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# **FACILITATING MISSION IN BRITISH METHODIST CHURCHES**

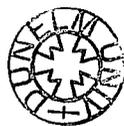
## **LESSONS FROM HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MODELS**

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*Paul J Worsnop*

*June 2000*

**Submitted to the University of Durham for degree of Master of Arts  
(Theology Department)**



17 JAN 2001

**FACILITATING MISSION IN BRITISH METHODIST CHURCHES**  
-  
**LESSONS FROM HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MODELS**

*Paul J Worsnop - MA Degree (Durham) - June 2000*

***ABSTRACT***

The recent rapid decline and current ageing membership of British Methodism has given rise to questions as to whether it has a viable future. If recent trends are to be arrested and reversed local Methodist churches need to become more committed to mission. Modern secularised society presents both difficulties and opportunities for mission and these need to be grappled with if effective mission paradigms are to be developed. In doing this, the 'Epworth Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason provides a useful framework.

The history of Methodism provides useful lessons and models for mission which can be built upon for churches today. A detailed analysis of the churches and communities they serve in one Methodist circuit demonstrates a variety of attitudes and approaches towards mission and points towards the identification of three ideal types – the remnant church, the institutional church and the mission-minded church. If mission is to be taken seriously, churches need to exhibit mission-minded attitudes and characteristics rather than remnant or institutional ones.

Scripture, through the gospels and the early church, provides useful indicators for key characteristics of mission-minded Christian communities. In recent times cell churches, the 'Willow Creek' approach of seeker style services, the Alpha/Emmaus models of Christian catechumenate and serious commitment to social care and action have all been effective in facilitating mission in certain circumstances.

A critical analysis and synthesis of all these models and approaches enable some key characteristics of ideal type mission-minded churches to be put forward. The adoption of such a mission-minded approach will have implications for both the organisation and nature of ministry in the Methodist Church. Each local church will have to discern the best approach to mission in its local situation, but to be effective it will exhibit to some extent all the key characteristics identified.

### *Declaration*

I declare that no material contained within this thesis has been submitted for a degree at Durham or at any other University. Apart from those places where the work of others has been quoted or paraphrased or referred to, it is all my own research.

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### *Acknowledgements*

I am indebted firstly to the Chester-le-Street Methodist Circuit, since my role in circuit development work involved the carrying out of a survey of both the churches and communities of the circuit in 1997-8. This survey formed the basis of Chapter Three of the thesis, and I am very grateful to all those people, church officers and otherwise, who completed the questionnaires in the 6 churches. Staff at Chester-le-Street District Council, Durham County Council and Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council were very helpful in providing the census information. I am also grateful to Gerald Kerwood for carrying out the community questionnaire. In Chapter Four there is an analysis of Woodhouse Close church in the Bishop Auckland circuit, which was completed largely by John Armstrong, who I would also like to thank.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### A CHURCH IN CRISIS?

The decline in both numbers attending worship and church membership in England during recent decades is well documented and probably comes as no surprise in an increasingly secularised society. The most recent research, based upon the 1998 English Church Attendance Survey, both confirms this decline and, through its book title 'The Tide is Running Out', points to the implications for the church's future in this country.<sup>1</sup> Worryingly, these latest figures indicate that the decline has accelerated during the 1990s, so that only 7.5% of the population attended church on an average Sunday in 1998, compared to 8.9% in 1989 and 11.7% in 1975 (p27). Projected forwards, this accelerating decline would result in a tiny 0.9% by 2016 (p28).

Clearly, the general secularisation of society is probably the most significant factor in causing this decline since it has affected most mainstream churches<sup>2</sup>. However, Methodism has suffered one of the sharpest declines. In losing 44% of its Sunday congregations between 1979 and 1998, only the Church of England (47%) declined more, and the Methodist decline showed a sharp acceleration in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The elderly age profile of most Methodist congregations (a staggering 38% aged 65 and over – easily the oldest denomination)<sup>4</sup> means that this rate of decline is likely to continue even more sharply unless there is a drastic reversal in trends. The decline in Methodist membership has continued alongside the decline in worship attendance and in the latest 3 year period for which figures are available, 1995-8, membership in British Methodist churches declined from 380,269 to 353,330, or 7.1%; the steepest decline in England was in the Newcastle District at 10%.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Brierley (*ibid*, p66) suggests that one major event – the passing of the Sunday Trading Law – may have been the largest single factor.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp34-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp118-9.

<sup>5</sup> 1999 edition of *Minutes of Conference*, pp65-74.



However, the English Church Attendance Survey also shows that, even across whole denominations, decline has not been inevitable. The Baptist group of churches, which had declined by 7% between 1979 and 1989, actually grew in numbers by 2% during the following 9 years.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the Pentecostal Churches grew during the 1980's, by 4%, but declined by 9% in the 1990s,<sup>7</sup> despite Brierley's earlier prediction of further growth.<sup>8</sup> The only group of churches showing consistent growth through both decades were the 'New Churches' (161% and 38% overall in the two decades).<sup>9</sup> These were established in the early 1970s and include such as New Frontiers, Pioneer, Vineyard; although no figures are available, anecdotal evidence would suggest that much of their growth was as transfer from traditional denominations.

There have been a number of different responses to the numerical decline of British Methodism. In 1996 a report was produced for Conference which highlighted the decline in membership and attendance in Methodism, especially among young people, and made dire predictions about the possible disappearance of the Methodist Church in this country within 30 years. Shortly afterwards, Rev Dr Rob Frost, national Methodist evangelist, published a challenging book, 'Which Way for the Church'. This book urged radical changes in approach to mission if the Methodist Church is to reach younger generations in an era of profound social and cultural change. His actual suggestions are perhaps less important than his issuing of the challenge to change and his optimism that the theology and tradition of Methodism does offer a hopeful context for mission today. To a large extent, this thesis is an attempt to develop a response to that challenge at the level of the local church, using the lessons of both Methodist tradition and contemporary experience.

In a rather different response to that of Frost, a group of young Methodists leaders recently produced a series of essays on the future of Methodism, looking at the broader context of the church as a connexion.<sup>10</sup> In the final chapter of that book, Craske and Marsh put forward four possible alternative scenarios, one being Methodism 'Fizzling

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<sup>6</sup> Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, pp38-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p42.

<sup>8</sup> Brierley, *Christian England*, 1991, p208.

<sup>9</sup> Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, p37.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Craske & Clive Marsh (eds), *Methodism and the Future*, 1999.

out', two involving incorporation within or merging with the Church of England and only one where 'Methodism continues independent of other Christian traditions with a clearer focus on what justifies it being separate' (p184). My belief, which is paradigmatic for this thesis, is that only through local Methodist churches having a clear vision of their mission to their local community, and the commitment to follow that vision through in faith and with practical action, will the Methodist Church continue to exist, or deserve to.

The purpose of this thesis is, therefore, clear – to facilitate mission in local British Methodist churches. The methodology involved is based upon John Wesley's 'Epworth Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. It includes an examination of Methodist practice in mission, from a broad sweep of its history (Chapter Two) and a detailed examination of current practice in one circuit in North-East England (Chapter Three), and an analysis of New Testament and contemporary models of mission (Chapter Four). At each stage, lessons are drawn in order to build a picture of what the characteristics of a 'mission-minded' Methodist church should be. Finally, the implications of this for the organisation and ministry of the church are briefly examined (Chapter Five).

Given the limits of this thesis, it has not been possible to include an examination of the ecumenical dimension of mission at the local level. In omitting this, I am not minimising its importance – indeed, I take the view that ecumenical co-operation is vital at the local level in order that the church as a whole presents a consistent and coherent message to a local community, showing that neither God nor the gospel are divided or compartmentalised. In Chapter Four, a Methodist-Anglican LEP which serves a local authority housing estate is looked at in detail and, interestingly, provides in many ways an excellent model for mission within its local context. In my experience, more and more local churches are finding that co-operation rather than competition with other churches is more effective in terms of mission, but constraints of space and time prevent me from exploring this important dimension in depth.

In order to establish the broader context, it is important to look first in general terms at the role of mission in the life of the whole church, and also at the nature of this modern society with which our mission is engaged.

## MISSION AND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

In Pauline theology, the universal church is identified as the 'Body of Christ', with which he, Christ, is united and over which he is her head (*Eph 1:22,23*). This understanding, taken with the classical definition of mission as being 'sent out' from Jesus' statement to his disciples: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (*John 20:21*), would lead to the conclusion that the church's mission is simply to be Christ to and for the world. However, Jesus also commanded his own disciples to 'Make disciples' (*Matt 28:18,19*) and to be his witnesses (*Acts 1:8*) throughout the world. Mission is not, therefore, only a matter of Christians living Christ-like lives, but also of proclaiming the Good News of Christ and of seeking to make disciples of Christ.

Ultimately, though, mission is God's enterprise and constitutes much more than the actions of individual Christians and the activities of the church. As Bosch comments, '[Mission] has always been greater than the observable missionary enterprise...It is not the church which 'undertakes' mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.'<sup>11</sup> That *missio Dei* is no less than building the Kingdom of God and the church's calling is to be God's partner in his kingdom-building enterprise. Therefore, in addition to evangelism and disciple-making, mission should also involve the church in wider issues such as justice, peace, social welfare and environmental concern. All in all, for the universal church, an outward orientation is not an option but an imperative, as well as its very reason for being: 'Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very *raison d'être*'<sup>12</sup>.

The universal church finds its physical expression in local churches and, therefore, 'The church-in-mission is, primarily, the *local* church everywhere in the world'.<sup>13</sup> Since mission is about being 'sent out', a mission-minded local church must be oriented more outwards than inwards. However, since mission is first of all God's this outward orientation must be first towards God before it can be towards the church's local community. So, issues surrounding the worship life of the local church and the spirituality of its members are not only important but are fundamental in examining the

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<sup>11</sup> *Transforming Mission*, 1991, p519.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p9. Another apposite expression, attributed to William Temple, is: 'The church is the only organisation which exists for the benefit of its **non** members'.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p378.

essential characteristics of a mission-minded church. Croft speaks of a church's essential rhythm of coming together for worship and going out in mission<sup>14</sup> and Warren in his work for the Durham Diocese identifies spiritual enthusiasm, or an 'energising faith', as a key underlying characteristic for 'healthy' churches<sup>15</sup>. It seems obvious that, without such an energising faith, forged through both uplifting corporate worship and the 'road' of personal growth in discipleship, the members of a local church will not be motivated to mission.

Then, the 'sending out' of the church into its local community must involve communication between the two, since without that communication, whether it is primarily in words or deeds or both, new disciples cannot be made, Kingdom values cannot be spread and Kingdom-building will cease. More than that, because coming to faith is usually a process, one which often takes several years,<sup>16</sup> there needs to be long-term engagement between a church and its local community. That engagement will focus on both incarnating and proclaiming God's love in the local community, not for the church's sake, but for the sake of the people in that community and because the church's own experience of God's love will allow it do no other. So, the characteristics of a mission-minded church will not only be determined by what it **does**, but by what it **is**.

## **A METHODIST CONTEXT FOR MISSION**

Since this investigation is largely confined to British Methodism, a key question should be: **What should it mean to be a local mission-minded Methodist church in modern Britain?** Building upon the examinations of historic and current Methodist practice, and also upon the 'ideal types' identified at the end of Chapter Three, in Chapter Four I will examine different models of 'being' church, in particular models which seek to be mission-oriented in various ways. Then the mission-minded 'ideal type' church will be examined further as **key characteristics** of a mission-minded local British Methodist church are identified.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, 1999, p158.

<sup>15</sup> *Healthy Churches Project*, 1999, Unpublished.

<sup>16</sup> Finney: *Finding Faith Today*, 1992, pp24-5.

Although much has been written about what characteristics a mission-minded church should exhibit at the end of the twentieth century, much of the British material has been written by Anglicans primarily for Anglicans (eg. *Warren, Grundy, Croft*), with one Methodist exception being Frost's '*Which Way for the Church?*' Of course, many of the principles apply across denominations, and I shall therefore draw upon a variety of different material.

Any Methodist Church which seeks to engage with the postmodern world, with its secularisation and particularly its rejection of any insistence on exclusive claims to truth (see below), will have a problem, since a Methodist's answer to the question: 'What is Christian truth?' must always be:

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.<sup>17</sup>

This does not mean that the Bible has to be interpreted in a static and rigid way; as the word of God it is dynamic and active and our use of it needs to reflect this.<sup>18</sup> Whilst the Bible is primary for Methodists in determining what is true, tradition is also important. In particular, the principles and creeds of the Protestant Reformation, the contents of Wesley's notes on the New Testament and his 44 sermons and the providential raising up of Methodism 'to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith' are also fundamental in interpreting scripture and in deciding doctrinal issues. In all this, however, the exclusiveness of Christian truth, summarised in John 14:6, remains undisputed.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, none of this is an excuse for bigotry or cultural insensitivity, or for the church to seek to impose what are fundamentally white Anglo-Saxon, male middle-class values on others.<sup>20</sup> In general, the church has been slow to react and adapt to social change. For instance, the church's main means of communicating its message is still through a one-

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<sup>17</sup> Part 1, Section 2.4 of the Deed of Union (p213 in *Constitutional Practice and Discipline*, 1999, Vol 2).

<sup>18</sup> The acceptance of women in ordained ministry is a positive example of this. Also, the church has sometimes used the Bible in a new and positive manner in ethical issues, such as in supporting and promoting the Jubilee campaign with the principles of debt-remission in Leviticus.

<sup>19</sup> At the 1997 Methodist Conference, a proposal to allow Methodist churches to be used for 'multi-faith worship' was defeated by the floor, on the grounds that this would have undermined the exclusive truth claims of Jesus.

<sup>20</sup>D. Tomlinson develops this theme in *The Post Evangelical*, 1995.

person discourse – the 10-20-minute sermon <sup>21</sup>- despite the fact that contemporary culture is increasingly image-based, particularly through the cultural dominance of TV and advertising.

If any local Methodist church is to really engage in mission with its local community, it is important that it not only understands the nature of that community (its demography, socio-economic characteristics, history, etc – see Chapter Three), but also the nature of modern society as a whole.

### **THE CHURCH IN A SECURALISED SOCIETY**

Over the last two decades or so, contemporary writers in various fields have perceived a fundamental shift in the set of beliefs and philosophical principles which undergird western civilisation. From the early eighteenth century society, following the science of such as Newton and the philosophy of such as Descartes, increasingly came to rely upon rational and scientific explanations for natural and human phenomena. Reason, rather than religion, became the guiding philosophical principle of what is known as the ‘Enlightenment’. One of the distinguishing features of Wesley and early Methodism was a refusal to allow religious experience to be swamped by the rising tide of reason which during the eighteenth century also permeated the religious establishment in Britain.<sup>22</sup> This ‘swimming against the tide’ would have contributed significantly to the sense of ‘distinctiveness’ characterised by early Methodists, as shown in Chapter Two, albeit their everyday expression of that distinctiveness was primarily ethical rather than philosophical.

As the eighteenth century progressed, belief in progress and development in the fields of economics, social organisation, science and technology went hand-in-hand with the industrial revolution as modern society, or ‘modernity’, was born and matured.<sup>23</sup> To a large extent, the development of the organisation and practices of the institutional church, largely regardless of denomination, during the last 250 years or so has reflected

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<sup>21</sup> Usually 20 minutes in most Methodist churches, where many existing congregations feel they have been short-changed if they receive less.

<sup>22</sup> Rack’s widely-accepted description of Wesley as ‘The Reasonable Enthusiast’ shows, however, that Wesley maintained a healthy balance between these two elements.

<sup>23</sup> For a helpful brief analysis of ‘modernity and postmodernity’, see the article with that title by D A Lyon in Atkinson & Field’s *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 1995, pp597-9.

this rise of modernity.<sup>24</sup> The evolution of Methodism from society to church, as set out in Chapter Two, has very much followed this trend, including increasing reliance on reason rather than experience. Until more recent years it would have been unusual for any experience which could not have been given a ‘reasonable’ explanation to have received general credence in most Methodist churches.

However, whilst the organised church and society increasingly came to share the underlying beliefs and principles of modernity, so the church has gradually lost much of its significance in society – this process is part of what is known as secularisation.<sup>25</sup>

This has generally been attributed to:

- The weakening of Christian-based (ie, fundamentally supernatural) assumptions about the human condition and human destiny, previously taken for granted but increasingly challenged by reason and rational thought.
- The gradual loss of dominance of the church in the institutional life of modern society - notably education, health and welfare.
- Increased global awareness and the rise of religious pluralism.

All these factors contributing to the decline of Christianity derive ultimately from its distinctiveness; however, in my view and that of Frost, some of the cause of its decline can, paradoxically, be attributed to its **loss** of distinctiveness. As the institutional church has come to resemble secular institutions in its organisation and practice and as it has increasingly relied upon ‘reason’ for explanations so it has lost its ability to have anything really distinctive to offer. This is, perhaps, confirmed by the fact that the Pentecostal churches,<sup>26</sup> most distinctive of all in their emphasis on experience rather than reason, have consistently shown the strongest growth during the last century as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The global missionary endeavours of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the increasingly democratic, but also bureaucratic, nature of most denominations would be good examples of this.

<sup>25</sup> D A Lyon, in Atkinson & Field, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, pp767-9, comments that ‘Secularisation studies seemed to confirm that religion in general and Christianity in particular had a merely residual existence’.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson (*Patterns of Sectarianism*, 1967, p27) would define Pentecostals as ‘sects’ rather than ‘churches’.

<sup>27</sup> Many of the ‘New Churches’ whose recent rapid growth has been noted have a strong Pentecostal flavour.

In terms of ethics, an area where the church as a whole has to a certain extent maintained its distinctiveness, Christian teaching has been perceived in both negative and positive lights by society as a whole. For instance, on issues of poverty and unemployment, the church has at times almost been a lone voice, particularly during the 1980's, and in areas like Durham has been welcomed for this.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, whilst the mainstream church's antipathy to homosexual practice has been true to both scripture and tradition, it has been perceived negatively by many outside the church and as exclusive and hostile by gay people.<sup>29</sup> Issues such as this and divorce/re-marriage are at the cutting edge of the church's dilemma between its need and desire for engagement with people in order to fulfil its mission, on the one hand, and to maintain Biblical truth on the other – ie between what 'works' and what is 'true'.

In recent years there have been signs that modernity may be in terminal decline in Western society. Whilst the arrival, and the meaning, of 'postmodernity' have been the subject of intense debate since the 1980's, as Lyon states: 'There is enough of substance to warrant careful attention from anyone who would discern the signs of the times'.<sup>30</sup> The signs that are relevant to this study include the erosion<sup>31</sup> of the Enlightenment meta-narratives of reason, progress and even science; there are no certainties any more. 'Truth' has become more subjective and dependent upon experience – 'if it works for me, it must be right'. A much more eclectic 'spirituality' has developed, where avid following of horoscopes, an interest in Feng Shui and a belief in Gaia as 'earth mother' can co-exist with elements of Christianity for one individual.<sup>32</sup> This rejection of absolute truth increasingly applies to issues of morality<sup>33</sup> as well as questions of ultimate meaning and purpose.

The global economic hegemony of transnational corporations grows apace, while suspicions increase of institutions, including governments. Therefore, while many

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<sup>28</sup> The then Bishop of Durham's support, echoed by many others in the church, for mining communities during the 1984-5 coal strike is a good example.

<sup>29</sup> See Michael Vasey's *Strangers and Friends*, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> In Atkinson & Field, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, p598.

<sup>31</sup> Lyon (in Atkinson & Field, *ibid*, p598) uses the word 'collapse', but I feel that is rather strong.

<sup>32</sup> Glen Hoddle's attempt to conflate a belief in re-incarnation with Christianity demonstrateD this.

<sup>33</sup> Halsey (quoted in Frost, *Which Way for the Church*, 1997, p37) came to this conclusion in the 1980's.

people in Britain still consider themselves 'Christian', relatively few associate themselves actively with a church through either attendance or membership – they are 'nominal' Christians.<sup>34</sup> Mainstream church denominations are not alone, as institutions which depend upon voluntary collective participation, in experiencing decline – this has affected Trade Unions, political parties and more localised groups such as Women's Institutes. In contrast, single-issue groups, such as the numerous ones with environmental objectives, have grown. Perhaps Mrs Thatcher was merely reflecting postmodern trends when she said: 'There's no such thing as society'. Spengler and Simmel described the modern urban mind-set as: 'Rational, intellectual, blasé, cynical, and, very much, alone'.<sup>35</sup> This aloneness is also a product of the revolution in information technology, where tasks which previously necessitated face-to-face contact can now be performed by telephone or in front of a computer screen.

At a more localised level the increasing divide between those who are over-employed and those who are under- or unemployed has exacerbated the trend for geographically-based 'communities' to become less important for many people. Instead, communities are increasingly pluralistic and partial, bringing together people with shared interests rather than shared localities. Apart from any immediate family (or, still for many in North-East England, extended family), someone will be more likely to identify their work colleagues, racial group, fellow football players/supporters, other Internet interest group members as their 'community', rather than the people who live near them. The main exceptions to this are mothers<sup>36</sup> at home with young children, the elderly who are no longer mobile<sup>37</sup>, and often the unemployed. This shift represents a profound challenge to the local church, which as an institution continues to be very much geographically defined (even in Methodist churches, which in theory are associational rather than parish-based) through the way it is perceived, and focused through its programmes.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps this challenge can begin to be faced by focusing more clearly

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<sup>34</sup> Gibbs, in his detailed study of nominal Christianity, *Winning them Back*, 1993, identifies the growing problem of nominality with that of institutionalisation, ie, the more mature a denomination becomes, the more people identify with it only nominally.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Frost, *Which Way for the Church*, p39.

<sup>36</sup> I am being descriptive, not sexist!

<sup>37</sup> By this, I mean 'mobile' in a wider sense than ability to walk.

<sup>38</sup> It is probably no co-incidence that the institutional church has in general retained geographically-based communities – especially the elderly and young children – more successfully than other groups. (Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p9).

on the local church as a group of people, called together at a particular time and place, who each have their own communities.<sup>39</sup>

So, how can a local church hope to engage with people in a postmodern society? Tomlinson, in his challenging book *Post Evangelical*, feels that the gap between church and modern society, in both culture and belief, is so great that churches need to leave both behind. For him, only by abandoning both the rigidity of doctrine of evangelical Christianity and the traditional church-based worship style can modern people be drawn towards Christian faith. In my view, his critique is founded on an over-narrow, and possibly out-dated, perception of evangelical Christianity, although he says some very valuable things about the perceived culture of the church and the need to encourage new forms, styles and places of worship to which modern people can relate.

Bosch, on the other hand, talks of a new ‘postmodern paradigm’ for mission, seeing the rise in importance of experience as an opportunity for the church:

For the church's missionary existence in the world all this has profound and far-reaching consequences. It implies that nature and especially people may not be viewed as mere objects, manipulable and exploitable by others. Such a new epistemology for mission means, also, that technology must be confronted with a reality outside itself which does not depend on its canons of rationality and which therefore will not be subservient to its deterministic power. This reality may be identified as the reign of God, which stands in polemical tension with the closed system of this world.<sup>40</sup>

However, the collapse in influence of Christian education in recent decades means that the church has much work to do in ensuring that **our** interpretation of that supra-rational reality gains more general acceptance. Hand-in-hand with a growing mistrust in institutions and a greater interest in spirituality is the view that no one faith system or set of beliefs should have an exclusive claim to the ‘truth’. Therefore, many will reject the church, for its institutionalisation and its insistence on exclusive truth as revealed through Jesus, at the same time as expressing their openness to Jesus himself, as a role model and a **possible** source of truth.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The cell church movement (after Neighbour, *Where do we go from here?*, 1990, p117) defines this personal ‘community’ of each church member as their *oikos*.

<sup>40</sup> *Transforming Mission*, p355.

<sup>41</sup> G Cray, quoted in C Horseman *Good News for a Postmodern World*, 1996, p5.

Clearly, the rise of postmodernity has provided immense challenges as well as opportunities for the church today. Some of the contemporary models of mission looked at in Chapter Four are at least in part a response to this cultural shift. Other responses, such as the development of Christian arts as a tool for mission, especially in worship, following the rise in importance of the visual arts, especially TV/film, in modern culture, are also important but a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, Wesley's 'Epworth quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience remains very relevant in postmodern Britain – indeed, the need to hold these elements in balance seems at least as great as it has ever been. We turn next, therefore, to Methodism's historic roots to seek appropriate models for mission today.

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<sup>42</sup> Methodists Rob Frost and David Wilkinson have developed this theme, eg. in *A New Start?* 1999.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BRITISH METHODIST CHURCH - BORN AND NURTURED IN MISSION

Compared to the Christian church as a whole, Methodism has had a relatively short history, one which is usually dated from Wesley's 'warmed heart' experience of May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738. Over the 260 years of its existence, it exhibited considerable growth for its first 150 years, before the seemingly inexorable decline of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the local churches I shall be examining in depth in the next chapter are all Methodist, it is necessary to look first at the history of Methodism, particularly with regard to its approach to mission.

In doing this, I shall highlight what seem to have been the most significant factors influencing both the periods of growth and the subsequent decline in the church as a whole and ascertain whether or not different approaches to mission can be uncovered in those factors.

