rather than enabled to flourish in a context.

Fresh expressions and community development is viewed by some in circuit and district oversight as an additional, extra-curricular activity for a presbyter – and a problem for lay people who are no longer taking up formal lay appointments in the Church. Inherited and missional modes are set at odds with each other, and one risks suffocating if not euthanising the other. This tension, therefore, may require some significant policy work in order to facilitate a true ‘mixed economy’ rather than a competitive market.

The Methodist Church, if it takes seriously its history and heritage, will always be a place of protest, social transformation and mission. The risk of the current mixed model of leadership is that both communities and leaders become confused about what they are called to do and be. This in turn fosters a lack of confidence in the local congregation about both the value of the denomination and the cultivation and sharing of a community and individual narrative. Ultimately, the risked consequence of this is a lack of confidence, or disappointment, in God. There is a clear and present danger with the current tension between Church as institution and Church as mission, which results in leaders becoming de-churched themselves, and thereby becoming frustrated, cynical, embittered and angry towards the institution that enabled (and funded) their experimentation in the first place.

I want to suggest that the tension between inherited (or institutional) Methodism and the excited fervour enabled by fresh expressions is not a call to something new – but a rediscovery of our Methodist and missional DNA. There is greater freedom, creativity and verve if we are able to narrate fresh expressions as being authentically Methodist – rather than having to justify their existence as something distinctive and other. Furthermore, this intentional shift of language would free up Fresh Expressions to press deeper into its own aims and outcomes to enable true fresh expressions to develop with greater ecclesiological and denominational connectedness. There are examples of local leaders working and praying hard in new missional opportunities, and yet their work is misunderstood, stymied; it is still perceived as an extraordinary threat to the status quo, rather than a spirit-led and pragmatic response to terminal decline, dislocation from public opinion, and limiting understandings of lay and ordained ministry.

3. The freedom to separate from a centralised institution

So far, much of the supporting data on fresh expressions and post-Christendom mission as presented in this essay is from within a mainstream approach to the topic. However, there are more radical voices who would prefer a more permanent shift away from any institutional backing. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, for example, argue that the strain between movement and institution is necessary, suggesting 'that renewal movements typically live in tension with the dominant church institution'.²⁷ They develop their argument inciting the conclusion that movements exist better without an institutional infrastructure. Academics such as Peter Rollins push this further by concluding that by adopting Fresh Expressions into the institutional fold is actually a subversive action designed to silence the movement altogether: 'By the very process of [providing space], the radical voice of these groups is actually suppressed'.²⁸ Methodism has been referred to as the 'second-class citizen of Fresh Expressions' and as an institutional Church has a long history of remaining a small player on the denominational playing field. Further insights into the significance of power and separation rather than integration might also be found within the practical theology of Hyun Kyung Chung in Asia. Chung 'raises the question not only of the way in which one dominant (colonial) culture can silence another (indigenous) expression; but also how issues of power and difference within a culture can be adequately considered and addressed'.²⁹ Such a conversation is beyond the scope of this essay, but raises some interesting points of cognition with the Belonging Together project and the ongoing development of Cultural Fellowship groups in the UK.

Methodism has never been immune to splits, schisms and division on missional grounds. A rediscovery of Methodist identity at the heart of current missional and fresh expression praxis may have the (un)desired effect of requiring a more local and context-driven form of oversight than the Methodist Church institution is able to offer. Facilitating this as a positive experience, especially in light of earlier comments about the psychological well-being of leaders, remains a potential outcome to which attention may need to be paid both locally and connexionally.

Central Halls

As one Superintendent has observed, 'Central Halls were the Fresh Expressions of their day.' Central Halls, therefore, have the renewed potential to enable focused and specifically contextual ministry and missional appointments for

teams of presbyters, deacons and lay people. In contemporary terms, this need not be about buildings per se. The rediscovery of a theology and ecclesial practice of Central Halls enables flexibility within Methodist structures, as Central Halls have their own standing orders and legal status. There is also the intentionality that the context is the primary focus of mission and ministry, not necessarily the original inherited congregants. The *missio Dei* necessarily means that God is active in and around all areas of culture and community life. Central Halls have intentionally focused on spiritual, social and civic engagement in missional terms.

