



Living Theology: Methodists Respond to a Call to Holiness

Research Article

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Abstract: The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church in Britain assert a vocation of holiness yet what is unclear is the strategy through which this vocation might be enabled. The author outlines research that describes diverse responses to holiness within one particular British Methodist church. Throughout the article, the author asserts the relational nature of holiness and therefore presents an authentic and effective way for enabling local Methodist churches to engage with their Methodist doctrine through local and rooted relationships joining together in spiritual exploration and sharing in God's ministry.

Keywords: BANDS • RELATIONAL HOLINESS • LOCAL MINISTRY • METHODISM • VOCATION

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Introduction

The case for a Methodist focus on holiness is clear. The Methodist Church of Great Britain was 'raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land',¹ and the church's doctrinal standards go on to highlight Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and his *44 Sermons*,² which affirm Methodism's vocation towards holiness.³ That historic vocation resonates with contemporary theological discourse about holiness,⁴ with a number of authors arguing that Methodists have an opportunity—perhaps a duty—to highlight the call to holiness today in a way the whole of Britain can hear.⁵ Yet less clear is the strategy through which this focus might be achieved. Forged on the anvil of my own desire as a Methodist presbyter to discover the nature of our church's vocation, I invited Village Road Methodist Church⁶ in North East England to join me in exploring holiness. Over 100 people were involved. Together we led a youth group, wrote house group notes, participated in small groups and experimented with 'band' meetings. I also engaged 22 people in hour-long, semi-structured conversations about holiness. A rich record emerged of people's response to a vocation of holiness that was rooted in their lives.

At the outset I want to acknowledge that engaging with the lived realities of individuals associated with church communities is an untidy process. This research did not happen in a vacuum isolated from the complexity of relating: I was a practitioner-researcher among people at a specific time rooted in a particular location. As someone appointed to be their minister through British Methodism's stationing matching process, the congregation's exploration of holiness began before me and continued after I was sent to my next appointment. Moreover, the responses to holiness that I heard might be different to those the congregation might convey to someone else, because each relationship is different. Responses are rarely static but continue to form as a result of ongoing thinking. Yet, as Pete

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Ward argues, 'Complexity is not necessarily a problem to be solved; it is just the way things are'.⁷ This complexity has benefits. For example, my research would not have begun had I not been a presbyter who deeply cares about his church, its people and, in particular, for the people of Village Road where I had pastoral charge. Moreover, because Christian holiness is essentially relational⁸—the revelation of God as Father, as the Son incarnate in Jesus Christ and as the Holy Spirit among us—then the proper research of holiness must engage with the rooted divine-human relating that is the revelation of holiness. Moreover, as Webster argues, 'theological thinking about holiness is itself an exercise of holiness',⁹ because—from a Christian worldview—researching holiness is a response to God's relating, God's holiness. The gift of academic process is in the way it draws us deeper into the mystery and enables us to reflect and conceptualise the nature of holiness.¹⁰ My own research suggests some of the nuanced and complex signs of welcome and resistance to God's holiness that might enable others—as part of their relating with God, the church and the world—to explore how to be faithful to the God who has been revealed as holy and who extends the invitation, 'be holy as I am holy'.¹¹

Signs of Welcome and Resistance to Holiness

First, although many people at Village Road Methodist Church felt that they had encountered God's ministry, wanted to talk about that ministry and could do so in compelling ways, it was unusual for anyone to use holiness terminology.¹² The rare recourse to holiness terminology by Methodists to describe their discipleship may reflect the relative absence of holiness in public discourse. Typical comments included 'It is a word we don't talk about very much [...] even if we want to, we struggle to find the language to express what we mean by it' (Julie¹³) and 'I suppose it is a word that I've grown up with in the church and never really stopped to think, "What does this mean?"' (Bernie). Of the 22 interviewees, 9 had received formal theological training yet only 1 could recall it being part of their formation for ministry. Isaac remembers one session of his training for Methodist presbyteral ministry where his tutor declared dissatisfaction with 'the modern way of saying [holiness] was just wholeness [...] And that stuck.' The absence of any further memorable reflection on holiness enabled by Methodist training institutions by Isaac or others may be a cause—or an outcome—of the surprising lack of sustained published theological discourse about holiness by contemporary British Methodist theologians.¹⁴ Yet perhaps because of the absence of discourse about holiness—in the public sphere, in churches and in theological training—people at Village Road were curious. It is important to be clear: it is not that the content of holiness theology was unfamiliar to them—each person had words to describe the ministry of God they had received, and often drew upon phrases that academic theology uses to describe holiness. Yet it was unusual for participants to see the movement of God towards them—and towards the world—as holiness.