#### THE ORIGINS OF METHODISM

Origins are important, especially for Methodism, which was conceived as a 'Religious Society' and only developed into a separate church when it reached adulthood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> Religious societies had begun to develop in England in the 1670's as a response to a need felt by pious tradesmen for something more than public worship and individual private devotions. One such society was the Holy Club at Oxford, which the young Anglican priest John Wesley led from 1729. Davies describes this group as rather inward-looking and concerned primarily with their own salvation and personal holiness and, whilst this is supported by the evidence of Wesley's pre-occupation with his own spiritual condition throughout the period prior to 1738, it should be noted that Wesley and others from the Holy Club began a prison ministry and work with the poor in 1730.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> There has been considerable discussion over the transition of the Methodist movement from 'sect' and 'society' to 'church'. 'Wesleyan Methodist Church' first appeared on class tickets in 1893. (Rack, in *Proceedings of Wesley Historical Society* XXXIX, 1973, p16). The Methodist Church still exhibits some characteristics of a society, rather than a Church, eg its approach to church membership which remains that of the 1740's with the issue of a 'class ticket'. Only in October 1998 did the Church publish a discussion paper on membership which proposed to abandon this approach and move to a similar system to the Church of England, ie baptism plus a 'local church roll'.

<sup>44</sup> R. E. Davies: *Methodism*, 1976, pp44-5.

After a fairly disastrous 2-year missionary trip to Georgia, where he had hoped to convert the native Americans, Wesley returned to England in January 1738 still profoundly dissatisfied with his spiritual life. His own inherent tendencies in this direction, manifest throughout his life, had been exacerbated by his encounter with the Moravians, whose faith in contrast to his own had enabled them to face the possibility of death with equanimity. It seems that the absence, at this time, of any kind of supernatural personal spiritual experience led him to believe he was still in need of conversion<sup>45</sup>, although he was soon preaching in a manner and with a content which had him banned from a number of London churches.<sup>46</sup>

It was against this spiritual background that Wesley had his well-documented and oft-quoted 'heart-warming' experience on May 24 1738 in a meeting of a Religious Society in Aldersgate Street. From reading Wesley's own account of this in his Journal, and the views of several commentators, it seems that this was not an initial conversion experience, but rather the first occasion that Wesley had felt a deep, inner assurance of God's grace and forgiveness personal to him, the experience of God's Spirit witnessing to his spirit for which he had so long sought. Turner expresses it as Wesley having felt he had exchanged the faith of a servant (doing all he could for God) for that of a son (accepting what God in Christ could do for him).<sup>47</sup> However, Wesley himself, with the zeal typical of a new convert, now doubted whether he had ever been a real Christian before this experience.<sup>48</sup> It would seem to me that, unless Wesley was a classic self-delusionist, he had been a Christian for many years as evidenced by his life and preaching, but on May 24 1738 he experienced, to use more modern terminology, the 'fullness of the Spirit' for the first time; 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 was for Wesley a specific event (or crisis) within a lengthy process.

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<sup>45</sup> His diary entry for 24/1/38: 'I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief?' *Wesley's Journal (Abridged)*, p35.

<sup>46</sup> Whether it was the manner or the content which led to his being banned is not clear. Since the content – justification by faith and the need for new birth – had been preached by him before he went to America, it may be that the manner – extempore preaching and praying – was the more critical change.

<sup>47</sup> J. M. Turner: *Conflict and Reconciliation*, 1985, p47.

<sup>48</sup> In his later life, however, Wesley changed his mind on this, as is shown by a footnote he added to his Journal in 1774 (Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 1989, p156).

However we classify it, this experience clearly gave his preaching a new impetus and from January 1739 he began to record physical manifestations<sup>49</sup> and dramatic conversions happening in response to his prayers and preaching<sup>50</sup>. Although Wesley was temperamentally rather credulous, he did recognise from the beginning that not all such occurrences were genuine<sup>51</sup>. He was, in this and all things, essentially a pragmatist who used his formidable intellectual powers to test the validity of such manifestations by their fruit (in terms of whether or not the person concerned was helped by them to turn to Christ and grow in holiness) and he accepted those genuine ones as evidence of God working providentially through him. Indeed, it is apparent that, throughout his ministry, such evidence in others became the prime means by which he received assurance of the reality of God's grace in his own life.

In April 1739 Wesley was persuaded by George Whitefield to join him in open-air preaching, despite his strong initial antipathy to the whole notion<sup>52</sup>, and beginning with the miners of Kingswood near Bristol, this became the work for which he is most famous. However, Wesley's Arminian theology (which distinguished him from many evangelical contemporaries, notably Whitefield) allowed for the very real possibility of 'backsliding', so for him the initial conversion experience of his followers was very much a beginning rather than an end in itself. Wesley did adhere to the mainstream Protestant emphasis on justification by faith and therefore, insofar as such justification by faith can be telescoped from a process into an event, stressed the need for all his people to come to the point of repentance, faith in Christ and commitment to him, or using theological shorthand, to undergo a 'conversion experience'. However, he also put considerable emphasis on sanctification, the pursuit of personal holiness, which he later termed 'Christian perfection', to the extent that some accused him of Popery. Indeed, for Rack, Wesley's main enthusiasm was for sanctification, rather than initial conversions.<sup>53</sup> It was this quest for perfection, this emphasis on sanctification, which

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<sup>49</sup> Eg falling to the ground, convulsions, involuntary crying out and groaning.

<sup>50</sup> Such as entry for 6/3/39 (*Wesley's Journal* (Abridged), p64).

<sup>51</sup> Eg Journal entry for 28/1/39 (*Ibid*, p64).

<sup>52</sup> Journal entry for 31/3/39 (*Ibid*, pp65-6).

<sup>53</sup> *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p395.

made the structure of bands, select bands and class meetings so central to Methodism as it developed under Wesley's leadership.<sup>54</sup>

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF METHODISM TO 1791

The earliest evidence of organisational structure in Methodism is the 'Band rules' of December 1738<sup>55</sup>. These **bands** were a development of the religious societies and admission to them was confined to those who had gained a ticket of membership by satisfying certain conditions, principally the possession of a saving faith (ie they were all believers) and an earnest desire to attain holiness. Members were not allowed to drink spirits and in the meetings, comprising between 5 and 10 members and occurring at least weekly, they confessed to and prayed for each other, the designated leader speaking first and, where necessary, questioning others. Bands were divided by age, sex and marital status and as Methodism grew they became its 'inner circle' of the more spiritually advanced and those seeking 'perfection'.<sup>56</sup> These more select groups had mostly faded away by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>57</sup>.

The '**class meetings**' on the other hand were the very core of Methodism, albeit they had come into being by accident.<sup>58</sup> Wesley the pragmatist quickly recognised the pastoral potential of these groups of 12 people meeting together, which were organised on a geographical basis, separately for men and women in those early days<sup>59</sup>, and included 'anyone who desired to flee from the wrath to come' and whose conduct reflected that<sup>60</sup>. Therefore, no proof of conversion was needed and, unlike the bands,

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<sup>54</sup> Lovelace, in his *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (1979, pp229-237), talks about the 'sanctification gap' which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of evangelical emphasis on initial conversion. In my view, the Methodist system as practised under Wesley, whatever its shortcomings or faults, was the first comprehensive attempt by evangelicals to close that gap and established a future model which has only recently been re-discovered.

<sup>55</sup> Davies & Rupp: *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Volume One, 1965, p191.

<sup>56</sup> This information on Bands is mainly gleaned from R.G.Tuttle Jnr: *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*, 1979, p280.

<sup>57</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p239. As early as 1764, Wesley in a letter to the Bristol societies, whilst exhorting them to meet 'in band' says 'there has been a shameful neglect of this' (Davies, Rupp & George, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol IV, 1988, p154).

<sup>58</sup> The circumstances, in Bristol in 1740, are described in Davies & Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol I, p222).

<sup>59</sup> It is not clear at what time men and women began meeting together in the same class.

<sup>60</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, p63.

non-believers were not necessarily excluded provided they were sincere seekers. Already, in 1741 Wesley could refer to ‘The unspeakable usefulness of the institution’ [of classes]<sup>61</sup>. Wesley hand-picked his class-leaders, who were lay people and often of humble origin with little formal education; women class leaders were important from the start.<sup>62</sup> The only qualifications for leading a class were ‘Faithfulness, honesty and a concern for people’ and those who showed this could expect to rise to higher levels of leadership.<sup>63</sup>

In class meetings, which were widely established throughout the fledgling Methodist societies by 1744, there was an atmosphere of praise and prayer, of mutual support and encouragement, but also of reproof where necessary. What actually happened clearly varied from place to place, time to time, and leader to leader, but extempore prayer was carried out by members as well as leaders. Hymn-singing, one of the traditional strengths of Methodism, was also part of a typical class meeting. Personal confession of sins and testimony to the power of God was normal practice and the whole emphasis was on personal experience rather than doctrinal ideology or biblical information.<sup>64</sup> The weekly financial contribution was also expected, although if a member could not afford it then the leader or another member would make it up. Leaders would visit any ill or infirm members, and also those who did not attend, urging their future attendance.<sup>65</sup>

In order to obtain a ‘membership ticket’, which was the mark of belonging to a class, a person was examined orally and placed ‘on trial’ for at least 3 months (reduced to 2 months in 1780)<sup>66</sup>. Wesley himself personally interviewed any ‘doubtful characters’ wishing to join a class.<sup>67</sup> Since possession of a class membership ticket also defined membership of the Methodist society as a whole (as it still does today), then a degree of discipline was involved (rare today!) – 3 consecutive absences from class without good reason led to ‘self-expulsion’, the person had ‘ceased to meet’ and was no longer a

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<sup>61</sup> Tuttle, *John Wesley*, p279.

<sup>62</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, p63.

<sup>63</sup> Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 1997, p101.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p100.

<sup>65</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, p63.

<sup>66</sup> Davies & Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol I, p223.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p281.

member.<sup>68</sup> Wesley's emphasis on discipline exercised over class members, but tempered with gentleness, reflected his view that 'Exact discipline, rather than spontaneous enthusiasm, is the main principle of spiritual power'<sup>69</sup>. On his visits, he often purged the societies ruthlessly<sup>70</sup>, saying he 'Preferred a smaller group of the committed to a large group of the lukewarm'<sup>71</sup>. The necessity for discipline to be exercised to deal with non-attendance at class meetings<sup>72</sup> indicates that the class was not universally popular among Methodists even in Wesley's time; these problems became much greater in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The importance of class meetings within early Methodism reflects Wesley's emphasis on sanctification and his stated 'ultimate purpose of Methodism': 'The pursuit of inward and outward holiness'<sup>73</sup>. Wesley and the early Methodists were convinced that such growth in grace could not be achieved in the isolated Christian, and it is clear that the great disparity in social and moral values between them and society as a whole intensified the need for strong mutual support.<sup>74</sup> For Henderson, Wesley's class meeting was above all an effective model for making disciples.<sup>75</sup>

However, evangelism was also seen as a priority in class meetings, as well as the assimilation and spiritual growth of new members. The evangelistic heart of class meetings is apparent in Turner's description of the society, based as it was upon the classes, as: 'A group of earnest believers who are determined to improve the quality of the spiritual life by regular spiritual discipline *and to invite others to share it with*

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<sup>68</sup> Davies & Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church, Vol I*, p224. These rules are also set out in Wesley's letter of October 1764 to the Bristol societies, see note 18.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p198.

<sup>70</sup> Reasons included gossiping, drunkenness, quarrelling, 'lightness and carelessness' (ie not taking one's spiritual life seriously enough) as well as non-attendance.

<sup>71</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p241.

<sup>72</sup> In 1782, Wesley said in a letter that 'those who will not meet in class can no longer stay with us' (Rack, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XXXIX, 1973, p16(fn).

<sup>73</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p249.

<sup>74</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p47.

<sup>75</sup> Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*.

them'<sup>76</sup>. Wesley's own experience, and those of many of his contemporaries, led him to expect that most would undergo a, sometimes quite lengthy, period of searching and striving ('desiring to flee from the wrath to come'), rather than an instantaneous conversion. The class meeting served to assist that search, encouraged by the class leader and those others already converted, especially through their own personal testimonies. Dean comments: 'In the evangelical Methodist tradition, nothing bred enthusiasm like fresh accounts of conversions'.<sup>77</sup> Thus, there are many biographical accounts of people who 'found peace with God' in a class meeting.<sup>78</sup> So, the classes grew, but once they grew to a certain size, they had to divide<sup>79</sup> - pre-dating modern 'cell groups' by 250 years! Therefore, conversion, which we could perhaps define in this context as a crisis event within a process, often came after joining the class.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, Dean could find no record of Methodists born before 1800 being converted in the context of a preaching or chapel service. This is in line with the general view today that, in the majority of cases, 'belonging' comes before 'believing'.

In the early years of Methodism, it seems that many 'new members' had a strong religious background<sup>81</sup> and may well have been attracted more by the fellowship and discipline of class and band than by Wesley's field preaching. What is clear is that where preaching was carried out without forming societies, there was no lasting benefit. Wesley himself tried such an experiment for more than 2 years in the north and west, with the result that 'Almost all seed fell by the wayside; there was no watching over one another in love, no building one another up and no bearing one another's burdens'<sup>82</sup>. In 1763, he attacked Whitefield's preaching in Pembrokeshire which had been on-going for 20 years but without any 'religious societies, discipline, order or correction', with the result that '9 in 10 of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever'<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p62, my italics.

<sup>77</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p45.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p44.

<sup>79</sup> Hetzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 1988, p265, says this was 30 members; although I have not come across actual numbers to counter this, this figure seems large since in the early days classes normally met in peoples' homes.

<sup>80</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p242.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, p176.

<sup>82</sup> Hetzenrater: *op cit*, p165.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, p214.

The early Methodists were also involved in social outreach of various kinds. In 1740 a severe frost in the Bristol area led to great hardship; Wesley organised a special collection which led to 150 people/day being fed. In 1746 medicines were provided for the poor at the Foundery in London, 100 people per month benefiting. Housing for 12 tenants (the aged, blind, widows and poor children) was made available at the Foundery, and Wesley set up schools there and at Kingswood. An early form of Credit Union was established among class members which assisted 250 people in the first year.<sup>84</sup> His social concern, and that of the early Methodists generally, cannot have gone un-noticed among the population at large; in fact, Wesley attracted some criticism for his 'excessive generosity to the poor' and to needy tradesmen<sup>85</sup>.

Wesley saw his God-ordained mission as no less than the reform of the nation, which by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century was in a parlous state socially and morally: Knox described Wesley as a prophet 'determined to reproach his contemporaries with their decadence'<sup>86</sup>. This national moral and social reform was for Wesley the hoped-for outcome of spreading scriptural holiness through the land. He certainly had some success, notably in his encouragement of Wilberforce's campaign to end slavery, and his Methodist successors were among the leading social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1750, the number of Methodists was about 10,000, out of a total population of about 10 million, concentrated around London, Bristol and Newcastle, the centres of Wesley's early preaching activity. This had risen to 25,911 by 1767, when Methodism was growing by 1000/year. Growth was neither even nor consistent, however, since the early history of Methodism was characterised by numerous examples of local 'revivals', such as at Epworth, Everton (in Bedfordshire) and Weardale. The nature of these local revivals varied from place to place, but they were often accompanied by outbreaks of physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit and people being convicted of sin in numbers.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, controversies with the Calvinists in the early 1770's led to

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<sup>84</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, pp166-8.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, p252.

<sup>86</sup> Knox: *Enthusiasm*, 1950, p423.

<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, Wesley's apparent reluctance to discipline what he clearly considered to be excessive enthusiasm (Knox, *Enthusiasm*, pp533-5), contrasted with his zeal at rooting out half-heartedness and lack of commitment.

the loss of some members, so that in 1775 one-quarter of circuits saw a decline in membership. However, the sizeable gains elsewhere more than compensated for these losses, and by 1791, the year of Wesley's death, there were 72,476 Methodists (although about four times that number attended Methodist services), including over 300 preachers, or 'helpers'. Between 1767 and 1791 Methodism grew by 4%/year, the annual rate of growth varying between 1% and 7%.<sup>88</sup>

Theologically, the period around 1760 saw a change in emphasis from Wesley himself and the doctrine he encouraged others to preach. From that time, he constantly stressed the doctrine of 'Christian perfection' as being attainable instantaneously in a believer who had previously been justified through faith – this was the 'second blessing'. Rather than being the end point of a lengthy process (which current orthodoxy would say is not completed this side of death and resurrection), sanctification was now seen as an event in itself – Wesley urged his brother Charles in 1766 to: 'Press the instantaneous blessing'.<sup>89</sup> Whilst Wesley had for some time believed that this instantaneous perfection was the Christian's natural inheritance of faith, he could now increasingly observe in others the fruit of 'perfect love' which for him was a 'restless, passionate, heartbreaking, consuming concern for all people'.<sup>90</sup> It was this observation of some of his Methodists which led Wesley to encourage his people to believe Christian perfection was not only attainable in this life, but instantaneously. However, Wesley recognised that for many people (perhaps for most people), sanctification, by which the believer is transformed from a life characterised by sin into one characterised by holiness, would be a process rather than an event – hence, the need for on-going mutual support and encouragement in class and band.

At his death, Wesley's legacy was a thriving and growing Methodist society across the British Isles (and also in America), with a network of preaching-houses and thousands of class meetings, band meetings and prayer meetings where members met to build up one another's spiritual life – in Knox's view, nearer to New Testament Christianity than anything else<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> All these figures are from Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, pp 181, 216-7, 264-5 and from Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p437.

<sup>89</sup> E. Stewart, *Streams of Life; Revival in the Age of Wesley*, 1988, p128.

<sup>90</sup> Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p50.

<sup>91</sup> Davies & Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol I, p314.

Wesley had never wanted to break away from the Church of England, and to his death encouraged his members to continue to attend their local Parish Church to receive Holy Communion. However, after his death this break became inevitable and in 1792 the Methodist societies joined themselves into a 'Connexion' which then ordained its own ministers – and so Methodism began its transformation from a society into a church.

## **METHODISM IN THE 19<sup>th</sup> AND 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES**

Methodism continued to grow at a faster rate than the population as a whole right up until the 1880's<sup>92</sup>, but by this time there were a number of 'churches' included under the umbrella of 'Methodism'. The time-honoured tendency of revivalist, evangelical groups to continually split and form new groups began in Methodism almost immediately after Wesley's death. In 1797 the Methodist New Connexion<sup>93</sup> was founded over the issue of granting more power to the laity. In 1811, the Primitive Methodist Church<sup>94</sup>, the largest breakaway group from the original Wesleyans, was established after open-air, revivalist, 'camp meetings' (prayer meetings on a large scale) had been disowned by the Wesleyan Conference.

These groups, and the others which sprang up in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all shared, however, the Wesleyan evangelical theology, stress on the need for godly living and personal holiness, and the centrality of the class meeting as the basis of Methodist life and membership. The dynamics driving the new groups were probably both ecclesiological - the new group found the 'mother' Wesleyan group too inhibiting whereas they had too strong a revivalist flavour for the Wesleyans - and social. Whereas the Wesleyans increasingly attracted middle-class tradesmen and their families,<sup>95</sup> the Primitives in particular attracted poorer folk, who were then instrumental in starting Trade Unions. The Primitive Methodist Church was particularly strong in close-knit

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<sup>92</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p437.

<sup>93</sup> In 1907, the MNC, together with the Bible Christians and the United Methodist Free Churches, joined to form the United Methodist Church (Davies, *Methodism*, p159).

<sup>94</sup> In 1932, the Primitive Methodist Church, the United Methodist Church (see note 95) and the Wesleyans united to form the modern Methodist Church.

<sup>95</sup> The rapid growth of the Wesleyan Church during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (estimated at twice the growth of the population) could in part be attributed to the growth of the middle-classes. (Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, 1963, p13).

working-class communities where there was an ever-present fear of death, such as the coalfields (Durham especially) and Cornwall.

The latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were of course times of rapid social and economic change as people moved geographically in response to the new industries being established and socially as many bettered themselves. Methodism responded to these changes as new societies, followed by church buildings, were quickly formed. It also influenced them as the pursuit of personal holiness by their members often brought with it socio-economic improvement. Rack comments that the close and valued fellowship experienced in Methodist classes helped to heal the disorientation experienced by industrial migrants, especially miners<sup>96</sup>. On the other hand, it seems that social tensions within class meetings contributed to their decline in popularity and importance during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>97</sup>

However, whilst attendance at class meetings continued to be required of Methodists, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was an increasing stream of writings seeking to both explain but also defend the class meeting, with a rising sense of unease and an apparent background of criticism.<sup>98</sup> During this period, it seems that actual attendance by Methodists at class meetings declined.<sup>99</sup> From an analysis of the two in-depth articles by Rack (*Proceedings, 1973*) and Dean (*Proceedings, 1981*), together with other sources, the following factors seem to have been involved here:

1. The **evangelistic function** of class meetings seems to have begun declining in importance from early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that by 1840 the class meeting had lost its religious dynamic, become a part of institutional church life and ‘ceased to be the heart of Methodism’<sup>100</sup>. Evangelism increasingly came to be the province of the prayer meetings which often followed preaching services and tended to have a strong revivalist flavour – Rack noted that as early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>96</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p173.

<sup>97</sup> These social tensions included the mixture of social classes within a class and instances where a class leader, chosen for his spiritual gifts, was exercising pastoral care and discipline over someone on a higher social scale, even in at least one instance his own employer (Rack, *Proceedings*, XXXIX, 1973, p15).

<sup>98</sup> Davies, Rupp & George, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol III, 1983, p159.

<sup>99</sup> Rack, *Proceedings*, XXXIX, 1973, p18..

<sup>100</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p43.

prayer meetings had become more effective than class meetings as ‘converting agencies’<sup>101</sup>. Attendance at prayer meetings was of course voluntary, and they tended to allow more scope for the exercise of the more unconventional and charismatic gifts. From 1820 to 1850, references to chapel prayer meetings multiply in Methodist diaries, whilst those born after 1800 record few instances of conversions in class meetings<sup>102</sup>, in contrast to a few decades earlier.

The loss of this element of seeing people come to faith in class meetings would have significantly changed the dynamics of the meetings, regardless of whether or not the classes continued to grow. Inevitably, they would have been more predictable, less spiritually charged and less encouraging for those already members. Therefore, devout Methodists, while continuing to attend class meetings without complaint, increasingly turned to prayer meetings ‘for a dynamic expression of spirituality’.<sup>103</sup> It seems quite likely that this change paved the way for the subsequent decline in the popularity of class meetings.

2. Like many such small group meetings, there were various **criticisms** that meetings were dull, boring and repetitive, with members tending to follow the tone of the first contributors. People who did not like to speak in public were forced to; ‘cheerful and victorious’ experiences were encouraged and well-received whilst those who could not report them were under-valued. It also seems that a considerable number of classes suffered from poor leadership. Problems of this kind would always have been inherent in such a system<sup>104</sup> but they would certainly have discouraged attendance and, combined with spiritual and institutional factors, led to decline.

To counter the criticism of dullness and repetition, and also to reflect the social changes amongst Methodists, some classes towards the end of the century adopted a more varied programme, with the normal ‘experience’ meeting rotating with Bible classes and general devotional fellowship and, in some cases, secular

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<sup>101</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p242.

<sup>102</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p45.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p46.

<sup>104</sup> Rack (*Reasonable Enthusiast*, p411), records them in Wesley’s day.

subjects.<sup>105</sup> The perceived need for better-informed leadership was met by a trend towards ministerial leadership of classes by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

3. As Methodism developed into an institutional church, the emphasis shifted to **chapel activities**. Classes were mostly moved from homes to the chapel. This, together with the change in spiritual character of the class meeting noted above in 1, 'eroded the warm informality and direct mutuality'<sup>106</sup> that typified the earlier classes. With regard to evangelism, a greater emphasis was placed on preaching and worship services, physically epitomised in the 'Central Missions' which were built in most big cities in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also 'social outreach' through such as chapel football teams.
4. The **disparity of values** between Methodism and society as a whole which had been so apparent in Wesley's time became less and less obvious. This change came from both directions – Victorian society, often urged by Methodists and fellow-evangelicals, took on, superficially at least, many of the mores of Evangelicalism and at the same time Methodists, by now entirely respectable in society's eyes and often progressing up the social scale, became more worldly. As Dean puts it: 'The Methodist of 1850 did not stand in opposition to social norms in the way that his ancestors had done two generations earlier'.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the need for Methodists to draw support and comfort from each other in a hostile world was considerably lessened. Classes became more like friendship circles where people of like mind and social class met together.
5. The emphasis placed on attendance at worship services and Holy Communion which naturally arose from the 'society to church' transition made the requirement to attend class meetings as a **condition of membership** seem increasingly anachronistic. It seems that the requirement to attend, as opposed to merely belonging to a class, was not enforced very rigorously and discipline was certainly

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<sup>105</sup> Davies, Rupp & George (*A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol III, p312) record classes at the Leeds Mission around 1900 in 'theology, New Testament Greek, domestic economy and cricket'!

<sup>106</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p46.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p47.

not exercised as in Wesley's day. As early as 1849 it was first publicly argued that the link between church membership and class membership should be broken<sup>108</sup>.

This issue was considered in depth by a Conference Committee in 1889, which decided to retain the traditional basis of church membership as class membership and also advocated the re-discovery of the best features of the class meeting – its reflection of New Testament ideals of fellowship and mutual encouragement, and its evangelistic effectiveness. The report also deplored the fact that, in some areas, attendance at class meetings had become very irregular, but at the same time accepted that there were increasing demands on peoples' time (from the church as well as social and work-related) and that there was an increased reluctance generally to speak freely of one's deepest feelings.<sup>109</sup> In recognition of these difficulties, the report endorsed what had become the traditional practice – ie, the minister was not to insist that failure in class-attendance, of itself, justified loss of membership. In reality, of course, this meant that attendance at class was now optional and the basis of church membership would be a more general commitment to Christ and the church. Shortly after this, in 1894, a special service for reception of people into Church membership was instituted.