This is not to say that the Central Hall experiment of the twentieth century was a wholehearted success story. Indeed, the urban prioritisation of the mission of the Halls has been an abject failure in many locations. However, the missional theory of Central Hall ecclesiology maintains a focus on contextually appropriate service to a local community and a relevant vehicle for authentic and passionate communication of the gospel. As John Hull notes, 'the purpose or function of mission is to bring in the Kingdom. In order to do this effectively the mission has (among other things) a church. But the mission is not the church.'³⁰

It would be easy to suggest that the city context of the Central Halls has limited appeal and interest for the wider Connexion. However, the missiology and practice of ministry in and around Central Halls, therefore, offers a significant Methodist model of mission which pre-dates Fresh Expressions and the *Mission-Shaped Church* report, and yet offers a model of mission which is about a context-driven expression of worship and mission for the prevailing culture, at a time when arguably the preceding inherited model of church was ineffective for a certain section of society.

Central Hall ecclesiology and missiology, therefore, offer a narrative of fresh expressions which is inherently Methodist, and yet is anything but consumerist, new or alternative. Methodists have been doing 'fresh expressions' for a very long time: in fact, perhaps Methodism has always been a fresh expression. If this is the case, then perhaps reclaiming this narrative is the first step towards a greater confidence in our own identity – and an opportunity and invitation for Fresh Expressions the organisation to incorporate more denominational, historical and ideological DNA into their language, practice and education tools.

Small groups

Statistically, most fresh expression communities attract a small number of people – although in context so do a majority of Methodist congregations, so there is some parity required in how this is explored. However, what remains a significant observation for both fresh and inherited forms of church and worshipping communities is that small groups and fellowship units remain the vehicle for growth, discipleship and pastoral oversight. A focus on small groups within Methodism enables a conversation based on the complementarity of intentional faith development, personal and corporate accountability, financial governance and missional endeavour.

Within the Fresh Expression canon, Davison and Milbank assume that the parish is the formational unit of discipleship. The *From Anecdote to Evidence* report would refute this; there is still the underlying assumption within a primarily Anglican initiative that a parish system, and not a small-group system, is the foremost unit of ongoing formation. Davison and Milbank note, ‘the Parish is where we begin to learn the grammar of the Christian life, to play ourselves like an instrument. It is the nursery of heaven where we encounter all ages and sorts of people.’³¹ What if, however, any form of worshipping community – Anglican, Methodist or other – is not the ‘nursery of heaven’ but is one of a number of ways that spiritual development occurs; and that formation as an intentional outworking of that development happens in smaller-sized, context-driven, units?

This is no surprise within a Methodist narrative. As Walton notes:

Wesley was clear what he wanted his system to do. It was to promote scriptural holiness and enable people to make the journey of discipleship together. In doing this, he knew where the groups were located in relation to mission and worship. Class and band meetings were not substitutes for worship ... nor was the small group a primary means of evangelism.³²

The contribution that Methodism makes to the current missional agendas at work, therefore, is that communities of people intentionally formed, and potentially covenanted together, remain the vehicles for formation and mission. Walton is keen to note, however, that

our context and John Wesley’s are different. This ought to be a warning to those of us who wish to use small groups for our own

and other's formation within our church's life. Valuable though a study of Wesley's small group is, it is unlikely to provide an off-the-shelf model for our own generation.³³

Perhaps fresh expressions are one way of challenging the one-size fits-all 'off-the-shelf' model of formation, and begin to provide Methodism with the renewed sense that context matters. Once again, Methodism's inheritance has the potential to be Fresh Expression's gain if small groups and communities continue to make intentional moves towards faith formation, missional endeavour outside of themselves, and accountability.

Small groups of contextually engaged, prayerful individuals who engage in theological reflection and mission together remains the core of Methodist identity – inspired by the Holy Spirit who is active in the world, however conflicted faith and the world appears. The interest in new monasticism indicates that there is a desire for accountability and spiritual direction. Rules of life and covenantal promises are significant in the ongoing life of some fresh expressions. Methodism's history and heritage has a great deal to offer this conversation, from accountability bands, an annual covenant and covenant discipleship groups.³⁴ David Lyall concludes, 'Christian discipleship is discovered in living dialogue between the traditions we inherit and our own.'³⁵ The challenge, therefore, is to promote the dialogue between the Methodist tradition and that experienced by local leaders. The work of Elaine Heath has much to offer this conversation in terms of a Wesleyan paradigm for intentional missional communities in a new monastic matrix.³⁶ Once again, Methodism's history and contemporary practice are neglected from the Fresh Expressions writing on this subject, and yet there is much to be explored from Methodist spirituality in terms of rules of life, Wesleyan and Holiness communities, and a contemplative posture for whole-life discipleship and missional leadership.