Second, holiness terminology has negative connotations. This was not because holiness terminology was unfamiliar, but rather because it was all too familiar in ways that ran against contemporary academic theology and Methodist doctrines. As Frank noted, the word 'does come with a load of baggage'. In part, this is connected to the negative way the word holiness can be used in popular discourse. As Bernie noted, 'it is linked with "holier than thou" [...] Everyone bangs on about sexuality and so on'. Yet I found that the true power of the negative connotations lay not in generalised statements, but in personal experience. For Maud, it was her involvement in an 'evangelical fundamentalist group' as a young person: 'Everything was black or white. You were either in or you were out [...] if you live like that you're holy and if you're not you are not holy.' Nadine was brought up in a 'very exclusive sect': 'They were the only people who had holiness [...] because they followed as closely as they possibly could the New Testament teaching'. For Cathy it was related to the way her daughters encountered the Christian Union at their university and stopped going to church. Cathy acknowledges, 'It is funny I should say this because I've never given this a lot of thought, but the people weren't normal [...] I'm saying that because the word holiness reminded me of that'. There are a number of unhelpful associations connected to holiness terminology at Village Road. Holiness was seen as detached, disconnected, immoral, judgemental, exclusive and of 'no earthly good'. This is what they 'knew' about holiness and, because this knowing was unreflective but deeply rooted, it was difficult to move beyond these negative connotations.

Third, holiness was commonly seen as a standard beyond reach of ordinary people. Participants at Village Road initially associated holiness with being separate and attainable by only a few extraordinary people. It was uncommon to hear someone instinctively present holiness as the outflowing of grace from the holy God revealed in

Christ. The sense of holiness being about attainment and not grace was illustrated in a house group of mainly older women where one person strongly asserted that there are not many saints and that she was not a saint because no one is 'good enough.' In a different group, an older lady related that when she had been called a 'saint' for doing something kind, she had taken offence because she did not see how doing one good deed made her a saint. The group reflected with her, realising that in everyday life different people in different contexts use the word 'saint' to mean different things. Yet her instinct is important. It connects with the way holiness has come to be defined in contemporary speech as often something quite different to the way God's grace is outlined in theological writing.¹⁵ It also points to the way that participants at Village Road portray holiness as beyond their reach but do not take the consequential step of seeing human holiness as dependent on—and therefore achievable through—God's grace. That this step was not taken suggests that participants at Village Road did not interpret God's grace as the fire powerful enough to make someone holy, especially them.¹⁶ It seems that people at Village Road – and perhaps elsewhere – have low expectations of the holiness of God. This contrasts with the Wesleyan optimism of God's holiness which, because it is rooted in the optimism of God's grace,¹⁷ can be planted in the human heart.¹⁸

Fourth, while teaching, preaching and liturgy are important, at Village Road it is relationships that profoundly affect how people respond to holiness. This should not surprise because, as I have already highlighted, holiness is fundamentally relational. Yet human relating does produce diverse responses to holiness. For some, relationships have been profoundly encouraging. For example, Heidi recalled how all her daughter's friends went to the same church with Heidi perceiving they were 'very together and they lived their lives a lot more visibly and inwardly about God'. For others, like Suzie, the effect of relationships is more complex. She described the relational element of hearing the choir sing in the context of a building that has witnessed centuries of prayer: 'you were conscious that hundreds of people had worshipped and there was a sense of holiness [...] that's to me where holiness is.' Yet it was the minister of the Baptist Church that she attended as a teenager that had an adverse effect on her perception of holiness and, indeed, Christianity more generally: 'The overriding feeling of sermons was 'thou shalt not commit adultery' or fornication [...] It was that kind of 'thou shalt not' [...] to be pure in thought, word and deed [...] They may have been trying to teach us to be holy but certainly for me it backfired'. In Denise's life there have been a number of relationships that have had a positive effect, but there are also some that have affected her negatively: 'I feel I ought to use the word "holy" in relation to the church but I don't feel I can [...] I do know some people I'd describe as holy [...] But having worked for the church and being part of the church, I think I've just seen too many flaws and too many difficult times to see the church as holy'. For Vince, it is not so much the experience of negative relationships, but rather the absence of positive relationships that affected his approach to holiness. He simply had not had the encouragement from someone who is truly interested in his discipleship and with whom he felt safe enough to share his faith journey: 'There are a couple of people that I tried that with since we've been here and it's just not taken [...] over the last few years I've given up really'. Not all give up, but relationships remain complex and are often in need of a third party. For example, as part of my research I began a meeting styled on Wesley's *bands*.¹⁹ It was appreciated by participants, as Kyle articulated: 'we were able to be really, really honest [...] I was far more able to open up and talk and go deeper than I'd experienced in other ways.' Yet, when my research no longer compelled me to ensure that the Band met, no one made arrangements for a further meeting. Alex's comment about youth groups might apply to all people of every age at Village Road: 'I wonder if really young people need more handholding than we were giving them [...] I wonder really if they are able at that age to join up the dots and think [...] how am I called to be holy in my daily life'. While academic theologians might rightly focus on the question 'what is holiness?', an equally important question might be 'who will pursue holiness with me?'