Concluding the reasons for the decline of the class meeting, Rack emphasises the institutional changes, notably the transition from society to church, whilst Dean emphasises the loss of the evangelistic function in the early part of the century, and the loss of need for mutual support due to social changes. These factors are themselves interwoven and I feel Dean sums it up well:

'The class meeting did not succumb to opposition and criticism or apostasy, but to a creeping institutionalism that shifted the centre of attention from Wesley's emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relationships as the key to dynamic religious life to an emphasis on the public, more impersonal, and less demanding services of the chapel.'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Rack, *Proceedings*, XXXIX, 1973, p19 (fn).

<sup>109</sup> The report is reproduced in Davies, Rupp & George, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol IV, 1988, pp571-5. In its introduction, it mentions that in the two years previously there had been a small decrease in membership of 866 and that, whilst the 4 years before this had seen an increase of 32,207, the membership was not growing at the rate that the increase in population and the investment in such as Central Missions would warrant.

<sup>110</sup> Dean, *Proceedings*, XLIII, 1981, p48.

This erosion of the experiential basis for Methodist spirituality together with the increasing emphasis on the church as an institution was most noticeable towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a significant theological change was also taking place in much of British Protestantism. This change was towards a more 'social', as opposed to evangelical, gospel which emphasised the ethical teaching of Jesus rather than his saving power.<sup>111</sup> It affected many churches, but Wesleyan Methodism more than most under its leader Hugh Price Hughes. Moss' lament at the condition of his church, written in 1908, is one which many would echo today:

'[Methodism] can staff little committees without number for advisory or executive purposes; but its famous class-meetings are in many places declining for lack of suitable leaders, whilst its useful social work is left incomplete through the inability to crown it with a carefully tended godliness.'<sup>112</sup>

Methodists who sought a deeper emphasis on personal holiness and a stronger evangelistic gospel were attracted to such holiness conventions as that began at Keswick, and to the work of Cliff College. These traditions remain strong today, with the recent addition of the annual 'Easter People', which attracts about 10,000 people, mostly Methodists, to a week's Bible-based teaching with a strong charismatic flavour.

So, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whilst the class meeting was still important in Methodism<sup>113</sup> and remained the main expression of their fellowship, it lacked the spiritual dynamism and evangelicalism of the early days.<sup>114</sup> Bunting, writing in 1908, was nevertheless hopeful: 'It seems more reasonable and more likely that the class meeting will be revived under various forms than that it will sink into decay'.<sup>115</sup> Whilst that may have been over-optimistic, it is estimated that as late as 1928, half of the members of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in London met regularly in class.<sup>116</sup> Also, after Methodist Union in 1932, group meetings in the Methodist student world were

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<sup>111</sup> Later, in the 1960's, this social gospel was combined by many Methodist ministers with universalism to call into question the very doctrinal foundations of the Church (Davies, *Methodism*, pp166-7).

<sup>112</sup> In Townsend, Workman & Eayrs, *A New History of Methodism*, Vol I, p480; it would seem from this comment that potential class leaders had in many cases been expending their energies in the 'bureaucracy' of the church.

<sup>113</sup> Davies, Rupp & George, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol III, p193.

<sup>114</sup> Townsend, Workman & Eayrs (eds), *op cit*, Vol I, p480

<sup>115</sup> In Townsend, Workman & Eayrs (eds), *op cit*, Vol II, 1909, p492.

<sup>116</sup> Davies Rupp & George, *op cit*, p315.

very like the early class meetings, and many of these members became leaders in the future church.<sup>117</sup>

However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the decline of 'class meetings' to the point where they have almost disappeared completely from Methodism. This became inevitable once the earlier loss of their impetus as a tool of evangelistic mission and an expression of dynamic spirituality was compounded by attendance at them no longer being a criterion of membership. In most churches, 'class leaders' have been replaced by 'pastoral visitors', and whilst some churches have small groups which meet in homes, or on church premises, these are for Bible study, prayer or general fellowship. Some may, in terms of content, exhibit similar characteristics to the early class meetings in that testimonies and problems are shared, but these groupings are voluntary and do not usually coincide with pastoral visitors' groups; neither are they normally evangelistic in purpose.

Overall, it seems that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan Methodism attracted people mainly from Methodist families, and the generally large size of Victorian families would have contributed to the church's growth,<sup>118</sup> and possibly also from some people aspiring to middle-class respectability who were of a non-conformist tendency. Evangelistic preaching, including that from the Central Missions,<sup>119</sup> also brought new people into the church, although there is no record of numbers. Social activities, such as cycling clubs, football, 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoons' which offered 'consecrated pleasure' were popular but do not seem to have been successful in drawing many into the life of the church. Primitive Methodism, with its roots in the working-class, provided poorer workers with both educational improvement and a theological basis for social and political activity<sup>120</sup> and, at its best, provided a model of well-rounded mission which combined evangelism with social action.

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<sup>117</sup> Davies, Rupp & George, *A History of the Methodist Church*, Vol III, 1983, p368.

<sup>118</sup> Currie, Gilbert & Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers*, 1977, p118, conclude from their study of church growth in Britain since 1700 that such demographic changes were the most significant factor in church growth generally.

<sup>119</sup> There is evidence that these, which also accommodated weeknight secular activities, were attracting many working-class people by the turn of the century.

<sup>120</sup> Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics*, 1974, p225.

Methodism in Britain reached its peak in terms of numbers around the beginning of the 20th century. In 1908 membership of the three main Methodist Churches totalled about 935,000 in 16,000 church buildings, plus about 1.77 million Sunday School scholars<sup>121</sup> Sadly, as set out in Chapter One, these numbers have declined greatly since, a decline which has accelerated since the last war and which has been even greater among youngsters than adults.

However, against the generally bleak background of modern Methodism, there are brighter patches, including:

- the fact that some local Methodist Churches **are** growing, although if the test is one of sustained growth over a 5-year period (year-on-year, either increase or stability, with an overall increase) in both membership and worship attendance, then the total is only 14 churches out of 6452 in Britain!<sup>122</sup>
- the numbers of presbyteral ministers/students has increased in recent years (3660 to 3727 between 1995 and 1998)
- there is a greater awareness of both the need for ‘revival’ and the possibility of it being achieved with the stimulus of the Holy Spirit<sup>123</sup>
- the evangelistic work of Rob Frost and the popularity of his ‘Easter People’ (see above)
- the ‘church planting’ movement – in 1992 the Conference called upon each Circuit to consider planting a new congregation by the year 2000 (this could include a new congregation in an existing church building); by 2000 a total of about 100 has been achieved, which although significantly fewer than the 691 circuits still represents one new church/congregation planted per month.
- The awareness by the church nationally of the need for greater efforts in mission, including the setting up of a ‘Resourcing Mission’ office for the benefit of local churches and the drafting of a Connexional ‘Vision’ for local churches to engage with, to be considered at Conference in June 2000.

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<sup>121</sup> Townsend, Workman & Eayrs, *A New History of Methodism*, Vol II, facing p532.

<sup>122</sup> Provided by Connexional Office, January 2000.

<sup>123</sup> In 1998, a tour organised by young Methodist ministers called ‘Approaching Revival’ was held in 12 venues across the country and attracted about 1,000 Methodist people who it is hoped will be ‘fire-starters’ for revival in their own churches.

Also, the fact that Methodism does have a history of rapid growth and of an approach to mission which was both evangelical and encompassed a concern for peoples' social, moral and economic as well as spiritual well-being is a resource that can be drawn upon. Before looking closely at a local example of where Methodist churches are today in terms of mission, it would be useful to draw from the survey of Methodist history, together with recent research on church growth, some possible lessons, both positive and negative.

## **LESSONS FROM 260 YEARS OF METHODISM**

### **Leadership**

One of the most striking things about early Methodism was its dependence upon and deference to one man – John Wesley. Methodism is generally thought of as being more 'democratic' and lay-led than most denominations and that is true in terms of its polity, but it owes its existence largely to the vision and energy of Wesley.<sup>124</sup> It would seem undeniable that Wesley, after his Aldersgate Street experience when his heart was 'strangely warmed', was a man powerfully anointed by the Holy Spirit. This strong gifting made him, in all senses of the word, a charismatic figure through whom God spoke despite, more perhaps than because of, his personal attributes<sup>125</sup>, in a similar, if less remarkable, way to St Paul. Clearly, such 'charisma' in leadership is not reproducible humanly speaking, but is dependent on God's sovereign will and calling, and of a person's submission to him.

In addition to Wesley himself, considerable importance was attached to class leaders; these were selected by Wesley himself at first, and the later overall decline in their quality seems to have been a significant factor in falling attendance at classes. After Wesley, powerful ministers have also been very influential in the church nationally, notably Jabez Bunting in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Scott Lidgett 100 years later and more recently, from different theological wings of the church, Lord Soper and Donald English.

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<sup>124</sup> Of course, the whole Christian Church owes its existence to one man, Jesus, and whilst he provides us with an excellent model of leadership, as in all things, his example is unique. Sometimes Methodists have been too ready to elevate Wesley to a position alongside him!

<sup>125</sup> Contemporaries generally described Wesley as not a very striking figure at all, unlike Whitefield.

Today, considerable importance is placed in church growth theories on leadership. Ministers have generally found it easy to identify themselves with the ‘servant’ and ‘shepherd’ models of leadership, but only now are the other leadership functions of ‘steward’ (keeper of the vision) and ‘overseer’ (*episkopos*, the one who guides and directs – ie. the more secular understanding of leadership) being re-discovered and stressed.<sup>126</sup> Christian Schwarz, in his *Natural Church Development* (1996), identifies ‘Empowering Leadership’ as his first ‘quality characteristic’ of church growth, but stresses that ‘leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry’ and they are ready to accept help from outside.<sup>127</sup>

The particular example of Wesley would tend to confirm that:

- Ministers should not recoil from taking on a clear leadership role and being accountable for that.
- Ministers should actively seek to develop and empower lay leaders in the church, and give them clearly-defined responsibilities for which they, in turn, are accountable.
- Leadership should, while being grounded on the rock of sound Christian theology, be pragmatic and flexible, prepared to respond and change, where appropriate, to circumstances and, in particular, to recognise the workings of the Holy Spirit. Rack draws the lesson of pragmatism strongly from Wesley: ‘Church order should be responsive to religious truth and mission rather than dogmatically settled.’<sup>128</sup>

## **Enthusiasm**

Although this is hard to quantify, it would seem that the history of Methodism would support the rather obvious finding that there is a clear correlation between church growth and the enthusiasm of members for both their faith and their local church. Schwarz (pp26-7) found a clear correlation and Warren, in an unpublished study of growing churches in the Durham Diocese, put ‘enthusiasm’ as an essential pre-

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<sup>126</sup> Finney, *Understanding Leadership*, 1989, especially Chapter Two; Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*.

<sup>127</sup> p22-3; interestingly, he also found that formal theological training has a **negative** correlation to both church growth and the overall quality of churches, but this may be partly linked with the stronger growth of non-traditional denominations.

<sup>128</sup> *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p553. Several commentators lament the ‘ossification’ of Methodism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the antithesis to such pragmatism, and as sowing the seeds of its eventual decline, eg Rack (*op cit*, p250) and Turner (*Conflict and Reconciliation*, p81).

condition for growth; for Warren this enthusiasm came from the underlying spiritual vitality of people in the church. My own observations of various churches, including those dealt with later in this thesis, would tend to support Warren's views – without an underlying passion which makes people want to spread the Gospel, help those in need and see others brought into God's Kingdom then no structures, people, activities or services, however good, will make for a mission-oriented church. Like God-given 'charisma', this passion cannot be self-generated, but comes from a life of faith, submission and commitment to Christ.

The early Methodist class meetings, informal prayer meetings, evangelical preaching (particularly in the open-air), the quest for and examples of 'perfection' and strong sense of social concern are all clear indications of an enthusiastic and passionate spirituality. After Wesley's death, one means of expression of enthusiasm was the various groups which split away from the Wesleyan Church, each of them finding the latter insufficiently passionate. As Methodism, including the schismatics, became increasingly institutionalised, this passion was gradually lost but clearly needs to be re-captured if growth is to replace decline. Whilst there has always been an enthusiastic element in the Methodist Church, it does seem that in recent years this has become stronger, or at least more vocal.<sup>129</sup>

### **'Supernatural' Occurrences**

The word 'charismatic', which in its original sense refers to all the grace-gifts of the Holy Spirit, has rather been appropriated by those who would put an emphasis on these more outward and physical, more obviously supernatural, gifts, such as speaking in tongues. Schwarz identifies a 'gift-orientated lay ministry' as one of his quality characteristics (pp24-5), but would rightly include all spiritual gifts, rather than merely the more obviously supernatural. However, the 'charismatic evangelical' churches which were identified in *'Christian England'* as exhibiting by far the strongest growth (7% between 1985 and 1989, p211) of all types of churchmanship<sup>130</sup>, fall into the more narrow definition of 'charismatic'.

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<sup>129</sup> Anecdotal evidence would suggest, however, that many enthusiastic Methodists have transferred out to the 'new' churches, such as Ichthus, Pioneer and Vineyard, or to the house church movement.

<sup>130</sup> In fact, the only type of churchmanship to show consistent growth over this period. However, in the subsequent decade, charismatic evangelicals declined in numbers (Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*, p151), ascribed to the desire by some churches to disassociate themselves from the 'Toronto Blessing'.

The outbreaks of physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the early years of Methodism have been noted, and the link between these and local revivals. There are few records of similar such outbreaks in Methodism between Wesley and the modern day<sup>131</sup>, although dramatic conversions continued, albeit at a declining rate after the early days of Primitive Methodism. The mid-1990s phenomenon of the 'Toronto blessing' touched some Methodist churches and the Church presented a report to Conference in 1996 which examined this. The report, in a very balanced and Wesleyan way, recognised the need for the church to be open to the possibility of God's Spirit working in these ways, affirmed peoples' positive experiences, but warned of the need to continually test such manifestations against Scripture and the lasting fruit in peoples' lives. This would seem to be the right way forward in the light of Methodist history and in the current more credulous age<sup>132</sup> it is vital the church does not seek to discredit, or even play down, the supernatural work of the Spirit.

### **Organisation and Discipline**

Wesley's formidable abilities of organisation have been widely noted, and without them it is quite possible that Methodism would have become hopelessly fragmented after his death. However, Wesley organised for pragmatic reasons – ie. if it worked, and was in accord with Biblical principles, he used it<sup>133</sup> – rather than for the sake of it, as has sometimes appeared to be the case in Methodism. The contribution which institutionalisation, and what I would call over-organisation, has made to the decline in the vitality of the church has been detailed already. Whilst it clearly is important for there to be structure in the church,<sup>134</sup> it now seems that that of the Methodist Church, particularly in the way it makes decisions, is too cumbersome to be able to respond

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<sup>131</sup> Most are early, including those experienced during the Yorkshire revival of 1792-4 and in camp meetings, especially those associated with the early Primitives (Methodist Church report on Toronto Blessing, 1996, p12).

<sup>132</sup> Shown by interest in astrology, the occult, UFO's, etc.

<sup>133</sup> Christian Schwarz, however, in *Natural Church Development*, (pp100-102) rejects the primarily 'pragmatic' approach of 'classical' church growth thinking, saying that pragmatism (ie. if it succeeds, it's OK) should never be allowed to override Biblical principles. Wesley would doubtless have agreed with him.

<sup>134</sup> Schwarz, *op cit*, pp28-9, identifies 'functional structures' as one of his key characteristics of growing churches.

readily to a rapidly-changing world.<sup>135</sup> For instance, the basic structure of Methodism (church, circuit, district, connexion) does have some drawbacks.

The most important geographical unit in the Church is the circuit. Circuits are responsible for appointing (with the exception of Probationary Ministers), employing and paying Presbyters and Deacons and, in some cases, lay workers. Although Ministers have pastoral responsibility for particular church(es), their employer is the circuit. The circuit, through its Superintendent minister, is also responsible for drawing up the preaching plan for each quarter, whereby preachers, both lay and ordained, are allocated for the various Sunday services to be held in the circuit's churches. Therefore, the identity of both the person who is in the position of leadership in a particular church and the person who is responsible for leading worship/preaching there each Sunday is determined not by the local church, but by the circuit.

Thus, whilst individual churches can draw up their mission statements and decide policy with regard to the key issues of engagement with their local community and the timing and format of worship, the implementation of that policy is very much influenced by the circuit.<sup>136</sup> However, the circuit itself cannot impose policy on local churches, but merely give advice in most circumstances. So, local churches and their circuits co-exist in a sometimes uneasy partnership where it is not difficult for one to, intentionally or otherwise, frustrate the vision and desires of the other.

With regard to discipline, there has been a steady decline in the enforcement of the Church's 'rules' since Wesley's time. Whilst no-one is likely to suggest that Wesley's strict discipline would be appropriate today, people generally respond well to clear, well-enforced and reasonable rules. In many Methodist churches today there is a great reluctance to remove people from membership lists as 'ceased to meet', in some cases even when they no longer live in the area, let alone attend church. Clearly, there needs to be a proper balance in a Christian community between love and forgiveness on the one hand and holding to Scriptural truth and a need to be in Christian fellowship on the

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<sup>135</sup> Although the recent creation of the Methodist Council, with an Executive, was intended to overcome this, the Annual Conference still remains the supreme decision-making body. The financial cost of the 1997 Conference rejecting a Council recommendation to cap the number of ministerial candidates accepted for training is still reverberating through the Church.

<sup>136</sup> This also limits the way in which leadership can be exercised in the local church and creates potential for conflict between ministerial colleagues within a circuit.

other; it seems that most churches now probably lean too far towards the former at the expense of the latter.

### **Small groups**

The importance of class meetings to the history of Methodism is hard to exaggerate. Whilst it would probably be going too far to conclude from the evidence I have presented that the decline of Methodism this century is due solely to the decline (in both quality and attendance) of the class meeting, this has surely been a significant factor. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not only were class meetings attractive to people because of the Christian fellowship found there and the fact that people were brought to faith in and through them, but attendance was compulsory for Methodists. As these classes grew, they multiplied because of size limitations. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the spiritual vitality of class meetings generally declined for various reasons, but attendance was still, in theory at least, compulsory, they became more diverse in character with less emphasis on sharing spiritual experiences. Once the requirement to attend classes was effectively removed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they completely withered away, although many Methodists continued to meet their need for small group fellowship through such as Bible study groups.

For Schwarz, ‘holistic small groups’ are a vital component of growing churches.<sup>137</sup> In particular, these are groups where people feel they can discuss their personal problems, which would seem to be a greater level of openness than was widely encouraged even in Wesley’s time. Even more significant was the link Schwarz identified with the promotion of the multiplication of small groups through ‘cell division’ – in fact, he found this to be the most statistically significant of all the factors he identified. This is one of the fundamental principles behind the ‘cell church’ movement which is currently growing rapidly worldwide.<sup>138</sup> Although Wesley’s classes did not have the specific objective of growing to the point of multiplication, this happened naturally as classes outgrew homes.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Natural Church Development*, pp32-33.

<sup>138</sup> For a more detailed examination of the cell church movement, see Chapter Four.

<sup>139</sup> The fact that visitors were welcomed into classes, albeit only twice before they had to decide whether to join the class, is well-documented – eg Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, p107.

Pastoral care within the class, albeit this was the responsibility largely of the class leader, was also a feature of early Methodism, with some classes even having all things in common, like the New Testament church. Although some pastoral visitors in modern Methodist churches do an excellent job, we have lost the sense of mutual, practical caring within the group, especially on a day-to-day basis and most churches are too big to do it effectively as a whole.<sup>140</sup> This mutual caring is very much a feature of good cell groups.

The disparity of values between Methodists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and society at large has been noted, together with the way that as this disparity lessened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this may well have contributed to the decline of the class meeting. Without developing a detailed social/moral critique of modern British society, it would seem that there is certainly a greater disparity today between scriptural Christian values and those of society as a whole than there was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup>, if not perhaps the 18<sup>th</sup>. Also, the pressures of modern society mean that ethical challenges and conflicts will be quite commonplace for Christians, especially for those who are in paid employment. This situation creates a pastoral need for Christians of fellowship, support and drawing out the issues, for which a small group environment is much more appropriate than a preaching service. It also creates an evangelistic opportunity to bring Christian ethical values before people who are often confused about these issues and for whom society often gives little guidance.<sup>141</sup>

### **A BALANCED MISSION?**

One of the striking features of Wesley's Methodism was the way it balanced aspects of Christian mission which have so often been traded off against each other, one being emphasised to the detriment of the other. Unlike much of more recent Methodist history, and that of many other Christian churches it has to be said, for Wesley it was very much a case of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. This can be seen from examining the following pairings.

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<sup>140</sup> Even in Methodism, with its predominantly small churches (under 60 members), this is true; cell groups are usually allowed to grow no bigger than about 15 people to ensure this care can be provided effectively. Interestingly, Methodists who belong to very small churches (under 20) sometimes comment on the depth of loving care and fellowship they find in such churches and it seems that, at their best, such churches are functioning as effective class meetings, but sadly not cells since they rarely multiply.

<sup>141</sup> Examples could include the issue of cohabitation/marriage, or the ethical limits of genetic engineering.

### **Evangelism – social concern/action.**

John Stott ably chronicled the way in which evangelical Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely abandoned the latter as a reaction to the ‘social gospel’ being promulgated by many 100 years ago, not least Methodists.<sup>142</sup> The bringing together of these two strands is one of the more important achievements of evangelicalism in recent years. Wesley used his tremendous energy to establish practical means of helping those most in social and economic need, as well as preaching and teaching. In this way he showed how the mission of the church could be more effective if it paid attention to both, although he of course was only following the example of Jesus in this. It is probably true to say that Methodism is probably better known today for its stand on social issues (particularly drinking and gambling) than it is for its evangelistic fervour – without decrying the very laudable social concern of the Church, it was certainly the case that during the Thatcher years it was much easier to get a resolution through Conference denouncing the Government’s latest socially regressive action than one clearly stating the Church’s commitment to evangelism, or even its position on doctrine.

### **Preaching services – class meetings.**

Wesley devoted most of his personal time and energy to the former, but most of his organisational skills to the latter. For him, attendance at their local Parish Church for worship, especially to take Communion, and later at Methodist preaching services was vital for his people, but it was attendance at class which defined them as ‘Methodists’. As the Methodist society developed into a church, Sunday worship took priority, to the point where attendance at class disappeared completely, and at any small group for most Methodists. Schwarz puts ‘inspiring worship services’ as one of his 8 quality characteristics, showing a strong correlation between the degree to which the main worship service was an ‘inspiring experience’ for participants and growing churches.<sup>143</sup> The circuit plan system can cause difficulties in ensuring consistent quality in worship and preaching, but this is as important for the church’s mission and growth as is the re-discovery of small groups as a real means of fellowship, support and evangelism. However, as Wesley found, even the best evangelistic preaching produced no lasting fruit, no sustainable growth, without the on-going nurture in small groups. This finding was almost exactly mirrored over 200 years later in a study which was made into the

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<sup>142</sup> *Issues facing Christians today*, 1990, Chapter One.

<sup>143</sup> *Natural Church Development*, pp30,31.

follow-up to the 1984 Mission England campaign – there was a clear correlation between those churches which saw the best long-term results (in terms of growth) from that campaign and those which had the greatest involvement in follow-up nurture groups.<sup>144</sup> This pairing could equally well be expressed as **seeker/celebration service – cell group**, or, in the context of Mission England, **evangelistic event – nurture group**. A balanced approach here is underpinned by the following theological balance:

### **Justification – sanctification.**

Although Wesley is most remembered for his field preaching, calling sinners to repentance, his heart was to see people live Godly lives. His Arminianism drove his emphasis on sanctification, in contrast to the more Calvinist leanings of many of his evangelical contemporaries. Whilst much good Methodist preaching today calls for both justification and sanctification (but without using such theological words!), it is my observation that such preaching is rarely followed up with people in a way which gives them an opportunity to respond to the challenge.<sup>145</sup> This shortfall is, in my view, one of the reasons for the popularity of ‘events’ like Easter People and of courses such as ‘Alpha’<sup>146</sup>. However, it could perhaps be said that a church which runs ‘Alpha’ courses without offering any follow-up is putting insufficient weight on sanctification, even though Alpha includes much that goes beyond an initial conversion. In contrast, Methodism’s ‘Disciple’ is a much longer course (30 weeks) which is essentially an in-depth study of the Bible and its constituent books and also involves additional commitment in terms of home-based study.<sup>147</sup> On the other hand, the Anglican ‘Emmaus’ is also a lengthy discipleship course, but is more rounded, including more in the way of nurture and encouraging a Christian lifestyle. Clearly, any balanced approach to mission cannot stop at justification by faith, but must be followed through with encouragement towards individual personal holiness, ie. sanctification. The small group is surely the natural environment within this to take place.

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<sup>144</sup> P. Back: *Churches reflect on Mission England 1984*, MARC Europe Monograph 21, 1988.

<sup>145</sup> ‘Altar calls’ are much less common than used to be the case, and whilst this may be a less appropriate model today, in relatively few churches are there trained ministry teams available to pray with people after services.

<sup>146</sup> Another reason for the popularity of Alpha is that the virtual collapse of Sunday Schools (Currie, Gilbert & Horsley, *Churches & Churchgoers*, 1977, p122) has left an enormous gap in terms of Christian education, even for many within the church. For a detailed analysis of Alpha and Emmaus, see Chapter Four.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Disciple’ is available from Methodist Publishing House.