Furthermore, one criteria now projected for the longevity of a fresh expression, beyond its initial missional impetus and towards an ecclesial identity of its own, is that of being self-sustaining. Once again, a Methodist approach takes this seriously. Walton again notes:

It is widely acknowledged that John Wesley's much-admired class meetings started for a purpose different from the one for which they became famous. Originating as a scheme for collecting money to pay off the loan on the Bristol Building, they rapidly became the engine of Methodist spirituality.³⁷

There is the potential for a reverse move here: a re-ignition of Methodist confidence as an authentic and intentional missional community invites consideration of financial as well as ethical accountability. In a UK context where financial irregularity remains headline news, a missional approach that has something to say about justice, economics and spirituality may indeed be a prophetic and attractional model of community engagement.

The Methodist practice of small groups for accountability and pastoral oversight, alongside the prevailing house group model for scriptural engagement and faith formation, and the increasing significance of contemplative forms of missional engagement, offers a critical insight into the importance of the number of people actively engaging in any form of Christian community – fresh or inherited. Once again, the Methodist Church is able to share this DNA in the missional conversation as a tried and tested model, and thus further enhance the suggestion that fresh expressions currently work in Methodism because they inherently employ Methodist theology and practice.

Open table

Albert Outler's often misappropriated and much debated Wesleyan quadrilateral finds an ideological home in the theological reflective practice of fresh expression communities. In a context where, in the words of emerging church specialist Dan Kimball, Western culture 'like[s] Jesus, but not the church',³⁸ mainly due to issues of inclusivity, accessibility and scientific evidence, there is an opportunity for the Methodist Church to be more articulate and overt about prevenient grace and inclusion at the open sacramental table. Taken even further, Methodism's ability to navigate some of the sacramental roadblocks that other denominations within Fresh Expressions face offers once again a model towards the organisation.

The American Methodist missiologist Leonard Sweet states that 'the story of Jesus is the story of the table. You can't think about Jesus without thinking about the table, its meals and its rituals. In fact, if you are reading the Gospels and not getting hungry, you are missing the meat of the Gospels.'³⁹ This offers a justification for the amount of food consumed at fresh expressions, and the significance of a meal table for contemporary mission. At a deeper level, within the context of Holy Communion, the open table offers a vision of inclusion which remains a central tenet in criticisms of the Church. A recognition of the place of the meal table as a narrative vehicle of the Christian story, as a way of providing sustenance to those who are struggling to cope under austerity, a mechanism to form community, and a memory of the early Church in Acts 2,

the open table is a tangible invitation. Although a pragmatic response to the new, methodical revival movement, the open table may be reinterpreted for contemporary contexts in a way which revitalises traditional Methodism and opens up the invitation for all to participate in the kingdom of God across biblical and ethical boundaries traditionally espoused.

The gift of this for the wider catholic Church is that at the heart of Methodist mission and ecclesiology is a desire to include rather than exclude people. Although not always present in a consensus model of policy-making, the intention and sentiment remains. At the heart of Methodism is a desire to enable all people – whatever cultural, transnational, gender, sexual or financial background they have – to encounter the risen Christ in their midst through the power of the Holy Spirit. The *missio Dei* is about invitation and encounter of all parties involved and necessarily demands willing, robust and intentional openness to change. Questions of power in *missio Dei* are largely ignored, and thus at worst fresh expressions become quirky versions of their founding parents; rather than indigenously authentic expressions of faith development from within the new context.

Crucially, such a reflection also offers a theological counterbalance to the charismatic hyperbole of some fresh expressions practitioners. Rather than leave the identity of the community resolutely in the hands of individual leaders, a refocusing on prevenient grace and the work of the Spirit reshapes the missional endeavour towards a relationship with Jesus rather than an individual leader. Methodism speaks much of this grace and provides the opportunities for this christological calibration – sacramentally and missionally. *Missio Dei* speaks of God's divine action in the world, and our invitation to participate in this. Far too often, growing and mission-minded communities become entwined in the identity of the leader (and vice versa), rather than in the identity of Christ. The fact that all can be saved mitigates this risk, and enables leaders to be vulnerable, servant-hearted and flawed, as much as the people to whom the community is reaching. Such a message is vital in a world where the gospel of media influence is powerful, where celebrity is celebrated and heroes of the faith are hard to come by.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay suggested that the DNA of Fresh Expressions might in fact be subversively and subconsciously Methodist. Therefore, fresh expressions