Fifth, when gathered for worship, Village Road articulated the optimism of God's power to transform people yet this belief was less evident in the theology they lived out day to day. In one house group the following unguarded comments not only expressed their difficulties with faith but also voiced their resistance to God's transforming power: 'I don't want to be holy if being holy is set apart or God-like', 'Striving to be holy is a step too far', 'I wouldn't ever see myself as holy' and 'Holiness is separate – out of reach for someone like me'. My interview with Suzie illuminated the complexity of someone believing, trusting and opening their life to God's holiness. I have already mentioned how part of her understanding of holiness was derived from a particular form of preaching so that, when I announced that we would be exploring holiness, Suzie panicked and started her own research, which included reading articles in *Holiness*. The 'Journal has helped a lot because it helped me grasp the definition of holiness you obviously wanted us to put across [...] Yet the articles [if that's holiness...] it's not what I thought it was.' In addition, Suzie found the prism of relationship problematic to understanding holiness. The assurance of 'God with us'—and not just a body of teaching—as being central to Methodist doctrine²⁰ seemed quite new to Suzie: 'I had

never ever come across the kind of holiness that was in that series and so I've had to get rid of 70 years of [...] my understanding of holiness [...] I've found that very difficult.' As a consequence, with notable self-awareness, Suzie candidly reflected, 'And so have I changed my perspective of holiness? I understand there is a different definition, there is different understanding. As far as what I feel about holiness, it is still the soaring choir boys going up to the rafters or the awesomeness of being on top of a mountain by yourself in winter'. Her choice of words is telling, revealing that lived-out theology is often far more influenced by what 'I feel' than through what 'I understand'.

Possibilities for Living Theology Rooted in the Call to Holiness

Holiness speaks of God's relating. It speaks of the relational character of the Holy Trinity, the movement of God—supremely revealed in Christ—towards a people who are named holy and the mission of both God and God's people to communicate the invitation to the whole of humanity to be holy.²¹ Due to the relational nature of holiness, it is fired by love, which is untidy and invariably costly. It therefore elicits a complex response of both welcome and resistance. Welcome, because it is love and acceptance, and resistance because God in Christ reveals love as especially costly – to God and to those who choose to participate in God's love for the world. As holiness is relational, it is not effective to speak generally but only in the context of specific people in their particular time and context. Nevertheless, drawing on what I discovered in my research, it does seem possible to suggest a way forward and the way forward takes inspiration from the power of 'what I feel' in Suzie's honest appraisal, Alex's realisation of the need for 'handholding' and my own reflections on the embodied theological experimentation that seemed to deepen Village Road's engagement with God's holiness.

Embodied experimentation—in contrast to theology learnt in the classroom or from the pulpit— enabled real change in people's lives and in the life of the church. This was evident in the participants telling their story leading up to our exploration. For example, Alex chose to live in community and found that she was 'accepted and valued' and saw other people, from different backgrounds and cultures, having a similar experience. Vince also experienced the transforming power of holiness when he 'immersed' himself in the Navigators.²² These stories resonated with my story, both the way I had participated in God's mission in the past, but also the way writing about holiness had inspired me to find ways to embed that theology in my own life. It also resonated with the stories of those who joined in the theological experimentation that was part of my research.