### **Process – event.**

Although Wesley can be criticised for emphasising sanctification as event (the ‘second blessing’, leading to ‘Christian perfection’), it is clear that his organisational practice was very much geared to the ‘process’ model. However, both through his preaching and the practice within class meetings, it is clear that people were challenged to commit themselves to Christ in an ‘event’. This recognition of both the journey into faith and the journey of faith as processes, but with identifiable events, would find agreement with most modern thinking on evangelism and discipleship. Schwarz identifies ‘loving relationships’ and ‘need-orientated evangelism’ as two of his key characteristics in growing churches.<sup>148</sup> These characteristics, expressed through the local church as a whole but especially in small groups, would very much help to both draw people along the process but also challenge them at the appropriate point of time.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

It seems clear that the Methodist Church stands at a cross-roads in its history. Its decline through most of the twentieth century and the legacy of a membership highly skewed towards the elderly means that without major efforts to draw new people into the life of the church, or a sovereign work of revival through the Holy Spirit, it will fade away in the not-too-distant future. Whilst we can pray for revival, as many are doing, history would tend to indicate that such revival is more likely to come where churches have put a priority, in both their goals and their practice, on mission.

The evidence from both Methodist history and church growth research is that the task is not impossible, but its success depends on taking to heart the lessons identified above and applying them in our local churches. Currie, Gilbert & Horsley drew the following conclusion from their study of nearly 300 years of church growth in Britain:

‘Few individuals have joined a church with whose members they were not thoroughly acquainted in their everyday lives, and few churches have made significant gains outside the community(ies) centred upon them.’<sup>149</sup>

For too long in Methodism, most of those new members have been drawn from the families of existing Methodists. If this trend continues, the Church will die. However, the above quote also contains hope for the Church, since the legacy of a network of

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<sup>148</sup> *Natural Church Development*, pp34-7.

<sup>149</sup> *Churches & Churchgoers*, p117.

local churches serving most of the communities of this country gives us a good starting-point for mission. Furthermore, our history of class meetings, together with the new insights of the cell church movement, provide the basis of an organisational structure of small groups that can help bridge the gap between everyday friendships and Christian fellowship.

In the following chapter, an examination of one Methodist circuit, with a considerable variety of types and sizes among the 6 churches, will assess the extent to which the opportunities and potential of mission are being developed in one local area.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHESTER-LE-STREET METHODIST CIRCUIT

The relationship between the local church and its circuit in British Methodism has been briefly described in the previous chapter. I write as a Minister for the Chester-le-Street Circuit, which has 6 local churches, but with specific local pastoral charge of Lumley Church. The other part of my responsibility is to initiate a programme of development work throughout the circuit. My brief was a very wide and open one and both I and the circuit felt it was right to start with a thorough audit of the current situation, both in the local churches and the communities which they seek to serve. This audit comprised the following three elements:

1. An analysis at ward level of the 1991 Census data to examine the demographic and socio-economic structure of the towns and villages in the circuit.
2. A detailed questionnaire survey (see Appendix I) of each church in the circuit to assess their current activities and policies, particularly with regard to mission. This survey was sent to the secretary of each church, with a covering letter (Appendix II) to explain its purpose. The secretary then passed on various pages to other people in the church, eg financial question to the Treasurer, pastoral questions to the pastoral secretary. The final two questions asking the church to identify its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and to set out its mission statement/priorities were completed by the church stewards and the church's minister together. Trends of membership and attendance for each church over the previous 10 years were also examined using the annual October counts.
3. A much simpler questionnaire survey (Appendix III) of people in the communities served by the churches, to assess their perception of local needs and of the church. This was carried out by a volunteer assistant who interviewed people face-to-face. People were approached in local shops, doctors' surgeries, pubs, garages, offices, factories and private homes. They were asked the following simple questions:
  - (i) 'Where do you think people in this area are hurting most?' 'What are their most important needs?'
  - (ii) 'How do you think the church is seen by local people?'
  - (iii) 'What in your opinion could the church do, or do more, to help meet peoples' needs in this area?'

Interviewees were selected from personal judgement rather than being scientifically random, but the interviewer did attempt to obtain a broad cross-section of the local

community in each case. Answers were grouped together for ease of presentation.<sup>150</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis, the analysis and synthesis of these three surveys will focus on: (i) the churches' different understandings of mission; (ii) their different ways of engaging in mission and whether or not these match the needs (real or perceived) of their local communities, (iii) their different missiological hopes and intentions and whether or not these have a theological context. From this analysis, 'ideal types' will be identified with regard to a local church's approach to mission.

At this point, a difficulty in the synthesis should be pointed out. Census wards do not always coincide neatly with either village communities or the 'catchment areas' of local churches. General analysis of census data at enumeration district (ED) level would have necessitated access to the County Council's computer, which was not available, although I did manage to exclude the ED's of Lumley ward which are outside the circuit altogether. This difficulty has meant that in particular it is not possible to distinguish the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the communities served by the three churches at West Pelton, Pelton and Perkinsville.

## **GEOGRAPHY OF THE CIRCUIT**

Most of the circuit falls within the Chester-le-Street District of County Durham, of which only the area around Sacriston to the South falls outside the circuit. Birtley, however, is within the Metropolitan District of Gateshead. In recent decades, Chester-le-Street has been the only District in County Durham which has consistently grown in population, although this growth, which has mostly been through new house-building and in-migration, resulting in many residents commuting outside the district to work, may be coming to an end.

The geography of the circuit will be described by reference to the six churches, which serve the various communities. This will be done by looking at the 1991 Census data for the relevant wards and the more subjective community survey. The order I shall use reflects the order in which the wards are listed in Tables I-III (Appendix).

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<sup>150</sup> It would be fair to say that the community questionnaire survey cannot be treated as statistically rigorous, but it is helpful in giving a 'flavour' of local perceptions regarding the community and the local church.

## **Birtley**

Birtley is easily the largest community in the circuit outside Chester-le-Street town. Almost the whole town, apart from the northern-most tip, is included in the figures for Tables I-III. Despite being administratively part of Gateshead, it is separated from the rest of that Borough by the A1(M) and is therefore a distinctive community, which is traditional and manufacturing-based. Birtley has a relatively old, non-car or house-owning, population with a significant proportion of unemployed people, particularly women. Relatively little new house-building has taken place recently in Birtley (just 128 houses since 1991), but a large strategic site for 1,000 houses at North Side, between the town and the A1(M), was given outline planning permission in 1997. If this goes ahead, it will increase the size of the town significantly.

100 people were interviewed in Birtley and at least two-thirds of them mentioned one or more of **crime**, particularly juvenile crime, and **lack of jobs**, particularly for **young people**, as local problems. Shortage of money, mentioned by a third, was the other significant problem. Reflecting this, at least half of those interviewed put forward more effective policing, more jobs, and more things for young people to do as the priorities in Birtley.

In the south Birtley merges into Chester-le-Street District and the substantial Barley Mow estate is very much borderline as to which community it would naturally fall within. Nevertheless, there is a fairly good correlation between the area identified as Birtley in the Tables and the 'natural' catchment area of Birtley church. Of its 87 members, 73 live in Birtley, including Barley Mow (12), with the greatest concentration (one-third) living within ½ km of the church, which is situated centrally in the town. Of the 14 members who live outside Birtley, most are from Ouston (5) or living in residential homes (3).

The Roman Catholic Church is particularly strong in Birtley (average weekend attendance 675). The Church of England is also well supported (membership 250) and there are small Salvation Army and Assembly of God Churches. 'Churches Together' is active in the town and there is also a Christian Centre, the Oasis Trust, which has a bookshop and is open for coffee, etc; this is managed by an inter-denominational group on which the Methodist Church is represented.

### **West Pelton/Pelton/Perkinsville**

In this area to the North-West of Chester-le-Street, ward boundaries do not follow identifiable communities, with the exception of Ouston ward. Also, the half of West Pelton's membership which are local all live within the church's 'natural' catchment area of West Pelton/High Handenhold/Beamish, but the 'natural' catchment areas of Pelton and Perkinsville both include the community of Perkinsville, which is in Pelton ward. In practice, almost all Perkinsville's congregation come from Ouston and Urpeth, whilst Pelton draws its members from Ouston, Urpeth and Perkinsville as well as Pelton itself. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to look at these three churches together insofar as their local communities are concerned.

These communities are a mixture of traditional mining-based villages and new housing estates. The age profiles in Table I show, for instance, that Urpeth, with its younger population, had substantial new house building after Ouston, with its middle-aged population, but both these wards contain large new private estates. As a generalisation, it is fair to say that the communities of Pelton and Perkinsville are less affluent, particularly when compared to those of Ouston and Urpeth. However, the addition of 160 new private houses in Pelton since 1991 may well have changed the balance of that community. West Pelton village unfortunately straddles the boundaries of three wards, Urpeth, Grange Villa and Pelton, whose socio-economic characteristics vary considerably. Grange Villa ward has a high proportion of private-rented houses, which partly explains the high incidence of houses without central heating.<sup>151</sup>

Throughout this area the problems mentioned by over three-quarters of people in the community survey (50 people were interviewed in each of the three churches' local areas) were **juvenile crime** and **lack of jobs**. In Pelton and Perkinsville, 40% also mentioned **shortage of money**. Their priorities, in all three areas, were the need for a focal point in their local community and '**something for young people to do**' (specifically, jobs for them in West Pelton).

To some extent in contrast, the church itself identified the following local needs:

- Lack of social skills

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<sup>151</sup> Lack of inside WC, or exclusive use of a bath, are more usual indicators of housing deprivation, but incidence of these are rare today outside inner cities, so I have used availability of central heating as the indicator instead.

- Lack of caring parenting
- Lack of employment
- Lack of leisure activities for young people

There are CofE churches at Pelton (membership approx 120) and West Pelton (50), the latter having close relations with West Pelton Methodist, and a small satellite congregation which meets in Ouston school. There is also a RC Church at Perkinsville (40-50), but the strongest church in this area seems to be the fellowship, formed from Rickleton independent church in Washington, which meets in Ouston Community Centre (50-60 attendance). There is a small Methodist chapel (membership 15) in the village of Grange Villa, but since the village is physically distinct from West Pelton and the chapel is in the Stanley circuit, it has not been covered by this study.

### **Chester-le-Street**

Chester-le-Street itself is an old market town, but little of its history prior to Victorian times survives. Its 19<sup>th</sup> Century growth as a commercial centre for the Durham coalfield has continued this century in the form of sprawling residential estates. Tables II and III, showing employment and social indicators by ward, show how socio-economic characteristics vary considerably across the town itself, which had a population in 1991 of 25,035 in the wards from Pelton Fell to Holmlands Park inclusive. Chester West ward, which has the largest concentration of local authority housing, combines high unemployment and low car ownership, both classic deprivation indices, with a high proportion of households consisting of pensioners either living alone or caring for a dependent. On the other hand, North Lodge, a well-established middle-class area with a middle-aged population, has the characteristics of affluence. Waldridge, in the South-West, is the area of most recent large-scale housing development (almost exclusively private), reflected in a young, employed, home-owning profile.<sup>152</sup>

Given the size of the town which the church serves, it is perhaps not surprising that there was a reluctance on the church's part to identify any particular local needs. However, within the community, despite the different character of Chester-le-Street town, similar concerns are dominant for local people as elsewhere, namely **lack of jobs** (especially for young people) and **crime** (especially juvenile crime). **Traffic pollution**

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<sup>152</sup> Since 1991, a further 800 houses have been built at Waldridge, so the census figures here are very out-dated.

and/or **noise** were also mentioned by at least three-quarters of the 200 people interviewed. 'More jobs' was strongly the priority need, followed by more local authority housing and better control of traffic.

The Methodist Church, located on the northern edge of the Town Centre, serves the whole town, as identified above. Previously, there were three Methodist Churches in the town, but 20 years ago they decided to come together as one society and in one building. The current membership is drawn from most parts of the town, plus a few from outlying villages. The areas of South Pelaw, Chester South, Holmlands Park and the part of Chester North to the North-East of the Civic Centre are particularly well-represented.

Both the Church of England and the RC Church are strong in the town, with total numbers attending once or more on Sundays averaging 315 and 900 respectively. In 1972 the Anglican Parish Church began a pioneering programme of planting 5 new congregations in the various residential areas of the town. These congregations succeeded in attracting new worshippers to the school halls where most met (although one began life in a pub!) and on the first Sunday of each month all congregations joined together at the Parish Church for a Family Communion service. More recently, the parish has rationalised its congregations in order to ensure quality worship can be supported, closing the satellite congregations at South Pelaw and Bullion Lane and leaving the ones at North Lodge and Hermitage school (the latter serving the new estates in the south-west of the town).

There is also a URC, Salvation Army and independent Evangelical Church. Neither of the two most deprived wards in the circuit, Chester West and Pelton Fell, have any physical Christian presence in the form of buildings or premises. The local authority, together with MIND, Victim Support, the police and Social Services have sponsored the Chester West Action Group, which has established a neighbourhood house where informal advice and support is offered, but to date there is no church involvement in this. The extension of the Birtley and Ouston Credit Union to cover the whole of Chester-le-Street is now complete, with the active support of the circuit.

## Great Lumley

The actual census ward of Lumley includes part of Fence Houses, but I have excluded these ED's from the analysis, which, as far as is possible, relates to the village of Great Lumley. This has grown substantially in recent decades, with new private estates and some local authority building. It has slightly higher than average rates of car and house ownership, with a relatively young population, but also a relatively high rate of unemployment among young women (Table II) and a higher than average proportion of children in single-parent families. Since the 1991 Census, over 200 new houses, including an estate of 115 large detached houses, have been built which may have significantly changed the socio-economic profile of the village.

For the 50 people interviewed in Lumley, crime (especially **juvenile crime**) was the problem mentioned most (by over half of the people), followed by **lack of jobs**. In contrast, 90% said the biggest priority for the village was **more shops**, followed by **more things for young people to do**. This perhaps reflects a village-based focus.

The Methodist Church was built in 1988 in the centre of the village and extended in 1998. The village's two former chapels had previously amalgamated and then closed. These two chapels had been in separate circuits; the one adjacent to the new church was in the Houghton-le-Spring circuit. A relatively high proportion of the current membership (16 out of 69) live outside the village, due to a combination of historical factors and some who have chosen to join Lumley because of its particular emphasis. Also within the village, the CofE, which has a strong Anglo-Catholic tradition, and the Assembly of God churches, are both slightly smaller than the Methodist Church.

## LOCAL CHURCHES – A HISTORY OF DECLINE

In 1987, the circuit's membership was 768. In 1997 it was 624, a decline of 19%. At the same time, attendance at Sunday worship services declined from 597 to 481, an identical 19%. However, this similarity masks considerable differences at local church level, as Figures 1 to 6 (Appendix) show.<sup>153</sup> Figure 7 shows the different elements which have contributed to changes in membership in the 6 churches from 1988-1997.

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<sup>153</sup> A comment needs to be made here about the reliability of the figures. 'Membership' numbers should be accurate, but do not necessarily reflect the real strength of the church, which may well have several 'members' who rarely, if ever, bother to attend (in addition to elderly/housebound who cannot attend), at the same time as having several regular worshippers, who may also perform valuable roles in the life of

In general, the age/gender profiles of congregations across the circuit, as shown in Figures 8-18, were considerably older than the local population, and dominated by women, although again there are significant local variations. Therefore, it is important to look at each church in turn. It should be borne in mind that at the four churches which had services in both mornings and evenings (Pelton had a monthly family service in the mornings as well as a weekly evening service), some people attended twice, but it is not known how many. Also, in all churches there were members who did not attend and non-members who attended regularly.

### **Birtley**

Here, the substantial decline in membership (23%) was not matched by a decline in attendance at worship, which actually increased very slightly (1%) over the two services combined, with a small net growth in the morning and a small net loss in the evening. Most of the membership loss was through deaths but there were very few new members made (4 over 10 years) to replace them. By 1997, congregations at both services had twice as many women as men, with the 75+ age group strongly over-represented. In the mornings, whilst under-16's reflected the local population balance, due to a relatively strong Junior Church (average attendance 25), the 16-39 band was severely under-represented. The relatively small evening congregation was wholly over 40.

### **Perkinsville**

This small church suffered a dramatic decline in membership (47%) through a combination of deaths, members who 'ceased to meet'<sup>154</sup>, and net transfers out. Only 1 new member was made over the 10 years. Attendance at worship declined, mostly since 1994, although since the 1997 count it has increased (it averaged 24 in 1998) and is the only church in the circuit which regularly has more people at worship than its membership<sup>155</sup>. Despite the relatively young population profile of Urpeth/Ouston, its congregation was all over 40 and mostly women – this is still the case. It no longer has any activities for children or young people and in fact the church no longer had any formal groups at all.

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the church, who are not 'members'. 'Attendance' figures are, however, not always accurate; they are the average of attendance over the month of October and can be 'guessed', or distorted by special factors.

<sup>154</sup> This is the expression used for those who, by their own volition or at the instigation of the church, have ceased to be members.

<sup>155</sup> Although by 1999, Lumley's morning and evening congregations together exceeded the membership.

## **Pelton**

Here, the membership halved over the 10 years, almost entirely due to deaths. Only very recently had new members been made, 4 in 1997. Worship attendance also declined, but the change to one weekly service, and the monthly family service make direct comparisons difficult. The Junior Church numbers had, however, held up quite well since 1989. Again, the weekly evening congregation was predominantly female and middle-aged or older.<sup>156</sup>

## **West Pelton**

The steep membership decline here, 43%, was due to losses through deaths, net out-transfers and 'ceased to meet' being much greater than the gain of 20 new members. I am informed that about 12 years ago a number of new people were attracted to the church by the minister at the time and made members, but later ceased attendance when the minister left and were removed from membership. The patterns in attendance and membership would tend to support this,<sup>157</sup> with a rapid decline in morning attendance in 1991-3 being followed by 12 members ceasing to meet in 1993-4.<sup>158</sup> The Junior Church here also declined rapidly, from 25 in 1988 to 6, and average attendance was only 2 in 1998 according to the questionnaire. Despite many of the senior positions in the church being held by men, over 70% of the congregation (morning and evening combined) were women. Again, the 16-39 age group was almost non-existent and the over-55's disproportionately over-represented.

## **Chester-le-Street**

This is a large church by Methodist standards, and its decline in membership (10%) has been proportionally the lowest in the Circuit. This is because, although 95 members died and more were lost through out-transfers and 'ceased to meet', 80 new members were made over the 10 years. However, the number of people who attended worship regularly as a proportion of the number of members has consistently been by far the lowest in the Circuit – combining morning and evening attendance it was only 61% of

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<sup>156</sup> In 2000, Pelton moved to a weekly morning service only, and numbers have increased, especially of youngsters in Junior Church.

<sup>157</sup> The attendance figure for evening worship in 1993 was clearly increased by a special, distorting, factor since it is well out of line with the trend. Also, the morning figure for 1997 was artificially increased by the Harvest Festival being held in October, rather than September.

<sup>158</sup> It should be noted that the membership records for this church needed some 'interpretation' to enable them to make sense!

membership in 1997. The decline in attendance occurred mostly between 1991 and 1993, the morning figure for 1992 clearly being a 'freak'. Although the mid-week work with children and young people continued to be strong, attendance at Junior Church nearly halved from 90 to 50.

The age/gender structures of the two congregations differed significantly. In the mornings, women made up nearly two-thirds, compared to 58% in the evenings. The morning congregation was also considerably younger, with significant numbers (12.5%) in the 25-39 age group.<sup>159</sup> In the morning worship, both children and adults are encouraged to participate and the preacher is invited to tailor his/her service to a theme which will be followed for a number of weeks by both adults and the Junior Church. In general, the church seeks to encourage creativity in its morning worship. However, the 65-74 band still constituted 26% of the morning congregation, compared to less than 9% of the population of the town.<sup>160</sup>

The evening service is more traditional and the choir assists in leading worship. The evening congregation was almost entirely aged 40-74, and predominantly 55-74.

### **Lumley**

Lumley's membership also only declined by 10%, again due to significant numbers of new members being made over the 10 years (23). However, attendance at worship declined by 37% overall, concentrated mainly in the period 1989-1992. Figures for the Junior Church cannot be used for comparison purposes over the 10-year period, because since 1991 they were not included in Sunday worship counts, as they met after the morning service until 1999. Overall, work with children and young people continued to be a strength here, both on Sundays and during the week, reflecting the relatively young population of the village.

In stark contrast with Chester-le-Street and Birtley (and probably most churches), the evening service here attracted the younger congregation, with 32% under 40 despite

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<sup>159</sup> Although this compared with 22% of the general population, this age-group was almost absent elsewhere in the Circuit, except at Lumley, and is very under-represented in many churches generally. Also, the 'count' was done during a half-term weekend, and the Church Stewards felt that normally there would have been more young families present.

<sup>160</sup> In 1999, an early (8.45am) contemporary service was added, led by the church's worship group. This attracts a congregation of about 40, slightly younger than the later morning service.

there being no Junior Church. However, despite this the evening congregation was still predominantly middle-aged, with 56% aged 40-64. Both congregations had the highest proportion of men in the Circuit, at 45%.

### **Some general comments**

- 1 Whilst decline was the normative experience across the Circuit, it was neither universal nor inevitable.
- 2 The Circuit was predominantly female and middle-aged to elderly. Relative to the population as a whole, the 55+ age groups were strongly over-represented. In this respect, the circuit was typical of British Methodism (Chapter One).
- 3 The age –profile of most churches made them very vulnerable to continuing, and even steeper, decline due to future losses through deaths.
- 4 Churches that lost least members overall were those which made new members most consistently (CLS and Lumley). Of course, churches have greater ability to influence this than deaths or transfers!
- 5 In contrast, West Pelton’s experience shows that new members need to have spiritual roots in God, or they will fall away (Mark 4:16-17).
- 6 In a number of instances, significant changes in attendance figures can be correlated to a change in minister; this is more likely to be noticeable as a negative factor since a positive influence will be more gradual. Changes in ministers can and do affect attendance at worship and, ultimately, membership numbers.
- 7 Nevertheless, there was not a clear correlation between membership numbers and attendance at worship, either in trends or in actual numbers. This relationship will probably depend more on a church’s ‘ceased to meet’ policy, ie. whether, and when, a person’s membership is removed, rather than its policy towards making new members, since most churches will encourage the latter wherever possible.
- 8 Churches with younger congregations tended to be those with active Junior Churches – this may be because there were more younger adults available to help with Junior Church, rather than a strong Junior Church attracting parents.
- 9 Except in Lumley, younger people preferred to worship in the morning.
- 10 In general, the more traditional style of worship services tended to attract older congregations.

## THE CHURCHES' ACTIVITIES IN 1997/8

The churches in the circuit provided considerable detail about the various activities they were involved in. Since every activity has at least the potential to be missiological, I shall summarise them all.

### **Birtley**

For a medium-sized church, Birtley had a wide range of groups which met on the premises. Recent improvements to the building provided a good range of rooms of various sizes and suitable to the needs of all activities from parent and toddler group to Bible study. In 1998, partly because of the demands of the 'Disciple' course which was running then, there were no organised church groups which met in peoples' homes or anywhere other than church premises.<sup>161</sup>

On a weekly basis, two ('Disciple') Bible study groups, the Christian Endeavour and a (day-time) devotional group catered for the spiritual needs of people within the church. Also, the ladies' meeting point, women's guild and study group (the latter two meet in afternoons) met fortnightly and the men's fellowship monthly. The largest of these groups were the Christian Endeavour and women's guild, each attracting about 20 people, but the others had between 8 and 12 attending regularly.

On Wednesdays, there were about 100 non-church people coming there, for either the parent and toddler group or the 'Drop in' which provided a cooked lunch for £1. The latter attracted 60-75 mostly older people who seemed to come for company and/or a cheap meal. Both these groups performed a useful social purpose as well as showing God's love in the local community. Neither, however, attempted to introduce any overtly Christian content, directly or indirectly. There was also a weekly Brownies group, with about 24 girls, a Saturday morning 'Coffee and chat', which attracted about 20, mainly church, people, and a small fortnightly 'Craft group'.

On their own assessment of the orientation of the different groups, all scored themselves maximum points (10) for fellowship. Those groups which had a clearly social purpose, such as craft group, Brownies, Drop In, parent and toddler, also scored themselves 10 for 'meeting social needs' as did, more surprisingly, the Christian Endeavour. Scores for

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<sup>161</sup> By the end of 1999, 2 home groups were meeting.

'outreach' are interesting and do not seem to relate well to a group's ability to reach people outside the church -- this is typical of the questionnaire responses generally. For instance, the Christian Endeavour, which did not attract people from outside the church, nor indeed would it be expected to, scored itself 10 and the Disciple Bible study, again provided for church people, scored 8; on the other hand, 'Coffee and Chat' on Saturday morning, with great potential to draw in non-church people, scored only 4 and the Craft group 0. However, whilst the Wednesday Drop In attracted many non-church people, reflected in an outreach score of 8, nothing was done to take advantage of this, even in a non-threatening way such as background Christian music and banners/posters.

There was some work with children, through Brownies, Junior Church and parents and toddlers. Recently, the Junior Church has seen some growth and families are beginning to be attracted to morning worship. Despite the church's view that the greatest need in Birtley is for more things in the town for young people to do, (specifically mentioning leisure activities like bowling and cinemas) there was no Youth Club held at the church.

In addition to a pastoral support network which ensured all church members/attenders were visited at least once a year, the church had good contact with the wider community through its monthly magazine 'The Open door'. This, with the Drop In, Coffee and Chat and Parent and Toddler groups as well as participation in 'One World week' themes and national/international issues, gave Birtley quite a high profile as a caring church with strong concern for social issues. Indeed, a successful secular 'Caring for the Carers' programme was held at the church to reinforce this.

