



Leading Like a Methodist – Intercultural Perspectives Leading In Education

Thomas V. Wolfe

Summary Report

This report is a summary of thoughts and observations made at the Wesley House – Cambridge event, Leading Like a Methodist – Intercultural Perspectives. The specific focus is, Leading In Education.

The overarching theme connecting all of the sessions is, *What does it mean to carry forward the Wesleyan educational legacy into the future in a way that attends to the particular cultural contexts of a world facing a host of shared crises?*

The core questions addressed by the panelists of the Leading In Education session were, *What are the major challenges facing Methodist education in your context? What for you, makes education “Methodist,” and how does the answer to that question point to distinctly Methodist ways of addressing the challenges you named? What questions should we be asking in this panel that we have not yet?*

This panel was comprised of educational leaders representing various institutional and global contexts. They were invited to discuss the future of Methodist schools, universities, and seminaries that seek to carry the Wesleyan legacy of education into an uncertain future.

Members of the panel were:

Barbara Easton – Vice President of the British Methodist Church and Lead of the Methodist Academies and Schools Trust (MAST) The Methodist Academies & Schools Trust (Great Britain)

The **Rev Dr Mary Kinoti** – Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic at Kenya Methodist University (Nairobi, Kenya)

The **Rev Dr Naveen Rao** – Principal of Leonard Theological College (Jabalpur, India)

The **Rev Dr Thomas V. Wolfe** – President & CEO, Iliff School of Theology (Denver, USA)

In preparing this summary of the discussion of these panelists, one word keeps coming to mind. Enduring. The panelists each identified current challenges and set them within the long arc of Methodist history. Methodist education was created with the characteristics of institution and movement. As institutions, Methodist schools have been guided by a deep internalized sense of Wesleyan tradition. As movement, these same institutions have searched within the guidance of Methodism for a fresh responsiveness to the change they must address. Embracing change in each era is an act of once again revealing the essence of Methodist education in new relevant forms. This

dynamic is embodied in the panelists presentations. They each have spoken about the differentiating qualities of Methodist education. They shared how each is navigating current challenges that come amidst culture shifts in the church and the changing ecology of education. A characteristic of Methodist identity makes possible the embracing of change while living out the tradition. Methodist education has been stewarding that dynamic since John Wesley founded Kingswood, Methodism's first school.

The conversation of our panelists revealed some common themes. I have also added some additional thoughts about these themes that were part of the advanced presentation materials provided to me by the panelists and which time did not allow for a full discussion. These themes are highlighted and discussed below.

Impact of Government Schools on Methodist Institutions

Each of the panelists shared common issues about the impact of state sponsored institutions on Methodist education. These concerns held much commonality despite their governmentally and culturally different contexts. They all shared that the primary challenge was the issue of competing resources. State schools offer enrollment at a lesser tuition, in some places free, creating a struggle for enrollment and the revenue that follows as necessary to operate private Methodist schools. The irony is that in many of these places, the Methodist schools were the first to be open to marginalized populations of people. In many cases, those early schools set within the culture the expectation that education was a human right.

Given the choice between these two options, each of the panelists, in their own context, identified a common fear of parents that their child would be subjected to indoctrination by Methodist schools. One exception - in Kenya many Methodist schools are managed by the government and allowed to hold their Methodist identity. Some remain private. The government schools allow chaplains to foster robust Methodist culture and ethos alongside of multi-faith colleagues to communicate Methodist inclusivity and the value of dialogue.

The overarching issue within the state and private school discussion is best described as a competition having to do with the identity and purpose of the curriculum. For the panelists, this became a question about who has the power within education and is at the heart of the next identified issue.

The Essence of Methodist Education

The panelists identified a common trend having to do with a general lack of understanding the marks of a Methodist education. The general lack of widespread knowledge about the nature of Methodist education was expressed in contrast to government sponsored education. The panelists set it in a dichotomy such as, 'Commercial' v. 'Missional' or 'Utilitarian' v. 'Human Development'. The concern of the panelists was that students must not learn only for readiness for placement as laborers in government or factory jobs. Again, the conversation was framed around the competition each is feeling from the dominance of government schools. Each of the panelist expressed in similar terms the elements that capture the essence that differentiates Methodist education. It is the education of the whole person; their mind, body, and spirit. It was agreed upon among the panelists that Methodist education is the holistic deepening agent that in this way differentiates it from government institutions and stands in concert with faith communities.