Having explored together the grace of God in Christ, young people sought to find ways to express this, for example, at a local festival through giving away free sweets that referenced their Twitter feed about random acts of kindness. They also spent a day in a nearby church building, which was not their own, dusting on the inside and weeding on the outside. Three of these young people decided to explore confirmation and church membership.

The act of interviewing people, while motivated by research, had significant outcomes with many participants thanking me for listening as they explored what faith meant to them. At times the conversation seemed to provide space for participants to deepen their spiritual formation. On each occasion I left the interview feeling that I had been trusted and that our relationship had positively developed.

It was perhaps the experiment of writing house group notes that seemed to enable greatest transformation. This exercise in trusting a small group with freedom to cultivate for themselves a new imagination of what holiness might mean moved holiness from cerebral concept to an embodied engagement of their hopes and passions, which James Smith argues has the greatest formative potential.²³ As a consequence, the writing group not only displayed more commitment than others in pursuing holiness but were most animated in advocating holiness among others, both at church but also in the wider sphere of their lives. In addition, one member began to explore becoming a presbyter, one is now a deacon, another became commissioned as a worship leader and others deepened their commitment to pastoral care and writing. There are many factors that contributed to these vocational trajectories. Writing house group notes played a part in their transformation and also presented the opportunity of transformation to over 100 house group members at Village Road. It was among the writing group that I saw the most evidence of people enacting the Methodist vocation to 'spread scriptural holiness'.

The house groups exhibited the most resistance to holiness, but even here there were moments of welcome too. For example, in one session the leader introduced the theme of perfection, a word central to holiness terminology, and the whole group spontaneously burst into laughter. This collective embodied response suggests that they held a common understanding of being imperfect and any conversation about being perfect was comic. Yet, during the ensuing conversation, one person ventured, 'no child is perfect, unless in the eyes of their mother', pointing to the

possibility that, even in popular speech, perfection may be connected with love rather than faultless performance. The conversation continued, highlighting that someone could be perfect because they are loved by God and they could also be perfect because, through their love for God, they are open to God's power in their lives. Through this conversation, I sensed this group bridging the divide between their lived theology and the theology of the academy. I also sensed the mood of the house group had changed: it felt like the group had become an arena where 'ministry' was being encountered. The group appeared to be moving towards embracing holiness, not as unachievable or undesirable, but as being caught up in the loving purposes of God.²⁴ William, speaking on behalf of another group, could have been speaking on behalf of all participants when he said: 'What we all discovered was that holiness wasn't quite what we thought it was [...] somebody with a halo, white robes and all this, but in fact when we read through the studies and talked together it was [...] something that everyone could experience in their lives as a disciple. I think that was for a lot of us quite a good discovery really'.

If holiness is lived divine-human relationship, then the vocation to holiness is less likely to be enabled through generalised 'top-down' programmes or schemes and more likely to be encouraged by local church leaders who, in the context of their own relating to God and others, are able to engage Methodists in their vocation to holiness. In this, presbyters have, to quote the doctrinal standards, a 'principal and directing part', yet the standards also speak inclusively of all those who exercise ministry on behalf of Christ as 'stewards' and 'shepherds'.²⁵ The delegation of ministry was, according to Wakefield, 'the revolutionary aspect' of the early Methodist system, where 'Methodist laity are not only to be consulted [...] they are to be pastors of the flock'.²⁶

As a leader of a local church I have sought to play my part. Not all engaged positively with Methodism's vocation to holiness but, through seeking to create a gracious space for an embodied exploration, without the pressures of predetermined outcomes, a number of people engaged in significant ways that altered their life's trajectory. In choosing just 12 disciples, God in Jesus shows how a few people can have a significant influence. In the recent past a few Presidents of Conference have championed the call to holiness,²⁷ there has been a Conference²⁸ and there has been a Festival.²⁹ Yet what is needed is a strategy. My research shows that a reasonably effective strategy for British Methodists to live out a vocation to holiness might lie in enthusing local leaders to know more about holiness and encouraging them to invite those in their locality to embark together on a grace-empowered embodied exploration of the holiness of God. My research suggests that such an exploration might lead to a renewed identity for the Methodist Church of Great Britain, rooted in its formally articulated purpose for existence: 'to spread scriptural holiness through the land'.