Clearly, all these activities are a crucial part of mission, since they show God's love in action, albeit without shouting loudly about it. In terms of evangelism, the church had held evangelistic services in the past and each year, jointly with the other churches in the town, delivered a card with details of Easter services to every household in the town. Non-church people were attracted through baptisms, weddings and funerals, Junior Church celebrations and the Christmas carol service. However, as the church acknowledged, there was little success in drawing these people into the life of the church.

With regard to finance, Birtley spent 34% of its income from 1993-7 on its property, which seems quite low in relative terms, given the refurbishment work carried out in the

last year. The statement 'Our church's resources (money, people, time) are seriously depleted by the maintenance of our buildings' was slightly disagreed with. The church gave away a relatively high 15% to wider mission and other charities and spent a further 2% on local outreach. At £4.49 per member per week, its total spending was one of the highest in the circuit.

Overall, the church had quite a strong programme, which was also balanced between meeting its members' spiritual needs and the social needs of the wider community. The strength of its social programme, mentioned earlier, was reflected in its Mission Statement, which emphasised showing the love of God through the life and service of the church in the community. Its profile in the town was helped greatly by its printed material, which was both widely available and of a high quality, as well as its social activities. Its geographical position, excellent premises and good working relationships with other Christian churches in the town, were all strengths which were recognised. It was also a welcoming church which had an open attitude to worship style and content. The possible development of 1,000 new houses in the town, quite close to the church, could present a significant opportunity for outreach and growth. Despite all these positive aspects, the church struggled to attract younger people and to draw new people into its life, and relied on a fairly narrow base of people to take on its leadership roles. If progress cannot be made in these areas, the elderly nature of the fellowship means further decline is likely.<sup>162</sup>

When people in the town (100 were interviewed) were asked how they thought the church<sup>163</sup> was seen by local people, the most common responses were:

- 'A place for fellowship', 55%
- 'A place to go in time of trouble', 50%
- 'A place for births, marriages and deaths', 48%

The question 'What do you think the church could do (more) to help meet local peoples' needs?' met with the following responses:

- 'Come out more into the community', 70%

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<sup>162</sup> From 1997-9 a relatively high number of deaths meant that the church's membership declined further despite new members being made.

<sup>163</sup> It should be noted that it was not altogether clear to what extent people were referring to 'The church' in general, as opposed to Birtley Methodist Church in particular – this is a difficulty for the whole community survey. Interviewees were aware that the interviewer was from the local Methodist Church, so attempting to isolate these different emphases would have been very difficult.

- 'Put on more things for young people', 48%
- 'Change its image', 40%
- 'Change its attitude' ('less hypocrisy' was specifically mentioned), 35%

### **Perkinsville**

As has been stated, the church only met for Sunday morning worship. After 1991, Junior Church, Mother and Toddler group, and Boy's Brigade all closed, due in each case to leaders being unable to continue and no replacements being available. The recent increased attendance at worship was not reflected in the recorded figures and, even if sustained, would not be expected to provide such leadership for some time. It is dangerous, on the basis of this one example, to postulate a link between the recent growth in attendance at worship and the fact that the church had nothing else organised.<sup>164</sup> However, it may be, given the comment here and elsewhere that it is difficult to find people willing to take on leadership roles and other positions of responsibility in the church<sup>165</sup>, that people find they can come to worship within a small and friendly fellowship, but without being asked to, or feeling obliged to, take on other responsibilities – in other words, church attendance is not so likely to lead to pressure to show greater commitment as it is in many other churches.

The church's pastoral care was informal and no organised outreach or evangelistic activity had taken place in recent years. Some non-church people attended at Christmas/Easter but they had not been drawn into the wider church life.

Although the church spent a fairly average 35% on property, it felt strongly that its resources were being 'seriously depleted by the maintenance of our buildings'. This was possibly a reflection of heavy spending on property in the last year. The premises, which front onto the main road through Perkinsville/Ouston, essentially consist of a large, flexible room (no fixed pews) with a kitchen and small vestry. A ramp provides access for the disabled and the church can use the adjacent RC church's large car park.

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<sup>164</sup> Since 1998, a weekly Wednesday morning drop-in/coffee morning ('The Mustard Seed') has attracted some people from outside the church and one or two have begun coming to worship.

<sup>165</sup> From my own observations, this is a common phenomenon today in voluntary organisations, where those with the ability, experience and energy tend to be increasingly committed at work and have little free time. Richter & Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten*, 1998, pp2-6, describe a general 'retreat from commitment' in many areas of modern society.

The church's total spending, averaged over 5 years, was £4.44/member/week, including giving of 10% and negligible spending on local outreach.

The church acknowledged the need for activities for young people locally, and their lack of younger people in the church. The sense of fellowship in the church, which no doubt helped encourage the congregation's 'regular' attendance, was seen as a major strength which the church would like to build on with more activities on church premises. However, there was also a recognition, albeit somewhat as an afterthought, that church members were involved in other activities mostly held at the community centre, such as WI, ladies' club, exercise groups, craft group, and thereby 'demonstrate their faith'.

Local people in Perkinsville (50 were interviewed) overwhelmingly viewed the church as a place for 'births, deaths and marriages' (80%), followed by a place for fellowship (48%) and somewhere to get help (30%). Worryingly, 28% saw it (clearly referring to the Methodist Church) as an empty building. When asked what the church could do more to help local people, the responses were:

- Come out more into the community, 70%
- Change its image, 40%
- Put on more 'community' events, 38%
- Put on more things for young people, 35%
- Change its attitude to everyday living, 30%

### **Pelton**

Pelton had the smallest membership and worship attendance in the circuit. Its normal evening congregation had only 2 people under 55 years old, but the monthly morning family service attracted about 8 children, mostly girls, and a few young mothers. There was a notable absence of men at Pelton. On other Sunday mornings, the Sunday School had about 15 children, again almost all girls. Also, the leaders were involved in youth work outside the church, at Brownies and as school helpers and governors – perhaps there is a link here with what is, for a very small church, quite a successful Sunday school and family service.

The only weekday activity was the weekly Ladies' group, with an average attendance of 18. Although this included some non-church people, it scored itself only 3 for outreach, was also held.

Pastoral care was informal, but pastoral visitors were identified in the church. No formal outreach activities had been organised, but the church was looking at its worship with a view to outreach, particularly involving the children. Some non-church people attended at Christmas, Easter and for services involving the children, and partial success had been gained in drawing them into the wider life of the church.

The premises, which are central in Pelton village and on its main road, comprise a worship area with fixed pews, pulpit, etc, and a good-sized ancillary room with kitchen and toilet facilities.<sup>166</sup> The church had spent 41% of its total spending on the property, and was in the course of planning a refurbishment scheme but, despite this high level of spending and vandalism problems, only felt slightly that the property was a burden. It had given 12% of its total for missions and other good causes and spent a further 4% on children's work, but a negligible amount on local outreach. At £5.23/member/week, its total spending was the highest in the circuit.

The unity and commitment of this small church was reflected in their determination to continue work with children and to think positively about change and growth. There was a strong sense that the church is there for the local community and needed to be involved in it. However, the emphasis, as generally through the circuit, was upon the church's own premises as the focus for this.

The Pelton community's (50 people interviewed) perception of the church was fairly typical:

- Place for births, deaths and marriages, 75%
- Place for fellowship, 40%
- Somewhere to go in time of trouble, 38%

Also, their suggestions were similar to Perkinsville:

- Come out more into the community, 60%
- Do more things for young people, 50%
- Organise more community events, 32%

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<sup>166</sup> This ancillary room was used by the local Church of England for a monthly ladies' meeting, entirely separate from the Methodist group.

## West Pelton

Despite the considerable decline in its membership over the 10 years, and the fact that its congregation was a gathered one (at least half came from outside West Pelton itself) and overwhelmingly middle-aged/elderly, West Pelton church had a variety of groups and activities. A monthly ladies' circle held at the church on a weekday evening attracted about 25 ladies, of which about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> were from outside the church – thus its score of 6 for outreach, as well as 6 for fellowship. In contrast, a weekly fellowship group met in peoples' homes and attracted church people only, thus scoring 10 for fellowship only. Also meeting off church premises, in Beamish Club, was the bi-monthly men's fellowship, jointly with the CofE, drawing in about 14 people, all from within the church, and scoring 8 for fellowship and 5 for outreach.

The church also ran a youth club for children up to age 11, weekly after school, where about 20 youngsters attended. This scored 10 for meeting social needs, quite reasonably, but also 10 for outreach despite the lack of any spiritual content. A children's holiday club had been run on occasions in the past, but insufficient leadership support prevented this becoming a regular event.

St Paul's CofE in the village also ran an outdoor activities group at the church, weekly during the winter, where about 16 came. This was part of the Anglican Outdoor Activities Centre in West Pelton. The outreach potential of this was reflected in an outreach score of 10. There was also a weekly line dancing group for about 20 people, run by someone from outside the church on a commercial basis, and this had a purely social focus.

The church had 9 pastoral visitors who tried to visit the members on their list, plus 1 person from the community roll, once every 3 months.

There was close co-operation with the Anglican Church in West Pelton, indeed a few years ago the two churches only failed to sign a Covenant because of insufficient support in the Methodist Church<sup>167</sup>. Cards had been delivered jointly in the village at both Christmas and Easter. In worship, united 'Outreach services' had been held in the last 2 years, firstly in the local school and more recently in the Methodist Church;

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<sup>167</sup> Although the majority were in support, the two-thirds majority needed was not forthcoming. To a certain extent, the church still bears the scars from this, ultimately unsuccessful, process.

however, these were not successful in drawing in new people. A joint Lay Witness weekend had been held to encourage the spiritual life of the church. Members of the 2 churches also went out together for social activities such as meals. Overall, although various 'special services' attracted people from the fringe of the church, they remained on the fringe.

The church premises are prominently located on the main road through West Pelton, central to West Pelton/High Handenhold. As well as a large sanctuary, with fixed pews and pulpit, it has a large hall and good ancillary rooms, including kitchen/toilets. 34% of the church's expenditure had gone on the property, reflected in a feeling that this was 'slightly' a burden. An impressive 16% had been given for wider mission and other charitable causes, plus 1% for local outreach. The children's work was self-funding. Total spending was at £4.42/member/week.

The church's strengths were its fellowship, including meeting in peoples' homes, its good relations with the Anglicans and its premises. A committed core of people had ensured that various outreach efforts were made over the years, some with young people. However, its desires for further efforts with young people had been thwarted by a lack of young members to take on leadership roles – one young woman ran both the youth club and Junior Church. These difficulties were reflected in its identification of maintenance as its first purpose, and outreach its second.

Local people in West Pelton/High Handenhold (50 interviewed), like most within the circuit's area, identified the church as:

- a place for births, deaths and marriages, 70%
- a place to go in time of trouble, 15%
- a place of fellowship, 15%

Again, their main 'recommendations' for the church were:

- 'Come out more into the community', 40%
- 'Change your old-fashioned image', 30%
- 'Put on events for young people', 30%

## **Chester-le-Street**

As would be expected of such a large church, there were a large number of groups meeting and activities taking place on the premises during the week. **Adult** groups meeting **at the church** were as follows:

- Weekly:**
- Women's Fellowship - Monday afternoon, attendance 50-60 (of which (a worship service) approx 20 are not church members/attenders).
  - Prayer cell - Saturday morning, 3.
  - Choir - Thursday evening, 40.
  - Drama group - Monday evening, 15.
  - Thursday lunch - Lunch club, 40-50 (1- 2 non-church)
  - Badminton - Monday evening, 7.
- Fortnightly:**
- Christian Endeavour - Tuesday evening, 25 (1 non-church)
  - Ladies' Forum - Wednesday evening, 50-55 (10 non-church)
  - Communion Service - Friday morning, 20-25
- Monthly:**
- Men's meeting - Wednesday evening, 18 (occasional outside visits)

There was also a Banner group (about 6 people) which met intermittently for about 6 weeks when a new banner was needed.

**Children/young people's activities at the church** during the week were:

- Daily:** Playgroup (3-4 yr-olds) – Weekday mornings, attendance 18
- Weekly:** Mothers & toddlers (0-4yrs) - Wednesday afternoons, 27  
(+27adults, of which 22 non-church)
- Brownies and Guides - Friday evenings, 57
  - Boy's Brigade - Tuesday evenings, 50+
  - Girl's Brigade - Wednesday evenings, 40
  - Youth Club (open) - Thursday evenings, 20

Despite the wide variety of groups and activities for children during the week, where the numbers attending had held up well over the 10 years, numbers coming to Junior Church had continued to decline. Also, the church itself recognised that the numbers of infant baptisms at the church (average 32/year over the last 10 years) was not reflected in a strong primary (younger) department of Junior Church.

The church also has coffee mornings every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, which attracts a large number of shoppers from the adjacent market-place. In addition, a wide

variety of occasional activities take place at the church, from concerts and plays to sales and lunches and meetings for groups outside the church. The National Blood Transfusion Service uses the premises for blood donating sessions.

Also, meeting **in homes** were a weekly Bible study group (attend 8), a fortnightly fellowship group (12) and a fortnightly youth fellowship (12). All these catered for church people.<sup>168</sup>

As at Birtley, the scores given by the groups did not in all cases reflect the potential of the situation, particularly for outreach. Thus, the choir, which was entirely a church choir, scored itself 10 for outreach - possibly in the hope of a spiritual impact on others from their excellent performances outside worship services. Similarly with the drama group, scoring 8. For these groups, it was quality of performance which was important and they clearly had a rather low understanding of mission and outreach. The parent and toddler group, on the other hand, scored itself 3 for outreach, yet attracted mainly non-church people. The Thursday lunch which, unlike Birtley, attracted few non-church people, scored itself zero for outreach, probably an accurate assessment. Scores given for the youth activities varied greatly, but generally reflected a sense that they were mainly meeting a social need.

Overall, the premises were visited on a fairly regular basis by a large number of people from outside the church but, as at Birtley, little attempt was made to take advantage of this for outreach – the church themselves recognised this as an ‘opportunity’. Of course, in many of these activities, the church was showing its love for others which is a form of outreach, indeed, one which Jesus himself pioneered, although the love of Christ which, one hopes, was driving them was not made explicit. However, the strong musical tradition of the church attracted people from outside the church to concerts and performances which generally had a strong spiritual element, as well as being very professionally done.

The church was well-organised with respect to pastoral visiting, with a total of 42 visitors ensuring that both members and those on the community roll were visited every month, although such a ‘visit’ could include merely delivering the church monthly

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<sup>168</sup> In late 1999, a further 3 new ‘home groups’ began meeting for Bible study, prayer and fellowship, involving about 30 people in total.

newsletter 'Contact'. There was also a book in the church in which people could enter prayer requests – although this was monitored for visiting purposes it was little used.<sup>169</sup>

As well as the monthly newsletter, other Christian literature had been delivered in the town and evangelistic door-to-door visiting tried at times. A 'Stewardship Campaign' was held, where people on the church's community roll were challenged and encouraged to commit themselves to specific responsibilities in the church; this met with significant success. However, even a church this size commented on the difficulty it has in general in finding new people to take positions of responsibility.

The church ran its first 'Alpha' course in 1997, which was done on church premises with meal and video. The course was attended by about 30 church members/regular attenders (34 in total, average attendance 28), the nucleus coming from the church's Bible Study group which closed down while it was taking place. The minister led the course and those attending experienced spiritual growth, some to a considerable extent, through it. The 'Awayday' on the Holy Spirit was held jointly with the Anglican Parish Church. A further course, sadly, attracted little interest from the church and none from outside.

On Good Friday the churches in the town had a 'Walk of Witness' with leaflet distribution to passers-by, followed by an open-air act of worship. Various services attracted people from the 'fringe' or outside the church – the monthly family/parade service, monthly baptisms, fortnightly Friday Communion services, at Christmas and occasional youth services, and these were moderately successful in drawing people into the life of the church. It should be noted, however, that the maximum capacity of the church for worship is only 280, which is often almost filled for services such as monthly family worship.<sup>170</sup> Because of this, it had been suggested in the past that the church

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<sup>169</sup> In the summer of 1999 the church had a stall on Chester-le-Street market, where as well as selling Christian books and giving tracts etc away, people were encouraged to write down prayers and put them in a box and these were offered up in services and prayed over in the prayer meeting. This practice continued over the winter without the market stall, and has encouraged more prayer requests to come forward.

<sup>170</sup> A 'full' church is not necessarily one where every single seat is taken. Horsley, *Planting New Congregations*, 1994, p11, quotes church growth research which 'consistently shows that a church which is more than 80% full at its principal service has reached a level of attendance which discourages new people from joining'.

should plant a daughter church on the new estate, but in reality there was little enthusiasm for this from the church leadership.<sup>171</sup>

Notwithstanding limitations of space, particularly in the worship area, the church premises are ideally-situated, well-equipped and contain a wide range of rooms (although many are upstairs and inaccessible to the disabled). Despite the frequency of use of the premises, property costs were only 20% of the church's expenditure, a smaller proportion even than the compact, modern church at Lumley. Thus, the statement suggesting that maintaining the property is seriously depleting the church's resources was neither agreed nor disagreed with – the church had a realistic, pragmatic attitude to its property expenditure. A relatively low 7% of total spending was given away and 1% spent on local outreach. Children's work was self-funding. The church's large membership, relative to attendance, was reflected in the high proportion of spending going to the circuit assessment (67%) and also no doubt partly explains why the total spending figure of £3.16/member/week was the lowest in the circuit.

Overall, as would be expected with a church of this size, there was a wealth of activity and talent here. Particular efforts were made to try to ensure quality worship was achieved and maintained, especially in the mornings, and both the musical tradition of the church and its work with young people were recognised strengths. Weekday meetings with spiritual input were, however, very much biased towards women. The general strength of Christian churches in the town is a positive thing and presents further opportunities.<sup>172</sup> There is significant further potential for outreach within existing programmes and activities on Methodist Church premises. It should be pointed out, though, that the restricted size of the sanctuary is a major constraint on growth in the church and even prevents more than 70% of the church's existing members meeting together for worship. Also, there were very few home-based groups and activities and this was reflected in the strong identification of the Church as a 'place' in its Mission Statement, rather than a community of people.

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<sup>171</sup> In 1999 a new Sunday morning service was started, meeting at 8.45am, with a more contemporary style, led by the church's own worship group. This has attracted around 40 worshippers, generally younger than the other congregations.

<sup>172</sup> Contrary to what might be thought, strong churches tend not to compete with each other, but to reinforce each other's efforts within a locality – perhaps it is a result of the 'spiritual atmosphere' created.

200 people in the local community were interviewed about the church, and in considering the responses the relative strength of Anglican and RC churches in the town, plus the recent history of Anglican church planting, needs to be borne in mind.

Views expressed of the church were as follows:

- Place for births, marriages and deaths, 75%
- Somewhere to go in time of trouble, 68%
- Place of worship, 49%
- Place for fellowship, 45%
- Coffee mornings, 40%
- Entertainment (concerts, plays, recitals), 25%<sup>173</sup>
- To learn about 'religion', 10%

Their suggestions for the church were as follows:

- Come out more into the local community, 70%
- More visiting (of hospitals, old peoples' homes, private houses), 55%
- Change its 'old fashioned' image, 40%
- 'Less hypocrisy – practise what it preaches', 30%
- More events for young people, 25%
- More guide-lines on moral issues, 12%
- Make worship more relevant to needs and attitudes of local community, 11%

### **Lumley**

Much of the activity of the church outside Sunday worship was focussed on children and young people. The Junior Church met after Sunday morning worship in 1998 but since completion of an extension at the end of that year has met at the same time. There was a JAM ('Jesus and me') Club for 5-11 year-olds on Friday evenings, a 'Rock Solid' club<sup>174</sup> for 11-14 year-olds on Thursday evenings and a youth fellowship on Sunday evenings. These attracted widely fluctuating numbers, averaging roughly at 25, 15 and 10 respectively. The former two groups deliberately set out to attract children from families outside the church, although the JAM club did also have children from church families. Therefore, the JAM club and Rock Solid were strongly outreach-oriented,

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<sup>173</sup> Clearly, people must have been focussing to a considerable extent on the Methodist Church, rather than the church in general, since other churches in the town are not noted for either coffee mornings or entertainment.

<sup>174</sup> This follows a programme devised by Youth for Christ and used by various similar clubs.

whereas youth fellowship was primarily geared towards fellowship, with outreach secondary. These three groups, plus Junior Church, already involved 12 church members, plus 5 adherents, regularly in leadership – a significant proportion of the church, given that it intended to expand its work with children and young people once the extension was completed.<sup>175</sup> Also involving children, a ‘Tots Time’ met on Wednesday afternoons. On average, 2 church members and about 4 others brought their babies and toddlers along. There was no overt outreach at this group.

The only other group which met weekly at the church was the brass band, on Tuesday and most Sunday evenings. About 20 people, mostly middle-aged to older men but also some young girls who were learning to play instruments, met to practise for concerts and church services (about 6 times a year now). The band, of which about one-third were church members, always included a brief act of devotion in their practices as well as their concerts; thus, their score of 10 for fellowship and 8 for outreach do not seem unreasonable.

The church also had a worship group which led worship on two Sunday evenings a month and practised at the church either Sunday afternoons or Friday evenings. It comprised 11 people, all members or committed adherents. The group also led worship occasionally at other churches in the area. This was a ‘modern’ style of worship, with new songs, modern instruments and the use of an overhead projector rather than hymn-books and the ‘planned’ preacher set the theme rather than the detailed content of the worship, which was led by the group’s trained worship leader. This format was disliked by some in the church and worship had been a divisive issue in the congregation in recent years.<sup>176</sup> A monthly Saturday evening ‘Celebration Service’ had begun with this ‘new’ format, plus the opportunity for ministry; whilst this attracted people from other churches in the area, including a few from other churches in the circuit, relatively few from Lumley, apart from the worship group itself, came.

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<sup>175</sup> Rock Solid had to cease in summer 1998 when youngsters lost interest and some leaders went away to college. It was not until early 2000 that a youth club, utilising the new extension, was able to be run.

<sup>176</sup> Some members deliberately did not attend the ‘new’ form of worship whereas a few use it as an excuse for not attending at all. Genuine issues did exist, however, and were addressed, for instance by blurring the distinction between ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ services. 2 years on, worship is not so divisive an issue in the church.

A prayer breakfast met monthly at the church on Saturday mornings (attendance about 8) and prayer walking<sup>177</sup> was carried out in the village during summer months.

There were two Bible study/fellowship groups which met weekly in members' homes, each with about 5 attending. Both only scored themselves for fellowship, although one did 'hope that the product of the study would be to improve personal evangelism and attention to social needs'. Further home-based Bible study groups had just started as a follow-up to an Alpha course.

This Alpha course was led by myself and aimed at church members/regular attenders, 22 of whom came (average attendance 20) and met on church premises (except for the Holy Spirit awayday, held at Lanchester Methodist Church) with meal and video. A small group (3) of 11-year-olds were also taken through 'Youth Alpha'. Feedback responses indicated that those who came gained through spiritual growth and increased fellowship/friendship over the shared meal; 2 attenders also came into membership.<sup>178</sup>

Lumley had 9 pastoral visitors who aimed to visit each member and adherent on their list (about 7 separate addresses per visitor) every 3 months, more in the case of illness, bereavement, etc. However, there was an awareness of training needs in this area, and that the pastoral needs of the congregation were not always consistently met.

In 1995 a 'Next Steps' Stewardship campaign was held, which encouraged several people on the fringe of the church to offer their gifts for use in the church; however, in the 2 years following many of these offers failed to materialise, or perhaps to be properly followed through. In 1997 a children's weekend, led by a national worship leader/composer, was held to boost the work with youngsters.

The church attracted significant numbers of people from outside the church for baptism services (average about 8 services/year). Also, parents of Junior Church members, and others, attended services where the children took part, such as Mothering Sunday, Junior Church anniversary, Harvest, Christmas; some of these were morning Family

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<sup>177</sup> Walking around a neighbourhood in pairs or small groups, praying for the area and the people who live there.

<sup>178</sup> Further courses were run later in 1998, held in homes. Following these, another 3 church attenders came into membership.

Services. Although there had been little success in drawing these people further into the life of the church, it was hoped that this would be more likely to happen when morning worship was held at the same time as Junior Church.<sup>179</sup>

The church premises initially comprised the sanctuary together with a foyer area, kitchen and toilets; the extension has since added a large hall and smaller meeting rooms. Property costs were only 21% of total expenditure and, reflecting the age of the building, the suggestion that its maintenance is seriously depleting the church's resources was strongly disagreed with. Lumley gave away 15% of its expenditure but the only expenditure identified as local outreach was for the 1995 Stewardship campaign. Its total expenditure of £3.77/member/week was the second lowest in the circuit.

For a relatively small church, Lumley had an ambitious programme, particularly with children and young people. The forthcoming extension has helped facilitate this, although difficulties in finding enough leaders with the ability, time and commitment to run everything planned, especially work with children and young people, has been a constraint. Problems in the areas of pastoral care and providing opportunities for spiritual growth outside worship services were being addressed, to ensure a less premises-focused approach.<sup>180</sup> The church's emphasis on evangelism, as opposed to social action, is hopefully being balanced.

The more overtly evangelistic stance of Lumley church was perhaps reflected in the perception of the local community, where the 50 people interviewed saw it as:

- a place of fellowship, 70%
- a place of worship, 40%
- somewhere to go in time of trouble, 35%
- a place for births, deaths, marriages, 33%

However, in terms of their suggestions for the church's future activities, local people in Lumley were no different to anywhere else in the circuit – top priority again was 'To come out more into the community' (70%).