within Methodism offer the experience and opportunity for the Methodist people to be confident in their traditional identity as a mission-shaped Church. Such a conclusion consequently releases Fresh Expressions to achieve what it set out to achieve – new communities of contextually rich and relevant spiritual seekers finding a brand new ecclesial expression – and something which I contest they are not yet achieving. Further, the conclusion that fresh expressions might actually be Methodist, and that Methodism is in fact a fresh expression in its own right, challenges some of the prevailing economics of mission and policy-making. In turn, this may enable Methodist people to gain confidence in their own pragmatic, missional and discipleship calling in a way that begins to challenge the powerful narrative of terminal decline and insignificance which is restricting revival, growth, vision and significant intentional change.

This essay has offered four themes or charisms to underline this contestation: a history of tensions and schism; Central Halls as a model of *missio Dei*; small groups for financial backing, accountability and formation; and the open table for inclusive invitation to a relationship with Jesus, over and against a relationship with an individual leader or ideology.

Methodism has the potential, if not the present reality, to offer much to Fresh Expressions and wider society, and a renewed self-confidence and inspired narrative may be the first step towards offering more of our DNA into the missional petrie dish. Methodism matters – on its own terms, and because of what we can offer the mission-shaped conversations of the future.

Notes

1. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004.
2. www.acpi.org.uk/downloads/Ordained_Pioneer_Ministers_Guidelines.pdf, accessed 13 April 2011.
3. www.churchofengland.org/clergy-office-holders/pastoralandclosedchurches/pastoral/bmos.aspx, accessed 13 April 2011.
4. See Hull 2006.
5. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 3.
6. The report cites the work of Castells 2000 when it describes the networked society of the twenty-first century. The theory of networks has continued to be of interest to sociologists and to the continuing developments in social media. Further evidence of this can be found in Holland 1998, Johnson 2001, Surowiecki 2004, Brafman and Beckstrom 2006, Shirky 2009, Leadbeater 2009, and Shirky 2010.
7. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 12.

8. Schultz and Jones Yang 1997), Hashemi and Hashemi 2002, Lloyd 2006, Brown 2005), Cohen and Greenfield, 1997), and www.cafechurch.net/, accessed 17 April 2011.
9. Hunter III 1996.
10. Baker Gay 2003, Ward 2004, Baker 2010, and Dawn 2010.
11. www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision.
12. www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis.
13. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 1.
14. 'Deep Church' is a phrase initially coined by C. S. Lewis, but is now used by a number of constituencies to describe what Bretherton and Walker note as 'neither an attempt to simplify, restate or repristinate the Christian tradition, this is tantamount to ancestor worship, nor does it take its bearings from the emerging culture, to do this is simply to assimilate to the prevailing hegemony, rather, to be a deep church means to stand on the cusp or the breaking point of both the Christian tradition and the emerging culture, deeply rooted in the former while fully engaged in the latter'. Walker Bretherton 2007, p. xvii. See also Belcher 2009, and Orr-Ewing and Orr-Ewing 2008.
15. Walton 2009, p. 26.
16. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 35.
17. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. 41.
18. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. vii.
19. See also Croft 2006, and Bayes and Sledge 2006.
20. Moynah 2012, p. 192.
21. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 277.
22. Jane Craske, 'The Threads With Which We Weave: Towards a Holy Church' in Craske and Marsh 1999, p. 177.
23. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 8.
24. Bruce 2002, pp. 159–161.
25. Gladwell 2000, also quoted by Angela Shier-Jones, 'Pioneering Circuit Ministry', *Epworth Press* 36(3), July 2008, p. 45.
26. Snyder 1997, pp. 24–25.
27. Frost and Hirsch 2003, p. 205.
28. Peter Rollins, 'Biting the Hand that Feeds', in Nelstrop and Percy 2008, p. 72.
29. Graham, Walton and Ward 2005, p. 220, and Chung 1990.
30. Hull 2006, p. 2.
31. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. 211.
32. Walton 2014, p. 124.
33. Walton 2014, p. 124.
34. Walton 2009, p. 179.
35. Lyall 2010, pp. 269–270.
36. See Heath 2010, Heath and Duggins 2014, and Heath 2008.
37. Walton 2014, p. 136.
38. Kimball 2007.
39. Sweet 2014, p. 61.

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