Notes

- [1] Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 213-14.
- [2] Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* and Sermons 1-10, 12, 16-19, 21-42, 44-50 in Outler, 1984-1985.
- [3] For example, see Turner, 91-108.
- [4] For example, holiness is 'pure majesty in relation' (Webster, 41), 'about being possessed by God and responding to this call through offering all that one (whether individually or communally) is to God' (Orsuto, 11), 'derived in relation to God, the Holy One' (Brower, 15) and 'is understood as [...] a pure heart, being filled with outgoing, inclusive compassion' (Noble, 42) and 'not the absence of weakness or the obliteration of all failings, but rather the triumph of Christ by love' (Plekon, 44).
- [5] For example, 'Wesley was right to hold that the peculiar contribution of Methodists to the church universal lies in our struggle to recover the centrality of holiness as integral to the Christian life'. Hauerwas, 124. 'Perhaps we can find renewed vigour for the word 'holiness''. Craske, 'The threads with which we weave: towards a holy church' in Craske and Marsh, 177. And 'on my heart is the need to re-discover the centrality of holiness in our life as a church [...] Methodism was a holiness movement'. Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 'New Methodist President Calls for Holiness'.
- [6] 'Village Road Methodist Church' is a name created to protect the anonymity of those surveyed.
- [7] Ward, 10.
- [8] 'It is difficult to over stress the importance of this relational character for grasping the nature of God's holiness'. Webster, 45.

- [9] Webster, 8.
- [10] Kolb., 21.
- [11] Leviticus 11:44-45. See also Matthew 5:48, Luke 6:36 and 1 Peter 1:16. It is a phrase that is particularly important for Methodists: I have counted 11 references in Wesley's 44 sermons.
- [12] Here I draw upon the way God's being and activity has been described as 'ministry' by Root, xiii.
- [13] Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of respondents.
- [14] Welcome exceptions include Morna Hooker, Calvin Samuel and Frances Young.
- [15] For example, 'Holiness is [...] being open in all the brokenness and giftedness of human life to God's transforming grace'. *The Call to Holiness*, para. 111.
- [16] I am drawing here on Exodus 3 and Isaiah 6, Bible passages which are sometimes drawn upon in preaching and liturgy, and Charles Wesley's popular hymn 'O thou who camest from above'.
- [17] In his comment on 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Wesley suggests that when we root ourselves in the means of grace – for example praying without ceasing and in everything giving thanks – this is Christian perfection. Wesley, 762.
- [18] For example, in his comment on prayer in Matthew 6:7, Wesley identifies love as integral to holiness: it is the 'language of the heart'. Wesley, 35-36. Furthermore, 'all our actions [...] even those that are indifferent in their own nature, may be made holy and good and acceptable to God, by a pure and holy intention'. From 'Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Sixth' in Outler 1984, 573.
- [19] Writing on Christmas Day 1738, John Wesley positioned bands as a response to God revealed in Jesus Christ. Those in bands were to meet punctually and weekly; to begin with singing and prayer; to speak 'freely and plainly the true state of our souls'; and to end in prayer. See Davies, 77.
- [20] For example, in his comment on 'God is love' in 1 John 4:8, Wesley states, God is 'not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as he is said to be love; intimating that this is his darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections'. Wesley, 914. In his sermon on Romans 10:5-8, 'The Righteousness of Faith', Wesley presents God's intention for humanity as to be 'holy as He which had created him was holy [...] that he should love the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength; that he should love every soul which God had made, even as God had loved him'. Outler 1984, 205.
- [21] This triangular relationship between God, God's people and God's world is described by Hooker, 'Be holy as I am holy', 4-19 (p.6) and Bailey Wells, 50.
- [22] See www.navigators.co.uk, accessed 2 April 2019.
- [23] Smith, 18.
- [24] It does not seem coincidental that this house group had two of the writing team among its members and therefore, I would argue, benefited from the presence of those with deeper embodied engagement in the process.
- [25] Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 213.
- [26] Wakefield, 76.
- [27] For example, Kenneth Howcroft and Roger Walton. See Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. 'Back to the Bible, forward to the world: Inaugural address of the Methodist President'. www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/back-to-the-bible-forward-to-the-worldinaugural-address-of-the-methodist-president, [accessed 26 June 2017] and Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. 'New Methodist President Calls for Holiness'. www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/newsreleases/new-methodist-president-calls-for-holiness [accessed 16 June 2017].
- [28] Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. *Holiness and Risk*.
- [29] The title for the Cliff College Festival in 2016 was 'Holy Ground'.

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