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<sup>179</sup> Since this change, attendance at morning worship has increased, but not as a result of attracting Junior Church parents.

<sup>180</sup> Since September 1999, this has been achieved largely through the creation of 4 home groups, established along 'cell group' lines.

Others were:

- less hypocrisy, 43%
- improve its image, 38%
- more things for young people, 30%

## **MISMATCHES AND SHORTFALLS**

Most obviously, and least surprisingly, there was a considerable mismatch between the age-profiles of the various communities of the circuit and those of the churches which sought to serve them. The degree of mismatch varied from church to church, but in all the churches young adults were very under-represented, whilst middle-aged to older people, particularly women aged 55-74, were over-represented.

Children and young people were better represented in some than others, but were generally fewer than in the community at large. Most churches in the circuit recognised the importance of work with children and young people and for both Lumley and CLS this represented a large proportion of their activities. Many people interviewed in the community survey expressed the view that churches should organise more events and activities for youth, possibly because they as a community had washed their hands of them and were looking to the churches to solve the problem of disaffected youth.

Even those churches with relatively strong Junior Churches/youth groups had not included young people to any significant extent in decision-making bodies. There were no church stewards under the age of 35 in any churches and, whilst CLS had 2 young people (age 16 and 18) on its Church Council, these were both co-opted rather than elected and the total number on this body was 40.

The disparity in the male/female split was equally obvious, particularly in the smaller churches. Again, as with the age profiles, this is typical not only of British Methodism but of all traditional denominations in this country. However, the dominance of females in church membership and congregations in the CLS Circuit was not reflected in the leadership of the churches. Only at Pelton were the majority of church stewards women and at both Perkinsville and West Pelton, where women were in the clear majority in the church, all the stewards were men.

The Census data revealed an area with wide variations in the socio-economic structure of the population. Unfortunately, the wards with the highest levels of deprivation (Chester West and Pelton Fell) had no Christian church within them since the CofE closed their church plant at Bullion Lane. Any comment on the socio-economic composition of Methodist churches in the circuit has to rely on my subjective observation rather than scientific analysis, but I would think that the churches generally were more ‘middle-class’<sup>181</sup> than the communities they represented; this was particularly true of church leadership, of younger people and at CLS church. This was not the situation at Lumley, however, where out of 51 households with church members, 14 (27%) lived in local authority houses and a further 4 in former LA houses; this was more than the wider community (19%) and due mainly to the presence of a large working-class family in the church.

Perhaps the most significant ‘mismatch’ between church and community was in the area of perception – the image the community had of the church. Throughout the area, peoples’ strongest desire for the church was ‘to come out more into the community’, which indicated to me a perception of the church as a ‘holy huddle’ which was rather inward-looking and saw itself as separate from the community around it. Whether this was a fair perception or not matters less than the fact that it existed and clearly represented a barrier to the churches’ mission. The strong focus of most churches on their own premises would tend to confirm this perception. Also significant was the fact that few connections were made in answering the questionnaires between mission and the everyday lives of church people – this leads directly to the next section.

### **MISSION PRIORITIES – WHERE THE CHURCHES WERE GOING**

From both the questionnaires and the discussions I had with the churches over my report, it was clear that in general there was an acceptance that ‘something must be done’.<sup>182</sup> Therefore, the principle that mission must have a priority in the life of both the churches and the circuit did not need to be ‘sold’. In particular, people would have

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<sup>181</sup> I use ‘middle-class’ and ‘working-class’ as shorthand, acknowledging that such terms have their complications and limitations today.

<sup>182</sup> The only exception to this was at CLS, where at a meeting of the Church council called to discuss my report there seemed an element of complacency centred on the proposition that ‘We are a large church, so we don’t need to worry and it’s not surprising that a smaller proportion of our membership attends worship’. Despite this, a number of significant new initiatives, elaborated earlier, have since started.

loved to see more young people and young adults in their churches, although the extent to which they were prepared to change, for instance worship styles, to encourage this was questionable. Also, I detected a wide range of motives for mission from different people at the various meetings, including:

- A genuine desire to see people converted into the Christian faith for their own sakes – this was only clearly articulated at Lumley.
- A desire to make a difference in the local community by drawing (young) people into the life of faith through the church – this was most clearly expressed at Birtley.
- To ensure the survival of the church in the future – this was quite widely expressed.
- To see the church premises used more – Perkinsville particularly.
- To meet peoples' non-spiritual needs – Pelton and Lumley.

I shall now look at each church's Mission Statement, or equivalent, in turn together with their expressed priorities and comment on these with respect to their activities. In general, I would comment that 'Mission Statement' is often rather a misnomer, both in style and content – some were more a long-winded expression of who/what the particular church was. The 3 churches with formal Mission Statements had arrived at them by discussion in their leadership teams (mostly Church Stewards) and adoption by Church Councils.

### **Birtley**

Their lengthy Mission Statement was:

*As a people within the tradition of the Methodist Church, we are called by God to witness, together with those of other traditions, to the universal Love of God in Christ.*

*As Disciples of Christ we are called to display His Love in our lives and the Life of the Church Family and to proclaim the Good News of Our Saviour in word and deed, so that by the Power of the Holy Spirit others may find the Truth of the love of Our Father in their lives.*

*This calling and mission is to be worked out in our Life and example to others, in our Service to the Community in which we live, in our welcome and encouragement to the people of all ages, in our Prayers and support within and for this community, the peoples of the World and the Church universal.*

Their 3 priorities for the next 5 years were:

1. *Spiritual and Biblical growth opportunities for all.*
2. *The introduction of 'new families' to the church.*

3. *To take the opportunity that the 'Birtley Methodist Church Centenary Celebrations' offer by way of an introduction of what the church can offer and provide for the individual and the family.*

Overall, Birtley's Mission Statement was a quite comprehensive and refreshingly Trinitarian expression of how the church saw its calling, with a strong sense of church as people rather than place. Within it, an emphasis on the universal love of God in Christ, reference to the need to proclaim the Good News in 'word and deed' and to 'Service to the Community' all suggested an incarnational and holistic (ie. encompassing social need/action as well as evangelism) approach to mission which accorded well with the church's caring profile and the strength of its social programme. However, such an incarnational approach would also seem to point to a less premises-centred programme than was indicated both by Birtley's actual activities and its 3 priorities.

The mention of 'other traditions' in their very first sentence reflected an openness to ecumenical activities which was reflected in their current programme if not their 3 priorities.

### **Perkinsville**

This church did not have a formal Mission Statement, but saw its main purpose as '*providing an opportunity for non-conformist worship*'. This was a very strong indicator of church as a place and an institution. As they admitted, the only thing they were doing to fulfil this purpose is Sunday worship, although they would like to have had more church-based activities as well as community 'meetings' on the premises. If anything, this indicated something of a 'remnant' theology which saw its purpose as survival, a lesser goal even than maintenance. There seemed here little recognition of the possibility of mission, let alone its importance. However, since the questionnaire was completed a small but sustained increase in attendance at worship seems to have engendered a more optimistic spirit which recognises the strength and potential of a close-knit fellowship with a good worship 'atmosphere'.

## **Pelton**

This church's Mission Statement was expressed as 'aims':

*To continue to provide and maintain a place of worship for all local people. The most effective methods are to continue to organise church activities which include the local populace as often as possible.*

Their 3 priorities were:

- 1 *Increased membership*
- 2 *Improving/updating premises*
- 3 *Ensuring more involvement in the community*

Again, maintenance rather than mission together with a strongly place-centred concept of church stood out here. Whilst maintenance was clearly the church's first concern, there was also a recognition of the need to engage with the local community, including in 3 above the need for church people to be involved **in** the community, rather than merely expecting the community to come to the church. This was reflected to some extent in the church's activities, particularly with respect to children and the way church members were involved in local schools. Also, the church hoped to use the premises for a socially-based activity such as clothes exchange.<sup>183</sup> Neither in its written response nor in talking to the Church Council did I detect any underpinning theological basis for the church's approach.

## **West Pelton**

West Pelton did not have a formal Mission Statement, but saw its main purpose as:

*Maintain a Christian presence in the village, and provide a place of worship. To reach out into the community and care for those in the wider world.*

It felt that the activities which attracted people from the wider community (line dancing, ladies' circle) and its ecumenical links helped to achieve this, but felt it needed also to 'try and define the heart of the community' and 'find inroads into the community'. It also expressed the need to do more for younger people, but accepted that outside help was needed for this.

This church's primary purpose (ie the one it mentions first) sounded very much like that of Perkinsville – survival. Problems with vandalism had led to something of a siege

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<sup>183</sup> This has been incorporated into a weekly morning 'Pop-in'.

mentality, expressed in the erection of a formidable metal fence around the car park, and again a 'remnant' theology. However, despite this they had not lost the desire to reach out into the community and they had not yet given up on young people.<sup>184</sup> This was reflected in their actual activities, where one younger woman struggled on with children's and youth work. Their acceptance of the need for assistance with this, and their open and positive approach to ecumenical relations, were positive indicators of a co-operative spirit and showed potential for developing the church's mission in the community.<sup>185</sup>

In their answer to the final question of the questionnaire, 'What things do you need to stop doing?' they accepted their need to '*Let go of the past*'. If they took this seriously, it would mean a fairly dramatic change since this was a very traditional Methodist Church, especially in its worship.

### **Chester-le-Street**

Their Mission statement was as follows:

*We believe that our Church must be a place where God is at the centre, where the Bible and prayer are considered to be crucial, and where all decisions and actions are based on God's will. Our Church should be a place where the way of Jesus is taught, learnt and followed, and where there is an expectation that through the Holy Spirit, lives will be touched and change will take place.*

The church sought to implement this in 3 areas of church life, which it also saw as its 3, equally important, objectives:

- *Worship*, with emphasis on *creativity, combining best of old and new, using gifts and talents available, and making the Christian message relevant.*
- *Fellowship*, stressing *Christian community where all gatherings have a Christian flavour.*
- *Outreach*, specifically mentioning *prayer and financial support for outside organisations and charities, personal evangelism and organised mission in the local*

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<sup>184</sup> At the meeting which discussed my report, it was agreed to pursue joint youth work with the Anglican church and their 'outdoor activities centre'.

<sup>185</sup> By early 2000, however, relations with the Church of England had rather deteriorated. The Junior Church had shown unexpected and dramatic increase, and a 'prayer box' initiative in local shops had brought the church and village closer.

*community, and encouraging church people to be active in community life so that social evils and injustice can be challenged.*

The Mission Statement was admirably God-centred and the reference to expectation that the Holy Spirit will touch and change lives would seem to indicate a very positive approach to mission and growth. However, whilst the church made serious attempts, which achieved a degree of success, to ensure quality in worship, especially in morning services, the limited size of the sanctuary indicates a lack of real expectation that new people would be attracted in significant numbers. Also, the fact that only 3 people out of a membership of 400 attended the church's prayer meeting would suggest a definite reluctance to put any effort into ensuring the expectation was realised.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, the suggestion that a 'new congregation' could be planted in the church, possibly by a late, youth-oriented service, met with a distinctly lukewarm response at the Church Council meeting.

The emphasis on church as a place, set out clearly twice in the Mission Statement, was strongly confirmed. Firstly, it was only in the second half of the section on outreach that any reference to the community outside church premises was made. Secondly, the church's activity programme, as set out previously, was very strongly premises-oriented. Also, it was clear from Church Council meetings that what enthused most church members were property matters and issues connected with the church's musical activities. There was, on the other hand, a concern for young people and a desire to attract more younger adults and children into the church, but that would be outweighed if it meant any significant changes in the church's life, especially its worship.<sup>187</sup>

Overall, CLS seemed a fairly typical (for Methodism) large town church – a depth and breadth of talents and gifts and a variety of activities enjoyed by significant numbers of people. However, the potential for mission this generated was not realised because of a rather complacent, inward-looking attitude which saw church as place rather than people and which did much less to engage with the local community than its Mission Statement would indicate. In terms of theology, the church was seen primarily as an

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<sup>186</sup> Interestingly, in 1999 the new service and prayer stall initiatives were accompanied by an increase in attendance at the prayer meeting from 3 to about 8.

<sup>187</sup> The Church's Senior Steward commented that if the new early morning service resulted in decreasing attendance at the 'main' morning service, it would have to be reviewed.

institution within a building, rather than a living community of people; the understanding of mission, of teaching and following Jesus and the life-changing power of the Spirit were all there and articulated, but little was done to put that understanding into practice.

### **Lumley**

The situation at Lumley was more complex. In 1996, the church adopted the following as a draft Mission Statement:

*We wish to be known as a worshipping community of believers and seekers growing together in a shared experience of God's love.*

This was then developed further:

*We wish to see that love realised in us, and in a constantly growing number of others, as they are welcomed into fellowship, by:*

- *The thankful way we worship and its constant effect on the way we live.*
- *The high priority given to prayer, teaching and fellowship to effect the way we live.*
- *The way we care for, respect and encourage each other in the gifts we have.*
- *The way all these things are an effective witness to the village and beyond.*
- *The way we organise our resources – people, talents, premises, equipment and finances – for service in the church and circuit and mission outside it.*

Clearly, there were many good things in this statement, especially the emphasis on church as a 'community of believers and seekers' and the specific reference to growth. Its overall thrust was clearly spiritual growth within the church and, secondarily, numerical growth by drawing others in. Whilst there was little direct theological underpinning (no reference to Christ or the Spirit, for instance), the linkages between worship, fellowship, ethics ('the way we live') and effective witness were clearly articulated.<sup>188</sup> The church's programme to a large extent reflected this statement, with its emphasis on evangelism in worship, prayer and the work with children.

However, I felt the Mission Statement itself was very inward-looking and that overall there was too little direct engagement with the community, both in the Mission Statement and the church's programme. Also, in my view both reflected a less than

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<sup>188</sup> It is probably true to say that a history of rather public arguments in the church, plus at least two difficult marriage breakdowns, had led to some cynicism in the village towards the church and a recognition in the church that these things damaged the effectiveness of its witness.

holistic approach to mission, with little emphasis on the non-spiritual needs of the village. In addition, I felt a 'Mission Statement' needs to be short and with a clearly articulated objective. Therefore, at my instigation but without any resistance, the church adopted the following Mission Statement at my first Church Council meeting: *To encourage each other and all the people of Great Lumley to walk in the way of Christ.*<sup>189</sup>

This statement is being developed further through a '5-year plan'. The church leadership identified the following 3 priorities for the questionnaire:

- 1 *Improve pastoral care* (This encompassed non-members as well as members).
- 2 *Get worship right.*
- 3 *Be more outward-looking.*

Alpha courses in homes, development of cell groups, renewed commitment to prayer, using the new extension for different purposes, including youth work and drop-in for disabled are all helping to implement a holistic approach to mission. Also, participation in a Credit Union for the area and leading a local campaign against drugs are helping to make real a church 'slogan' which one of the stewards invented and which appears on our notices: *At the heart of the village, with a heart for the village.*

### **General comments and conclusions**

Only Birtley and Chester-le-Street churches provided a clearly articulated theological context for their Mission Statements or statements of priorities and this was partly a reflection of the fact that their statements were a good deal longer than the others. Birtley's was coherent, Trinitarian and, to a large extent, consistent with their programme. Chester-le-Street referred to the centrality of God, the way of Jesus and the change brought by the Holy Spirit, but this related to the church as building and institution, rather than as community, which rather undermined its theological coherence. Lumley's theological context was more implied than stated, but was worked through in its programme. If there was a theological context for mission in the other three churches, it was largely a 'remnant' theology, with maintenance, or even, survival, as the prime objective.

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<sup>189</sup> I readily accept that this was hardly a collaborative approach!

Most churches specifically referred to their ‘community’ and, to varying degrees, their desire to reach out and be involved with or serve that community. However, their largely church premises-centred programmes showed that they had not been able to clearly identify ways of doing this – indeed, West Pelton gave this away by saying they would like to ‘*find inroads into the community*’. Chester-le-Street would ‘*encourage church people to be active in community life*’ but have not put into place any programme to help this happen or support for those who may be so motivated.

This deficiency is related to a general lack in the circuit of programmes or activities which helped people make connections between their faith and their daily lives. The ‘Christian Endeavour’ groups, active still at Birtley and Chester-le-Street, were originally intended, largely, to fulfil this function, but now are more generally devotional in content.<sup>190</sup> In particular, the elderly nature of most congregations (this is even more accentuated in the Christian Endeavour groups) does not encourage programmes which help Christians relate their faith to their working lives, although this is probably increasingly important for those in work. Overall, the approach to church life and mission in the circuit tended to reflect a compartmentalised view of Christian life between the sacred and the secular which is clearly un-Biblical<sup>191</sup> and unhelpful to the *missio Dei*.<sup>192</sup>

For the most part in the circuit there was a recognition of the need to be engaged in mission, even if that was merely to ensure the local church’s survival. However, that mission imperative is not generally seen in a theological context - the church as the primary instrument of the *missio Dei*, partners in God’s Kingdom-building enterprise - or in a wider sociological context, changing the values and institutions of society at large. Furthermore, for most churches mission was not sufficiently important for a mission strategy to have been clearly set out, let alone implemented. This supports the views of Frost, whose statement that ‘Mission is the core activity of the church’s business, but often the churches don’t have a strategy for doing it’ is supported by Bible

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<sup>190</sup> Accepting this, Birtley’s Christian Endeavour group ceases in 2000.

<sup>191</sup> The Old Testament prophets, notably Amos and Isaiah, railed at those whose everyday values and ethics were at variance with their religious observance. In Jesus, of course, the sacred and the secular became a seamless whole.

<sup>192</sup> I am not saying that individuals do not put their faith into practice in their daily lives, because I know many who do just that, but rather that local churches do not provide the infrastructure of support to help them do it.

Society research which concluded that only one-third of a representative sample of 400 Protestant ministers were 'mission-orientated'.<sup>193</sup>

### **APPROACHES TO MISSION – THREE IDEAL TYPES**

Finally, reflecting upon the different priorities and approaches of the six churches in the Chester-le-Street circuit, I would tentatively suggest an ideal typology of churches. These ideal types are defined according to their attitude towards themselves, attitude towards God, and, crucially, their attitude towards their local community and the wider world. Such attitudes are rarely clearly articulated, but can be revealed in various ways through such as the style of worship, the 'feel' of the church, particularly in its welcome and the physical building itself. Taken together, these attitudes provide the framework for a church's approach to mission. No one church in the Chester-le-Street Circuit fell wholly or exclusively within one of these types, but such a typology may help understand a local church's approach to mission and how that could be changed or developed.

#### **The Remnant Church**

This is typified by an attitude towards itself which simply sees the continued existence of the local church as its priority. At its most extreme, it looks for nothing more than survival during the life-time of the church's current members – well expressed to me on one occasion by the comment from an (elderly) lady: 'I just hope the church is still here for my funeral'.<sup>194</sup> Such an attitude may well have its roots in a history of decline, often accompanied by seemingly endless problems of building decay and vandalism, an elderly membership, a lack of young adults and diminishing (if any) numbers of children. These circumstances can all produce an attitude of despair which sees no long-term hope for the church. Coupled with this, the remnant church is likely to see its past history in an unrealistically positive light, and this will be reflected in a reluctance to depart from old hymns and a general adherence to an old-fashioned style of worship and spirituality.

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<sup>193</sup> Frost, *Which way for the Church?* pp63-4.

<sup>194</sup> This was a church in the Bishop Auckland circuit; unsurprisingly, the church is now closed!

With regard to the local community, the ideal type remnant church would see this as hostile and seek to protect itself from them, physically by fences, locks and heavy window grilles and spiritually by failing to provide worship or other activities which local people are likely to have any interest in. Notice boards will be poorly maintained and provide out-of-date information. Children, categorised as noisy and difficult, are more to be discouraged than welcomed. Here, the church sees itself as distinct from the local community, but in a negative sense – its Christian values have, as far as the church members are concerned, been rejected by the community.

In these attitudes, the remnant church exhibits some (but by no means all) of the characteristics of Wilson's sects<sup>195</sup>. In particular, Wilson notes the sect's self-conception as an 'elect, gathered remnant' and which is 'hostile or indifferent to secular society' (p21). With regard to Wilson's classification of sects, none really fits my idealised remnant church, although the 'Introversionist' sect comes closest (p28), particularly if one reflects upon the obsession with avoiding alcohol as a characteristic Methodist 'strong in-group morality'.

It is not so easy to discern a clear attitude towards God in the ideal type remnant church. There would probably be a strong identification with the Old Testament picture of God as a 'refuge' and a 'rock' (eg Ps 18:2) and, in traditional Methodist churches at least, with Jesus as the unique source of salvation which the remnant church, unlike the community outside, possesses. By definition, the dynamism of the Holy Spirit would receive no emphasis at all.

Overall, the orientation of the remnant church will be inward and the outlook pessimistic, albeit the members will hold onto their own faith, both individually and as a group, as a drowning man holds onto a lifebelt.

Given this ideal type, the concept of a 'holy remnant' is one with Biblical connotations, especially through the Old Testament. At a number of times in Israel's history those who kept the flame of active faith in Yahweh alive were relatively small in number but they were buoyed up by promises of restoration and renewal – this is most clearly

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<sup>195</sup> Bryan Wilson (ed): *Patterns of Sectarianism*, 1967, Chapter I, 'An Analysis of Sect Development'. Wilson's typology for sects, whilst developed for sectarian groups, is applicable for the analysis of any group in its orientation to the world and therefore has been used in this discussion of denominational groups even though they are not sectarian.

shown in the writings of Deutero-Isaiah<sup>196</sup> and Ezekiel to the exiles in Babylon. In the New Testament, Jesus points to the need for death before resurrection (John 12:24) and in his parables of the kingdom stressed the possibilities of tremendous growth from something small (Matt 13:31-2). For many remnant churches, however, there seems little sense of expectation of such reversal of fortunes, or even in some cases any hope of it.

However, this situation can be changed significantly by something seemingly minor. There are stories of small churches which fit squarely within the remnant category being completely turned around to a position of strength and growth by the arrival of one young couple into a church where all the existing members had grown old together<sup>197</sup>. In the Chester-le-Street circuit, the 3 smaller churches have all found grounds for hope from recent new initiatives they have taken – all in response to the survey, although suggested by themselves. At Perkinsville the Wednesday morning drop-in has brought people into the church for the first time, some of whom are sometimes seen at worship - the numbers are less important than the fact that the leading members there now, for the first time in some years, actually expect to see new people joining them for worship. Similarly at Pelton with their ‘clothes exchange’, although their relatively buoyant Junior Church/monthly family service had maintained some hope of arresting decline. At West Pelton their decision to prioritise prayer resulted in distributing prayer cards around the village, with boxes to receive the cards being placed in local shops. The response to these from local people has encouraged the church and seems to have engendered an altogether better, more positive spirit in the church.

The lessons here would appear to be that people in churches with a long history of decline, especially smaller village churches, can be encouraged into a more optimistic spirit, and hence towards a more mission-minded approach, by quite small, even seemingly trivial, initiatives<sup>198</sup>. God-given opportunities often do present themselves and, if grasped, will produce fruit.

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<sup>196</sup> I have repeated the conventional view of the authorship of Isaiah 40-55 (or 66) here; this view has been challenged strongly recently by Motyer's *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (1993), where he argues that the coherence throughout the Book of Isaiah points to a single authorship.

<sup>197</sup> In my experience, even remnant churches will normally welcome new people with open arms, but will often be in danger of ‘smothering’ them with instant involvement and commitment.

<sup>198</sup> This has often been the experience through the ‘Vision 2000’ scheme of grants to small rural Methodist churches.

## **The Institutional Church**

This may seem a tautological definition, since all churches (even including the earliest New Testament Christian communities – see Chapter Four) exhibit to a degree the characteristics of an institution. By ‘Institutional church’ I mean a church whose role and character are those of a settled institution of some local significance, rather than one of an agent of mission and change. The ideal type local institutional church will see itself as a significant element of its local community and have a full programme of activities centred on its own premises which attract non-worshipping people. It will see itself in a positive light and seek to maintain its (self-perceived) position of strength in the local community. It is therefore likely to be a larger church with a strong organisational structure, generally in a town or city, with a history of civic involvement. It will generally have a predominantly middle-aged and older congregation and, also because it sees itself as successful, it will be reluctant to change from traditional patterns of worship and other aspects of church life.

In contrast with the ideal remnant church, the ideal institutional church will seek to minimise its distinctiveness from the local community and society as a whole. It will be very open to the community, but saying ‘Come to us’, rather than ‘Let us come to you’. It will encourage local people to see the church premises as one of their community buildings and church members will be actively involved in various worthy local organisations. However, among Methodist institutional churches, these outside organisations, and indeed the church itself, will tend to be very middle-class in orientation, including such as the Rotary Club and Townswomen’s Guild. According to Wilson, these are some of the characteristics which distinguish a denomination, as opposed to a sect: an emphasis on ‘breadth and tolerance’ and a tendency to self-limit membership to those ‘socially compatible’.<sup>199</sup>

In its attitude towards God, there will be an emphasis on the Fatherhood of God, embracing all the community<sup>200</sup>. This emphasis on the Father is also a corollary of the hierarchical approach to church organisation and structure which typifies the institutional church. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus will also be a focus, particularly at the major festivals of Christmas and Easter which play such an important

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<sup>199</sup> Wilson, *Patterns of Sectarianism*, p25.

<sup>200</sup> This may also be reflected in a ‘universalist’ approach to salvation.

part in the life of such a church. However, Jesus as the champion of the poor and outcast is less likely to be emphasised. Whilst maintaining a proper Trinitarian orthodoxy will be important for the institutional church, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is not likely to be a major focus.