Ungirding this whole area of discussion was the unanimous agreement that Methodist education is about learning in community. Community is that place where the whole person is formed as each is exposed to the diversity of culture, race, and diverse experience. This develops critical thinking, the acquiring of wisdom, shared work for justice, and the ability to navigate in a complex world. The panelists agreed that to do this, institutions must be committed to academic freedom.

Academic Freedom in the Current Culture

The panelists discovered many common concerns about the status of academic freedom in their contemporary educational environments. Within the United Kingdom there is a clash between politics and academic freedom. The same can be said for the United States. A strong example is the inclusion of anti-racist material used in the development of curriculum. The tension exists between those who may impose a judgment on a portion of the curriculum that challenges their own knowledge and the faculty and administrators who seek to uphold academic freedom. The dilemma often arises from members of Methodist congregations who resist the curriculum that includes material they are not comfortable with. In this case, there is a schism of experience that results in a lack of agreement about the core tradition of Methodist education. This can lead to further withdrawal of support for Methodist schools and attempts to rewrite the nature of Methodist education rather than call forth its essence to speak to the conflict.

Economic Challenges by Region

Most of the current challenges the panelists identified in their discussion were economic in nature. In India, work is being done to expand new communities of learning. This includes bringing a Methodist model of education for 'Outcasts', 'Tribals' and women who are adopted into Government Affirmative Action with free education, free clothing, free books, and a free mid-day meal. The current Methodist educational mission has limited or no resources. Because of cost, students prefer government schools over Methodist schools. In urban settings, British Educational initiatives grew in the cities and became prominent universities and colleges now owned by the government. The Methodist Education Mission has limited resources to compete with these government funded universities and colleges. Teaching faculty prefer universities with more facilities than Methodist education institutions are equipped with. In order to compete, there is a need to understand the modern context within the current mission. There is a need to analyze and understand the present context to locate communities and groups (i.e. marginalized, migratory, children, unemployed) to provide education. Along with this, it is necessary to analyze how to bring Methodist education to varying levels and disciplines such as, formal degree, technical, digital, medical, professional and environmental.

In addition to the previously stated, Methodist education in the United Kingdom is challenged by being small in number. It is difficult to have clout and a sense of authority in a stressed, diminishing church as a small faith group alongside the potential of a lack of knowledge of Methodism among the working staff who may come to work in the schools from outside the church.

In Kenya, pressing economic challenges force the management of Methodist institutions to be handed over to government. Declining membership in the church has led to a drop in enrollment. New pathways such as scholarships are needed for access to Methodist institutions. Providing such support would model a consistency between what the church says and what it does. And, it is necessary to build new networks with key stakeholder groups such as government, teacher's education groups, churches, and college networks.

Brief Discussion of Colonialism

The history and impact of colonialism was a topic raised during the question period of the session. It came late in the session and was not able to be fully explored. It remains an important question to return to the next time a gathering such as this takes place.

In the short time this was discussed, the sharing pointed to the complexities of the impact on cultures when the church arrives on the scene as part of national control over a region. The histories shared by some of the panelists spoke of how Methodist education created opportunities for people whose own cultures and economies forbid them from getting an education. In those experiences, Methodist education is described as serving a liberative purpose.

Are there other examples from history that were more defined by imposition and cultural erasure in the name of education by the church? These questions are important to the discussion as it goes forward. Does Wesleyan education have tools to critique the impact of colonialism? How does the Wesleyan education footprint already established around the globe stand in relationship to diverse cultural identities and traditions? What elements within contemporary Methodist education need to be decolonized?

Closing Thoughts

Returning to the larger question, *What does it mean to carry forward the Wesleyan educational legacy into the future in a way that attends to the particular cultural contexts of a world facing a host of shared crises?*

Drawing from what the panelists have presented to us...these questions both imply direction for addressing concerns and seek to further expand the exploration:

What does Methodism need to understand about the fear that exists within various cultures that make them suspicious that Methodist education is about indoctrination?

What more needs to be discussed about the relationship of Methodist education to an increasingly secular, suspicious, and multi-faith culture?

How does the differentiating characteristics of a Methodist education expand personal experience to live holistically in a cross-cultural complex world?

What capacities of Methodist education exist or need to be developed to address the fear of academic freedom?

How does Methodist education support congregational life and strengthen that relationship?

How can the global network of Methodist education strengthen the financial support for its schools and provide access to students through scholarships and support for faculty and teaching resources?

How can Methodism use existing networks more effectively to provide equity across its many institutions?

What opportunities and models exist to partner with government schools as a way of expanding Methodist presence in education?