Overall, the orientation of an ideal type institutional church will, like the remnant church, be inward but in a positive rather than a negative sense, because it is based on the church's self-perceived strength rather than weakness. The institutional church will also be optimistic rather than pessimistic, being unable to envisage a time when the church will not play a significant role in the local community. However, wiser and more perceptive members will have concerns about ageing congregations and the growing gap between the culture of the church and that of the world outside.

Chester-le-Street Methodist Church has many characteristics of such a church, with its musical and drama programmes (some 'sacred' material, but much secular), its central position in the market-place, the fact that the leader of the local Council is a member (albeit who rarely attends), its leading role in local Churches Together events, its large membership (albeit inflated above a true figure) and complex organisational structure.

Such a church has many strengths, not least as a potential 'lighthouse' in the local community, speaking a Christian voice into issues of local concern. However, this is only possible if there is a degree of distinctiveness maintained which ensures an authentic Christian stance is taken even if this is not likely to be popular locally.<sup>201</sup> For many people brought up in the institutional church, to simply attempt to communicate the gospel is seen as difficult and potentially confrontational. In the difficult business of finding the right balance between distinctiveness and engagement, the institutional church will favour engagement – this is seen in the absence of any Christian literature or symbols or music at the well-attended coffee mornings in Chester-le-Street. Robert Warren's comment about churches which have the mission structures but fail to use these to communicate its core values seems apposite here: 'Too often the church has many bridges into the community, but the gospel seldom travels along the bridges'<sup>202</sup>.

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<sup>201</sup> I have no relevant examples for Chester-le-Street, but at Lumley I know that the church's support for the family of a man convicted of assault on a young woman drew some venomous criticism from local people.

<sup>202</sup> *Building Missionary Congregations*, 1996, p47.

The emphasis Chester-le-Street puts, even in its Mission Statement, on its premises is also indicative of an attitude which sees itself as important in the local community, as a place to which people will come. Although some members are involved in the community in such ways as supporting MIND and the local hostel for homeless people, this is not seen as important by the church.

Clearly, any large church is likely to be more difficult to change course than a smaller one, partly because of the much more complex decision-making process. Also, the institutional model is by its very nature likely to be more entrenched. However, the new and quite different initiatives begun in 1999 at Chester-le-Street church and already mentioned in footnotes are significant. Both the prayer stall and the new early morning service were the suggestion of a young local preacher who had recently joined the church, and were enthusiastically adopted at the church's annual meeting.<sup>203</sup> This is perhaps indicative of a more 'mission-minded' approach by the church, although most church members are content to observe approvingly from the sidelines. The acid test would come if such a new initiative in mission were to reduce congregations at traditional services or necessitate the loss of a drama production or an annual concert.

It is easy to be critical of the 'remnant' and 'institutional' churches, but both have usually developed as a result of and a response to factors of history and geography – both of the church and its local community. In some cases, such as a declining Durham ex-pit village, it is hard to see any realistic alternative response. However, neither the remnant nor the institutional 'ideal type' point the way to renewal and growth for a local Methodist church. Given the bleak outlook for Methodism in Britain generally, identified in the previous chapter, we need to look for a different model which is focused on mission rather than maintenance.

### **The Mission-minded Church**

Such a church has mission as its number one priority and its programmes and activities will reflect this. The plethora of recent books urging local churches towards this would indicate that few have fully travelled down this road yet, and certainly none in Chester-le-Street Circuit, although Lumley and Birtley seem to be moving in that direction. For

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<sup>203</sup> Perhaps even in a large church the arrival of a new and committed young family can have a significant impact.

some churches, an emphasis on ‘social mission’, or living out the gospel, will be more appropriate (see section on Woodhouse Close Church in Chapter Four), while others will tend towards an emphasis on ‘evangelistic mission’, or proclaiming the gospel. Ideally, a holistically mission-minded church will do both – in fact, an ideal type mission-minded church would have the following attitudes:

*Towards itself: as God’s instrument in the local community.* It need not be predominantly young, ideally drawing its members from all ages and social classes.

*Towards the community: maintaining a balance between distinctiveness and engagement.* Whilst it will both proclaim and live out the gospel and Christian values, it will not try to impose them on people and will reach out to all, unconditionally.

*Towards God: balancing the Father’s love and concern for all people with the unique offer of salvation in Jesus and the dynamic, transforming power of the Holy Spirit.* It will place great importance on prayer, expecting God to act.

*Overall, it will be oriented outwards, both towards God and the local community, rather than inwards.* It will therefore not only be open to change, but will positively welcome it. It will be profoundly optimistic, but not in a triumphalistic way.

These attitudes should both underpin a mission-minded church and be reflected in its key characteristics. In the next chapter, I shall attempt to develop further both the attitudes and the implications they have for these characteristics as they relate to British Methodist churches. Before that, I shall look first at scripture, and the models for mission we find there, and then at some relevant contemporary models of mission, attempting to assess the usefulness of these models in the Methodist context.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE LOCAL CHURCH – MULTIPLE MODELS FOR MISSION

Given the fundamental importance of scripture for Methodism, it is appropriate to examine first the more obvious paradigms for mission which we find in the New Testament. Jesus in his ministry was of course engaged on God's mission to the world and therefore his life and teaching were concerned with doing, rather than teaching, mission. Although his cultural and religious context was very different to our own, we need to look at those parameters and paradigms of Jesus' approach to mission which may be useful to the local church today. A similar argument applies to the early Christian communities<sup>204</sup> we read about in the New Testament.

#### **JESUS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

Any analysis of the approach of Jesus and that of the First Century Christians to mission must of necessity draw almost entirely on the New Testament. Some Biblical scholars would contend that the four Gospels tell us at least as much about the practices and beliefs of the various early Christian communities as they do about the life and ministry of Jesus, since they were each the product of a handed-down, mostly oral, tradition within one or more such community<sup>205</sup>. Whilst I would recognise the fact that the Gospel material in particular needs careful interpretation, which itself will depend on the hermeneutic grid the interpreter brings, I find myself closer to the traditional, 'historical Jesus', position of such as Wright than the more liberal 'Christ of faith' position of such as Borg<sup>206</sup>.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into the hermeneutic debate concerning the context of the Gospel writings and indeed those of the rest of the New Testament, except to say that the Jewish context is probably the most significant. Notwithstanding this

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<sup>204</sup> I shall avoid using the word 'church' to describe the First Century Christian communities. Although the New Testament writers use the word 'church' to describe both the universal body of Christian believers (eg Matt 16:18, and as in the many references to 'the body of Christ') and, less often, the local congregation (eg 1Cor 14:34), those early Christian communities were sufficiently unlike the modern denominational church for the use of the word 'church' to be distracting.

<sup>205</sup> See such as Sanders & Davies: *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 1989.

<sup>206</sup> These two scholars carry out a fascinating debate on the historical Jesus in *The Meaning of Jesus*, 1999.

limitation, I would argue that the weight of New Testament evidence<sup>207</sup> allow the following **generalisations** to be made about the way Jesus engaged with people and the prevailing culture, ie the way he undertook his mission. These would seem to have special relevance for the church today:

- He did not allow himself to be distracted from his mission, he continued to move on in order to fulfil it (*Mark 1:36-39*). This often meant moving on from a situation where he was accepted and being successful to a more difficult one<sup>208</sup>.
- Jesus was not always successful; he risked and experienced failure in his missionary efforts. We often conveniently ignore this, but despite his person, his message and his miracles, many failed to respond (*Matt 11:20-24*).
- He was uncompromising with his message, even though this made him unpopular with many, especially institutional figures. He was openly counter-cultural in his challenge to various practices of his time. He wrecked the money-changers stalls in the Temple precincts (*Mark 11:15-17*) and openly ridiculed the detailed Sabbath observance rules which had been added to the original Jewish Law and become part of contemporary religious practice (*Matt 12:1-13*). On the other hand, he advocated a higher standard than was generally practised on ethical issues such as divorce (*Mark 10:2-12*), concern for the poor and needy (*Matt 25:31-46*).
- Despite his readiness to openly challenge people and what were widely-accepted views, Jesus was clearly not concerned about becoming 'contaminated' by people whose lives failed to live up to the standard he advocated. Indeed, he seemed to actively seek their company - this was evident in the way he and his disciples shared meals with 'sinners' and tax-collectors (*Matt 9:10*) and in his calling of Zaccheus (*Luke 19:1-10*). In this, and in his readiness to associate with Gentiles (*Matt 8:5-13*) and Samaritans (*John 4:7-26*), he went well beyond the social, religious and racial conventions of his time. Jesus had an open acceptance of all people, and he was prepared to spend time with them, regardless of being criticised for this.
- For Jesus, a person's heart and the way one lived, the manner in which one's faith was expressed in everyday life, especially the way in which one treated others, was more important than the observances of institutional religion (*Mark 7:14-23*).
- Jesus met people at their point of need, whether that need was physical (*Mark 1:40-*

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<sup>207</sup> Biblical references are not exhaustive in illustrating each point, merely indicative.

<sup>208</sup> This is exactly the 'Bell curve' principle which Charles Handy advocates for organisations in *The Empty Raincoat*, 1994 – to begin a new phase of activity or initiate a new programme at a point where current activities and programmes are still bringing growth, rather than waiting for decline to set in.

42) or spiritual (*John 4*) or both (*Mark 2:1-12*). In most recorded cases, it was people's physical needs which provided the point of contact with Jesus.

- Jesus lived, died and appeared after his resurrection all within a community context. In terms of organisation, Jesus centred his life and mission around his 'small group' of 12 disciples – they were his 'special community'<sup>209</sup>. He had other followers (eg the women Luke mentions *12:2,3*) and other apostles (eg the 72 who were also 'sent out' *Luke 10:1*), but these 12 were clearly his core group. Within this group, there were 3 (Peter, James, John) with whom he shared his closest thoughts, prayers and experiences. In a general sense 'the community around Jesus was to function as a community for the sake of all others, a model for others to emulate and be challenged by. Never, however, was this community to sever itself from others'.<sup>210</sup> The issue of community is a key one within contemporary society and one to which I shall return later.

We know from Jesus' baptism, and from his encounters with evil spirits, that his ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' physical presence itself was a great source of inspiration and power to those around him; after his ascension, this inspiration and power derived from the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, who also led and guided the **early Christian communities** and their leaders, such as Paul, James and Peter.

Although Fee's comment: 'Contemporary postmodernism looks much like the culture of the Greco-Roman world into which the gospel first appeared some 2000 years ago'<sup>211</sup> may be somewhat overdone since such a clear linkage is difficult to sustain across such a wide time span, the cultural context of those early Christian communities was in some ways similar to today's society. The 'official' religion of the Roman Empire was institutionalised and, through the cult of Emperor-worship, interlinked with civil government. First century society was itself, however, very fragmented and amongst the general population there was an eclectic spirituality which embraced such as Gnosticism, the Greek 'mysteries', idol worship, a fascination with astrology, the occult and animist superstition. This fragmentation encouraged the coming together of people of like mind through friendship groups and voluntary association. New spiritual and philosophical

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<sup>209</sup> W Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 1995, p135.

<sup>210</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p52.

<sup>211</sup> In: *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, 1996, xiii.

ideas were listened to and often received with interest – indeed, this seemed the main occupation of some (*Acts 17:21*) – but for many their rationality would not allow them to countenance the possibility of bodily resurrection (*Acts 17:32, 26:23-4*).

Given those similarities between contemporary and first-century culture of a fragmented society with an eclectic spirituality, the approach of the early Christian communities to mission should provide us with some valuable pointers. Again generalising, a number of aspects of their approach can be set out in brief:

- Nothing, not even the threat of imprisonment or death, would stop the early Christians from proclaiming the essential truth of the gospel, in particular the person of Jesus and his death and resurrection (*Acts 4:20*). This preparedness to be counter-cultural extended to the condemnation of contemporary religious practices which were clearly abhorred by God (*Acts 19:23-29*). The early Christians' refusal to conform to these practices, in particular worship of the Emperor as a deity, was one of the major factors in many of the outbreaks of persecution against them. Meeks links the distinctiveness of the early Christian communities, from both outsiders and 'the world', with their very strong sense of internal cohesion.<sup>212</sup>
- On the other hand, there was an acceptance of civil authority (*Romans 13:1-7*) and a readiness to use it to the advantage of the Christian community where appropriate (*Acts 16:37, 22:25, 25:11*).
- Christians needed to build bridges with various communities and were prepared to adapt their culture and practice, if not their beliefs, accordingly – hence, Paul's comment: 'I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some' (*1Cor 9:22*). However, when such inculturation began to involve ethics, as it clearly had done for the Corinthian congregation (sexual immorality - *1Cor 5*), or threaten the life of the community (arguments – *1Cor 6:1-8* - and lack of consideration for others - *1Cor 11:17-22*), then this was roundly condemned by leaders (also *the letter of James*).
- In explaining the Christian gospel, the early Christians recognised the need to speak the language of contemporary thought – this comes across most clearly in John's gospel's engagement with Gnostic thought and the use of *logos* in his Prologue.

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<sup>212</sup> W. Meeks: *The First Urban Christians*, 1983, p74. He comments further (pp106-7) on the tension that existed then, as it does today, between the need to draw boundaries around these Christian communities, on the one hand, and the need to interact with outsiders in order to fulfil God's desire for universal salvation, on the other.

- Teaching was of prime importance – as the gospel moved out from predominantly Jews to predominantly Gentiles, scripture (the Old Testament) would have needed to be taught. This teaching was never primarily, if at all, an academic exercise, but a means of disciplining believers. The Pastoral epistles (*Timothy, Titus*) set out ground rules for teaching, which including ethics as well as doctrine, and there was clearly a general expectation of growth in knowledge, spirituality and Christian behaviour. However, there was also recognition of the need for sensitivity towards those young or weak in the faith, and for stronger or older Christians not to act in a way which would undermine that faith (*1Cor 8:9-13*).
- The Christian community as a whole was prepared to move and change over major issues if they perceived it was God’s will – the clearest example was over taking the gospel to the Gentiles (*Acts 15*).
- The inclusiveness of early Christian communities – male and female; Greek, Jew, Roman and barbarian; slave and free; rich and poor – made them truly distinctive, even revolutionary. This would have aroused suspicions and hostility among their non-Christian contemporaries. Each community seems to have represented a fair cross-section of urban society, and Christians as a whole were upwardly mobile – ie. their achieved status was higher than their attributed status.<sup>213</sup>
- From the beginning, the early Christians clearly met both *en masse*, publicly in the Temple and in small groups in each other’s houses (*Acts 2:46, 5:42, 20:20*). Dunn comments on the significance of house meetings: ‘[They] indicate the beginning of a different structure or organisation and worship’.<sup>214</sup> These home-based groups formed the prayer base of the whole Christian community and therefore its prime spiritual dynamic (*Acts 12:12*), as well as being a context for teaching and worship (*Acts 5:42*<sup>215</sup> and *20:20*) and breaking bread together (*Acts 2:46*).<sup>216</sup>
- Whether meeting at home or in a public place, worship was of central importance, with the breaking of bread a key focus (*Acts 2:42*). This is emphasised by the fact that when Paul perceived irregularities or bad practice in worship, he condemned it,

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<sup>213</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p73.

<sup>214</sup> In his commentary on Acts, 1996, p36.

<sup>215</sup> Dunn, *ibid*, p74, comments here on the emergence of ‘the home’ as a new locus of Christian identity.

<sup>216</sup> Meeks (*op cit*, p75), points out that the Greek phrase *kat οικον... .ekkllesia* should be translated ‘The church in [a person’s] house. On this basis, the word ‘church’ in the first century context should be applied to these home-based groups, the nucleus of which was an individual household, rather than the larger group worshipping in a public place.

notably in his letter to the Corinthians (*1 Cor 11*).

- Whilst the actual pooling of possessions (*Acts 4:32*) may not have been widely practised<sup>217</sup>, it is clear that the early Christians actively cared for each other and ensured those in need were provided for. According to Harnack, this, by also involving the wider community through helping the poor, widows, the sick, prisoners etc became a ‘practice of love and service to all’ and was ‘a thing of power and action’ to the community as a whole.<sup>218</sup>
- The evangelistic methods of the first century were various, including preaching to large groups both in synagogues (*Acts 14:1*) and outside (*Acts 17:17*), one-to-one ‘stranger’ evangelism (*Acts 8:26-39*), sending ‘mission teams’ (*Acts 20:2-5*). It seems very likely, however, that the kind of one-to-one ‘friendship evangelism’ we see in John 1:35-49, where Andrew > Simon and Philip > Nathanael, was also practised widely.
- There was an urgency to the mission of the early Christians, inspired by the general expectation of Jesus’ return being imminent and reflected in their invocation: ‘*Maranatha*’ (‘our Lord, come!’). Two thousand years on, it is rare for the modern church to share that sense of urgency.

However, as Bosch points out (p51), what began as a missionary movement based upon Christian communities quite quickly developed into an institution – the beginnings of this trend can be discerned as early as the ‘Apostolic Council’ of 47 or 48, where the Jerusalem gathering showed some characteristics of an institution, particularly in their concern for consolidation rather than mission (*Acts 15*). Of course, as Bosch himself comments (p52), this was probably inevitable, given the ‘sociological law’ that ‘either a movement disintegrates or it becomes an institution’. Therefore, it is not so much the development from movement to institution which is to be deplored as the fact that what accompanied that development was a loss of missionary zeal, a stagnation: ‘The impetuous missionary torrent of earlier years was tamed into a still-flowing rivulet and eventually into a stationary pond’<sup>219</sup>.

Furthermore, we can already in the first century discern the way in which the

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<sup>217</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, p36, suggests that possessions would have been sold off over a period as the needs of the believers arose.

<sup>218</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp48-9.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid*, p53.

**distinctiveness** of those early Christian communities began to distance them from society as a whole, leading at times to persecution and giving rise to concerns of survival. This tension which the church has had throughout its life between being 'in' the world but not 'of' the world (*John 15:18,19*) is at the heart of mission. Finding the optimum point of balance in resolving that tension will vary for different places and at different times, but is always crucial to a particular local church in discerning its own approach to mission.

This approach to mission and engagement with society we find in the New Testament provides us with the element of 'Scripture' from the Epworth Quadrilateral of Methodism. Interestingly, there are a number of parallels between aspects of that approach and that identified from early Methodism in Chapter Two, particularly in its class meetings, which in turn provides the element of 'Tradition'. These common elements can be identified as:

1. The **distinctiveness** of the Christian groups from society as a whole. This distinctiveness resulted from a relatively (compared to many other periods of history) wide gap existing between a Christian group which took New Testament values and ethics very seriously and, on the other hand, a society which largely lived to a very different set of ethics and values.
2. The importance of **worship**. For the early Christians, this was central and Wesley urged his Methodists, in addition to their meeting in class, band, and society, to continue attending their local Parish Church for weekly worship, including receiving Holy Communion.
3. An emphasis on **discipleship**, growth in personal holiness.
4. The existence of strong small groups, or local **communities**, where prayer and teaching (discipleship) were central, but which were open to others.
5. A real commitment to **mission and evangelism** which saw considerable growth in numbers, phenomenal in the case of the first century.
6. An engagement with the **whole spectrum of society**, from the rich and powerful to the poor and rejected. For both periods, there comes across a strong sense that worldly position had no bearing on role or position in the Christian community.

Before looking at those parallels more closely in order to draw possible conclusions for today's local Methodist churches, I shall examine briefly some more modern and innovative models of being church which are different from most mainstream British

churches. A critical assessment of such models and their usefulness in the British Methodist situation will provide the two remaining elements of the Epworth Quadrilateral: 'Experience' and 'Reason'.

## **RECENT MODELS OF CHURCH**

Across the world, there have been innumerable new churches being formed during the twentieth century outside the established denominations; some of these independent churches have gone on to become new 'denominations' in their own right. However, most have used the same basic model of being church as mainstream established churches – ie focus on Sunday worship, with a multiplicity of different ways of engaging their local communities in mission. For British Methodism, the latter have been examined in one area in Chapter Three and a further example will be looked at shortly. First, some different contemporary approaches to mission by various churches, all of which span across denominational boundaries, will be discussed.

Each model examined emphasises a particular strength of early Methodism and is therefore of special interest here. The extent to which each model may provide a paradigm for modern British Methodist churches will be considered, always bearing in mind the 'ideal type' mission-minded church set out at the end of Chapter Three.

### **Cell Church**

The element of early Methodism which cell church follows is that of the class meeting, which in turn of course followed the house churches of the First Century. However, the basic philosophy and practice of cell churches was set out systematically by Ralph Neighbour<sup>220</sup>, who emphasised the cell as a basic Christian community which is a sign to the society within which it is set that 'love is possible in a materialistic world'<sup>221</sup>. The concept of cell church has been developed most in Asia, particularly Korea and Singapore, where mega-churches of thousands are organised entirely on cell principles. These churches have seen phenomenal growth within a predominantly non-Christian culture.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> *Where do we go from here?* 1990.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, p11, a quote from Jean Vanier.

<sup>222</sup> Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore began in 1988 with its pastor Laurence Khong and a small group; by 1998 it had grown to 10,000 members, all in cells.

The essential basis of the church is the small group, or cell, which is of equal importance with the congregation of cells joined together for worship. In the cell Christ is worshipped, the Word proclaimed, needs and hopes are shared, thanks is given, people are disciplined – so the cell is a worshipping community of mutual love and encouragement seeking to grow in faith and service. As well as being rooted in prayer and the development of each person’s love-relationship with and for God, a cell church will have a very strong sense of ‘body life’, expressed through the development of loving fellowship within the cell.<sup>223</sup> There is a strong emphasis on every-member ministry, and a cell church will typically have a higher proportion of its members involved in leadership than a traditional church.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, each cell is **outward-looking** and openly evangelistic, actively seeking to draw others in through the *oikos* relationships of cell members outside the cell. Gavin Reid identified 5 criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of an evangelistic method, and cell church practice meets all these.<sup>225</sup> Clearly, a cell meeting will be different from the traditional Bible study or prayer meeting or even fellowship group which has formed the basis of most small group meetings in traditional churches, including modern British Methodist ones.

Each cell is essentially time-limited – if, after a certain time<sup>226</sup> the cell has not grown to the point where it needs to split into two (about 15 people), then it is disbanded and, with others, re-formed into new cells. The cells are lay-led, with further trainee leaders in the cell. The cells come together for congregational and/or celebrational worship on Sundays. Large cell churches have a complex hierarchical structure of zone pastors and supervisors.

Neighbour developed a whole series of leadership and discipleship resources for the use of cell churches and this material has now been adapted for British use. However, this can be presented in a rather prescriptive way, which, together with the terminology of

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<sup>223</sup> Astin, *Body and Cell*, 1998, p100.

<sup>224</sup> Souter, *The Cell Church Movement in the Anglican Context*, 1997, p39, estimates that 40% of a church’s core membership will be involved in leadership at any one time – creating a significant potential problem in many churches.

<sup>225</sup> Souter (*ibid*, p55) sets these out: 1) Is it about the discovery of the gospel rather than numbers of conversions? 2) Is it culturally appropriate? 3) Does it engage with the unevangelised? 4) Does it lead to valid responses? 5) Does it provide encounter with Christian community?

<sup>226</sup> Often as little as 6-9 months in Asia, usually 18months-2 years in Britain (Astin, *Body and Cell*, 1998, p39).

the cell church movement, can be off-putting. In particular, I feel the full adoption of cell church practice which has been developed in Asian countries might be too authoritarian for British culture and could lead to the kind of 'heavy shepherding' which has occurred in some 'new church' movements<sup>227</sup> – however, I accept Souter's comment (p40) that this is 'a perceived fear rather than being the result of observed practice'.

In Britain, a number of 'new' churches are developing along cell church lines, and some traditional churches are beginning to take it up. Rev Howard Astin in Bradford has been a pioneer within the CofE and has recorded his experience.<sup>228</sup> His church has seen growth in both numbers and especially in the way lay people in an inner-city parish have developed spiritually and been empowered into leadership roles. However, I am also aware of an Anglican church near Leigh (Lancs) where the transition to cell church has had a mixed response, with some cell group members resenting the expectation to attend each week, in addition to their other church activities.<sup>229</sup> Clearly, the potential to overburden lay people, especially those in leadership, is greater in cell churches, and indicates the need for cell churches to consider pruning their existing programmes.

The joint emphasis on fellowship and discipling within the group and evangelism and openness to those outside was also identified in early Methodist class meetings in Chapter Two. Many Methodists, including myself, see cell groups as a potential modern equivalent of the early class meetings and are looking to develop them in their churches. The most important values of cell groups, apart from that of multiplication, are similar to the practice of early classes: building loving relationships, encouraging each other spiritually within the group and focusing on evangelism within ones' friendship *oikos* to draw others into the group. Modern writers on cell church have commented upon this similarity with early class meetings<sup>230</sup>. It is therefore somewhat surprising that cell

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<sup>227</sup> 'Heavy shepherding' is used to describe a leadership which is both authoritarian and encourages members to become dependent on the leadership in matters outside church life, including the making of various kinds of decisions about their lives.

<sup>228</sup> *Body and Cell*, 1997.

<sup>229</sup> This is anecdotal evidence from a friend who is also a lay reader. He commented that if the church had decided to abandon its poorly-attended evening service and replace it by cell group meetings, this would have been well received by most people.

<sup>230</sup> In a Conference for cell church leaders in Newcastle in 1999, Beckham gave considerable attention to Wesley's class meetings and in Chapter 11 of *The Second Reformation* he concluded that the significance of Wesley was that he was the only church leader using small groups who actually taught that the group was the church (p121).

church principles have not yet to my knowledge been widely adopted in British Methodism. In my own church at Great Lumley from September 1999 over half the church has been actively involved in four cells, called 'home groups', and whilst it is very early to make any assessment of their effectiveness in terms of numerical growth, they already seem to have succeeded in building Christian community and in mutual encouragement and one has started to grow. The only Methodist Church in Britain which I am aware has fully transitioned to cell church is South Chadderton in Oldham. Their first cells met in February 1999, and some have already seen growth.

At their best, cell churches offer a means of resolving the 'in but not of' tension between local church and community. The cell is distinctive in its values, beliefs and ethics but at the same time it openly accepts any interested non-Christian in a non-judgemental manner. It engages with the community both collectively by becoming involved with social action in the locality and meeting individual needs, and individually through each member's *oikos*. Also, by providing a locus for mutual support and encouragement, building one another up, it equips its members for living a distinctive life within the community, similarly to early Methodist class meetings. However, all these elements should be in place and Souter is probably right to question whether cell churches will in practice uphold social action (p53) as part of a holistic approach to mission – this would seem to have the potential for being the area of greatest weakness in cell churches.

The outward orientation, towards God and the local community, identified in our 'ideal type' are present in theory in the cell church. Both Christ-centred worship and prayer are key elements of its meetings, and openness and the objective of multiplication are key values. However, it is always easy in a small group situation to become inward-looking and this must be constantly guarded against.

Possibly the greatest danger with the cell church approach is that of raised expectations. If, having set the initial target time for multiplying cells, sufficient growth is not achieved to enable this to happen, there will be a strong sense of disillusionment in the church which may set both the transition process and the church's whole approach to mission back significantly. But, of course, this comment itself betrays the fear of failure which often prevents the church from taking risks, especially in its missionary task.

Overall, a wholesale incorporation of a Neighbour-style cell church programme would

probably not be appropriate for most British Methodist churches, where people would find the style rather too deterministic, inflexible and authoritarian. However, the cell-church values (community-building in the group, mutual support and encouragement, open-ness to outsiders, aiming to multiply the groups) are a close reflection of the early Methodist class meetings and the establishment of home-based groups based on the principles of both would seem to be a course worth pursuing.

### **Willow Creek**

One of the vital elements of early Methodism, indeed a key driving force, was its concern to reach out to those who had no contact with or experience of the established church – the ‘unchurched’, which in Wesley’s day coincided more closely with the poorest sections of society than they do today. This concern for the unchurched was the basis of Willow Creek church. What began with about 100 people meeting in a theatre in a Chicago suburb has grown over the intervening years into one of, if not, the largest churches in USA, with over 17,000 members. However, unlike many other new, growing churches, this growth was derived not from gathering disaffected Christians from other churches, but mainly from new Christians. This emphasis on attracting and discipling non-Christians is reflected in Willow Creek’s boldly-worded Mission Statement: ‘To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ’, or as someone commented: ‘They’re trying to turn atheists into missionaries!’<sup>231</sup>. From the beginning, the church’s pastor Hybels and his team made a conscious effort to avoid anything which in terms of presentation resembled a traditional church service, about which he comments as follows:

‘The traditional church service is no place for the unchurched. To anybody but the already convinced, the average church service seems grossly abnormal. It makes no sense to those who haven’t grown up with it, to those who don’t know the drill. The music we sing, the titles we choose, the way we dress, the language we use, the subjects we discuss, the poor quality of what we do – all of these lead the average unchurched person to say, ‘This is definitely not for me.’<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> This section draws largely on Bill (the senior pastor from Willow Creek’s founding) and Lynne Hybels’ book: *Rediscovering Church* (1995), this comment pp167-8.

<sup>232</sup> *ibid*, p32. His comment reflected Wesley’s practice of designing his preaching and his organisation for the unchurched.

Willow Creek therefore designed 'seeker services' for unchurched people, going into the local community to ask people why they didn't go to church, and adjusting the format accordingly. Services were put together by a skilled team and included good quality contemporary music, multimedia and drama as well as non-jargonised preaching. Alistair McGrath commented as follows:

'Willow Creek is an excellent example of a church that has pioneered an approach that breaks down incidental barriers [that keep seekers away from church]...yet the Gospel is proclaimed effectively....There is no doubt that that this church and an increasing number of imitators throughout the Western world are getting a hearing for the Gospel among those who would regard a traditional church setting as a no-go zone'.<sup>233</sup>

The phenomenal growth of Willow Creek does, however, need to be put into context. As Clarke comments, it is a church which regards its 'parish' as having 300,000 people, the size of a British city like Nottingham, since it is based on a web of inter-personal networks where people invite their friends to services.<sup>234</sup> Each new Christian has a considerable number of people within their 'personal fringe' and is encouraged to invite as many of them as possible. The population of the area he also considers to be 'moderately receptive', which is probably not the case for most British churches.

However, there was much more to Willow Creek than seeker services. The leadership was aware from the beginning of the need to model 'community life' and provide a place of support and love for seekers and new Christians. This, together with the vital business of discipling new Christians, was done through a network of relationships and groups, such as women's luncheons, men's breakfasts (a rather sexist distinction and possibly indicating a middle-class bias?) and the mid-week New Community teaching sessions. There was also an emphasis on church people doing social and sporting activities together as a means of bonding relationships. Like Wesley, there was an awareness of the need to disciple the unchurched people who had responded to the gospel.

It was not until about 1992 that a systematic system of small groups was introduced throughout the church. These all normally had 4-10 members, with an 'open chair'

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<sup>233</sup>Hybel & Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, p205.

<sup>234</sup> John Clarke: *Evangelism that Really Works*, 1995, p73.

policy allowing the group to grow until it was ready to multiply, but attendees of Willow Creek could choose between five different types of groups:

- Disciple-making groups, providing a structured discipleship process
- Community groups, designed as entry points for believers new to the church
- Service groups, providing care and accountability for all involved in service at Willow Creek
- Seeker groups, for non-Christians who wanted to know more
- Support groups, offering help and encouragement to those going through difficulties

Interestingly, 'One of Bill's [Hybels] greatest regrets is that he didn't move Willow Creek toward this type of small-group approach years earlier'.<sup>235</sup> Perhaps he should have studied Wesley's methods more closely!

Clearly, what is appropriate and 'successful' in suburban USA will not necessarily work elsewhere, and the Willow Creek Association, formed to promote a similar approach to the original, emphasises the values, especially of the need to reach out to the unchurched, rather than the presentational details. In Britain many churches have run seeker services which have been different in style and content to traditional church services, with varying degrees of success in attracting unchurched people.<sup>236</sup> However, most churches offer such services once a month or less often and few in the traditional denominations have based their normal weekly worship on such an approach.

One modern Methodist exception to this is 'The Bridge', at Burbage, a suburb of Hinckley in Leicestershire. In response to a new vision by the circuit to give 'Mission and Development' a priority, a minister was released to give the bulk of his time to this work, a vision in the best traditions of early Methodism. After considerable survey work had been carried out in the local area, and seeker services held in various churches, a new congregation was established in 1995 in a school, meeting weekly on Sunday evenings from 5 to about 7.30pm. An evening consists of an hour's 'Gospel presentation' and an hour's 'community-building activities' including sharing food and talking or playing sport. The congregation of about 50 adults is composed of about 30-

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<sup>235</sup> Clarke, *Evangelism that Really Works*, p130.

<sup>236</sup> The most obvious example was the 'Nine O'clock Service' in Sheffield, which did attract hundreds of unchurched, mainly young, people to presentations with spectacular lighting, sound and multimedia, until a combination of bad theology and abuse of power by the leadership saw its demise – see the fascinating study by Roland Howard: *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'clock Service*, 1996.

40% unchurched people<sup>237</sup>, with the rest mostly Methodists from other churches in the circuit who choose to worship there either full-time or in addition to attending their 'home' church in the morning. In addition, there are a number of children who attend; they leave for their separate groups after the initial 10-15 minutes.

Having attended what I was assured was a fairly typical presentation and talked with the minister and members of the congregation, the first thing to impress me was how very informal and relaxed the setting was. The minister wore an open-necked shirt, avoided theological or church jargon, there were no hymn books or service sheets (an OHP was used for hymns and Bible readings). There was no traditional church furniture and a music group, incorporating drums, guitars and keyboard, led the singing of 3 congregational songs. The group also 'performed' a song with a strong Christian content. Overall, the musical quality was very good and the fact that the group had practised 3 times during the previous week was obvious.

With regard to the content, there was no sermon, but a fairly simple Gospel message was communicated effectively by judicious use of linking material and a 'Michael Parkinson' style interview with 2 committed Christians. There were no formal prayers, apart from a closing prayer by the minister. However, there was a 5-minute period of quiet for personal reflection/meditation/prayer towards the end which, unlike in some 'traditional' church services, seemed in no way awkward.<sup>238</sup>

In contrast with the techniques of the early Methodist preachers, there was no call for a response to the Gospel. Also, there were no demonstrative expressions during worship, apart from a genuine sincerity – whilst some of the team leading worship would describe themselves as charismatic, they had made a conscious decision to avoid such expressions in case unchurched people found them threatening.

Overall, there was no doubt that this was Christian worship and the content was wholly orthodox – indeed, the beginning of the presentation was based on Jesus' ascension,

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<sup>237</sup> To the knowledge of Rev Graham Horsley, Methodist Connexional church planting officer, this is a proportion unmatched anywhere in British Methodism.

<sup>238</sup> The minister told me that this was initially a 'spare' 5 minutes which they used, with some trepidation, for silence in their first presentation. It had such an obviously profound effect on some people, who were clearly not used to having such time for quiet reflection in their lives, that it has been included ever since.

since it was the Sunday after Ascension Day. However, the very non-traditional style and format was clearly one which the congregation, which seemed on average younger than most Methodist churches, appreciated.

Significant human and financial resources had been committed to the venture by the Circuit. As well as the minister (an extra Circuit minister had been appointed to fill the gap), a lay worker, one of the leaders of the worship group who in addition took the minister's role when he was away, was also being paid by the Circuit. Although there was an offering taken up during the presentation, this would nowhere near cover all these costs. According to the minister, the Circuit commitment to this specific project and the overall priority for Mission and Development has helped restore a 'sense of circuit identity and a forward-moving ethos'.<sup>239</sup> The strength of the circuit system is apparent here, since very few Methodist churches are capable of resourcing a significant new missionary venture on their own.

However, there were some negative aspects of 'The Bridge' which should be noted. Firstly, the absence of intercessory prayers meant that there was no clear opportunity for connections between Christian faith and current issues of concern in the world and in the lives of the congregation to be articulated. Although the quiet time may provide this opportunity for some, others would need help with this. Also, the content of the presentation seemed rather fixed and inflexible, allowing little opportunity for the movement of the Spirit. Such inflexibility can be a disadvantage of putting a high value on the quality of the content, especially the music.

From my observation, the congregation seemed rather uniformly middle-class, but this may well have been a reflection of the surrounding area – a large private housing estate about 20-30 years old.

Given what we have already learnt, especially from early Methodism, about the importance of nurture, fellowship and discipleship, my major criticism is that there were no opportunities for the congregation to meet during the week, apart from those involved in planning the presentation. Thus, there was no provision for any systematic nurture or discipleship programme – in Croft's terms, an absence of 'road'. This seems surprising,

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<sup>239</sup> P. Hancock: 'Into Mission Mode', in *Epworth Review*, Vol 24, No 4, (1997) p10.

given the emphasis on attracting unchurched people, but the leadership is aware of this deficiency and hopes to remedy it soon through the creation of small groups and/or Alpha courses.

Adoption of the Willow Creek approach is, of course, much easier when starting with a new church or congregation than when trying to update an existing one. However, there would seem to be mission principles of value here which could be applied generally in local churches and which have particular validity for Methodists. These include seeing one's church as being more than a forum for worshipping together, but also providing an opportunity for 'fellowship' in its broadest sense. In particular, the recognition that 'traditional' worship services are hopelessly inaccessible to most unchurched people is valuable for all churches, albeit many will find it difficult to act upon. The helpfulness of carrying out some kind of survey of local people before embarking on plans for more modern styles of worship is another useful insight. Clearly, despite what such a survey reveals, any presentation of the Gospel must be based on 'What is true' as well as 'What works' (in terms of communication), ie the application of the full Epworth Quadrilateral.<sup>240</sup> Again, need for a balance between distinctiveness and engagement is highlighted. With regard to having occasional 'seeker services' I am somewhat sceptical of their value, unless they are part of a regular pattern.<sup>241</sup> If non-Christians are being drawn into the life of the church through home-based groups, friendship evangelism or the wider mission activity of the church then it is vital that they are able to both understand and participate in normal worship, so the principles we can learn from Willow Creek in terms of communication need to be applied universally.

In its objective of reaching out to the unchurched in the local community, a Willow Creek-style church has a clear outward orientation – although this is then re-directed inwards as people are invited in. Reflecting back on our 'ideal type', it is important that such a church has a clear, and primary, focus on God and that this is energised by an active prayer life, both corporately and individually.

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<sup>240</sup> This is a principle which should be applied, of course, to the whole missionary endeavour.

<sup>241</sup> Some colleagues who have tried such services on Sundays on an occasional, or even regular (once a month is typical), basis have felt it creates a rather artificial atmosphere, and that 'guests' can feel manipulated. At Lumley, the monthly Saturday evening 'Celebration' services, where the worship is contemporary and the spoken element more biased towards testimony than a traditional sermon, has proved a good opportunity to invite non-Christians.



## **Alpha and Emmaus – a modern catechumenate<sup>242</sup>**

The early Christians received instruction in the faith weekly for 2-3 years before they were baptised<sup>243</sup>; during this period they were ‘catechumens’. Of course, with widespread infant baptism in many churches, modern parallels are difficult, but in any event no modern British church is likely to demand such a lengthy period of instruction before welcoming someone as a committed member. Many churches have some kind of programme whereby new attendees can be taken through basic Christian teaching and brought to a position where they are ready to make a public commitment to Christ and the church, and where the church is ready to accept that commitment as genuine. This would traditionally be known as confirmation classes, or as are offered (and should be required for new members<sup>244</sup>) in Methodist churches, membership classes. Such classes are adapted for newly committed Christians who may have had a sudden conversion experience, such as through a mission, or a more gradual one through one-to-one evangelism outside the context of a worshipping congregation, or through gradual absorption into the life of the local church. Membership classes are intended to ensure that new members are both familiar with and committed to the Christian faith and the Methodist Church.

In recent years, Methodist churches have, like British churches of many denominations, had available, and have used, two more formalised catechumenate programmes which can be used ‘off the peg’, or adapted and customised to suit the local situation. These are the ‘Alpha’ and ‘Emmaus’ programmes<sup>245</sup>. Some Methodist churches, including my own, have used Alpha instead of membership classes, supplementing it with teaching on the Methodist Church. Overall, almost 7,000 churches in the UK, including 750 Methodist, are currently registered as running Alpha courses and it is estimated that

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<sup>242</sup> In this section I shall only deal with the formalised instruction programmes of Alpha and Emmaus, used mainly in Protestant Churches, and not the ‘New Catechumenate’ movement of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>243</sup> S Cottrell et al: *Emmaus, the Way of Faith*, Book One, p3.

<sup>244</sup> Clause 8 (Admission to Membership) of the Deed of Union does not specifically refer to membership classes, but the need for them is clearly implied in such as Standing Order 525. This sets out the duties of a Methodist minister with regard to preparation for membership, and section (iv) states that the minister should ‘lead or otherwise participate in the preparation classes for membership’. (*Constitution, Practice and Discipline*, Vol 2, 1999, p 214 and 485).

<sup>245</sup> There have been other catechumenate programmes which have been developed recently, such as ‘Credo’, an Anglo-Catholic course, but they have not been significant in Methodism.

about 650,000 people in the UK have gone through an Alpha course.<sup>246</sup> A total of over 50,000 Emmaus books have been sold, including 8,000 nurture courses – the latter is a fair indication of the number of churches undertaking the course from the beginning at least.

Alpha grew out of a nurture group following up a mission in 1980 to Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, West London (HTB). As the course developed, HTB saw hundreds of people, mostly young professionals from this cosmopolitan but mainly middle-class area, becoming Christians. The course was promoted nationally and then internationally. The 15 sessions are usually held over 11 or so weeks, with the 3 key sessions on the Holy Spirit held over a weekend or Saturday - the course has a charismatic emphasis and it is often these sessions which produce the most dramatic results in terms of life-changing experiences. Indeed, the course is to a large extent focused around these Holy Spirit sessions, when ‘decision moments’ are looked for. The general format of a shared meal, short time of worship, teaching session aimed at unchurched people (this was videoed for use in other churches), and no-holds-barred discussion in small groups, has proved very culturally transferable.

As Clarke comments, the bringing together of what he calls ‘proclamation’ (the teaching sessions) and persuasion (the group discussions) is an effective strategy.<sup>247</sup> I have yet to hear from any participant on an Alpha course who was negative about it overall; the opportunity for friendship-building over a meal, the general content of the video sessions and the openness of the small group discussions have all been favourably received. However, despite being involved in Alpha courses in 3 different Methodist churches, I have yet to come across a participant who was not already within or on the fringe of the church, whereas the course is designed primarily for non-Christians – church folk are encouraged to bring their friends. It is larger churches where there are already significant numbers of younger people with well-developed networks of relationships with non-Christians which have seen most significant growth through Alpha.<sup>248</sup> Generally,

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<sup>246</sup> Figures provided by ‘Alpha’ office at Holy Trinity Brompton, January 2000. They will be an underestimate, since some churches do not register.

<sup>247</sup> J Clarke, *Evangelism that Really Works*, p86.

<sup>248</sup> This is a conclusion from Clarke’s research (*ibid*, pp86-7); he calls such churches with strong relationship networks outside the church ‘Web churches’. These generally show greater numerical growth through evangelistic efforts than do ‘Osmosis churches’, where people are drawn in through the church’s fringe.

though, churches which have experience of Alpha have been encouraged by it since it is clearly an effective vehicle for communicating the basics of the Gospel.

Emmaus, on the other hand, grew out of a course designed in a parish church in the 'missionary' Diocese of Wakefield, 'inspired by the recent renewal of interest in the catechumenate as an accompanied journey of faith'.<sup>249</sup> Written by 5 Anglicans and published by the Bible Society and National Society/Church House Publishing, it has been designed for use by all denominations in the UK. One of the writers is John Finney, and the conclusions of his research (published in *Finding Faith Today*, 1992) would appear to have been taken on board in designing the course, especially those relating to 'belonging coming before believing', coming to faith as more usually a process often over a long period, and the importance of Christian lifestyles in attracting friends etc to Christ.

Where Alpha works best with larger groups (25-30 is suggested as an ideal size), the Emmaus course is designed for smaller, home-based groups – 6-10 is recommended. In practice, it has generally tended to be the larger churches which have used Alpha and the smaller ones Emmaus. Whilst Alpha is focused on bringing non-Christians to a point of commitment, or existing Christians to a deeper commitment and infilling of the Holy Spirit, Emmaus is a comprehensive course which includes evangelism, nurture and growth. Emmaus also provides detailed suggestions on means of making contact with people to involve them in the course. Whilst both Alpha and Emmaus are comfortable with Gavin Reid's statement that: 'Evangelism is a process rather than a crisis [event], though there may well be a crisis [event] in the process'<sup>250</sup>, Alpha puts more emphasis on the event (crisis), Emmaus on the process.

The first 15 sessions of Emmaus, 'What Christians believe', 'How Christians grow' and 'Living the Christian life', cover much of the same subject-matter, albeit in a very different format, as Alpha but already there is a greater emphasis on Christian lifestyle. Interestingly, though, Emmaus has one session, the sixth, entitled 'Becoming a Christian' where non-Christians are invited to make a first-time commitment; Alpha avoids such a session, although opportunities are provided in two of the early sessions

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<sup>249</sup> S Cottrell et al: *Emmaus: The Way of Faith, Introduction*, p vii.

<sup>250</sup> Clarke, *Evangelism that Really Works*, 1995, p10.

(‘Why did Jesus die?’ and ‘How can I be sure of my faith?’) and during the Holy Spirit sessions.

There follow 4 distinct ‘Growth’ series entitled ‘Knowing God’, ‘Growing as a Christian’, ‘Christian lifestyles’ and ‘Your Kingdom Come’ which together provide a comprehensive programme of nurture and discipleship. Altogether, there are over 80 sessions in the Emmaus course which would take about 2 years to complete, although it is not recommended that groups simply work their way through the whole course. However, there is no reason why groups could not intersperse material, especially from the ‘Growth’ series, with other activities or programmes. Also, the ‘growth’ series, or parts of it, can be used as a follow-up for Alpha groups which wanted to continue and many churches have done this.

It seems from the Emmaus material that the church’s minister, or perhaps a theologically-educated lay person (such as a recently-trained local preacher in a Methodist church), is generally expected to lead the group through the first 15 nurture sessions, to provide the teaching input and help with questions.<sup>251</sup> The following ‘Growth’ sessions are designed to be lay-led and this pattern was recently followed by Elvet Methodist Church in its use of Emmaus. Elvet only attracted one non-church member to their nurture group, but this person has been drawn into the life and faith of the church through the course. The ‘Growth’ sessions, used by 3 existing house groups, met with a mixed reception – one positive, one negative and one who felt they should have begun with the nurture material. However, two groups are to continue with the ‘Growth’ course.

Both Alpha and Emmaus have considerable strengths and possibilities as tools for evangelism and nurture in a local Methodist church. Whilst there is little real difference between the two in theological terms (despite the perception among some Methodists that Alpha is ‘fundamentalist’), there is a difference in emphasis and which is most appropriate in any given situation will depend on:

1. The church’s worship tradition – if there is no charismatic tradition in the church and the minister/lay leadership is not comfortable with this, then Alpha may not be appropriate because the Holy Spirit sessions are central to the course. On the other

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<sup>251</sup>See S Cottrell et al: *Emmaus: The Way of Faith, Stage 2*, p5.

hand, Alpha may be just what the church needs, provided it is prepared to be shaken up!

2. The church's theological tradition – although both courses are soundly orthodox and could both be described as 'open evangelical', Alpha is perhaps more suited to a more evangelical church which is used to calling for public response from the congregation.
3. Leaders/skills available – Alpha requires, on the whole, less input in terms of the level of leadership training/skill involved, provided the videos are used. A minister with limited time may feel Alpha, where at least 20-30 people can more easily be handled at once (with help from suitable small group leaders), would be more appropriate. On the other hand, investment in a course for small group leaders for people who already have a degree of theological competence (such as local preachers) could pay dividends in the long term through a series of Emmaus groups, since this is another way of empowering lay leadership.
4. The church culture context – if small groups are not already part of the life of the church, Alpha may prove an easier introduction to small group life than Emmaus. Once introduced, however, the Emmaus 'Growth' series provide excellent material for their continuance.
5. Practical considerations – if there is no suitable local venue to provide a meal for 20+ people, and providing meals in home-based groups is not possible, Alpha may have to be ruled out, since the general consensus is that the meal is an important part of the format.
6. Adaptability – whereas sections of Emmaus could be used for small groups, and can be adapted or tailored for local circumstances, Alpha comes as a package.

To be 'successful' in terms of bringing new people to faith, both Alpha and Emmaus depend upon church people inviting others from their networks of friends, from the church fringe, neighbours etc. Methodist churches have contacts through dealing with rites of passage – baptisms, weddings and funerals – and this is an obvious place to start. However, in my experience with Alpha and Elvet's with Emmaus, friendship contacts with a church member actually bringing a friend along are likely to prove more successful.

Many churches have found that existing church-goers have deepened or re-discovered their faith as a result of both courses and this, in providing a stronger orientation towards

God, may well be helpful in developing a church's mission-mindedness. Reflecting on our 'ideal type', taking as many church members as possible through an Alpha or Emmaus nurture course would make a significant contribution in developing the kind of enthusiastic, God-centred faith which a mission-minded church needs<sup>252</sup>. Perhaps this could form the first stage of a long-term strategy for mission.

Emmaus also provides the kind of long-term discipling material which Wesley would have approved of, particularly in the connections it makes between a Christian's faith and everyday life. Compared to the Methodist-based 'Disciple' course<sup>253</sup>, Emmaus is more practical and focused more on one's lifestyles and values, rather than knowledge of the Bible, and therefore in my view more Wesleyan. The Emmaus material can be used with any group of existing Christians and in my opinion is both better and much more comprehensive than the follow-up Alpha material. It could in itself be used as a resource for the 'Word' section of cell groups, but this would have to be handled carefully so as not to detract from the overall focus of such groups.

### **Social and Community Action**

The three different approaches to evangelism and mission examined above have all been focused largely on the spiritual life of the church and its members, both existing and potential. Whilst Emmaus, particularly through its 'Your Kingdom Come' section, advocates Christians being involved in social action in the local community and best cell group practice includes this, it is not a primary focus. However, a holistic approach to mission must include an engagement with the physical, social and economic needs of people, both as individuals and as the local community, particularly if it is to be true to Methodist tradition.

Clearly, no one local church could hope to meet all these needs around it, and the emphasis will, hopefully, reflect the particular needs of the local community as well as the resources available to the church and the opportunities presented to it. Dunn, in his book *The Kingdom of God in North-East England*, identified a number of initiatives

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<sup>252</sup> I have noted with interest that there has been a strong correlation between the people in Lumley church who are involved with the (cell-based) home groups and those who have undergone the Alpha course. However, I suspect this is due to a combination of factors – a re-kindling of faith, an acceptance of small groups and the stage of entry into the church.

<sup>253</sup> This is an intensive Bible-study course over a 34-week period which aims to take the participant, by home and group-based study, through the whole Bible, applying its truths to everyday life. Participants known to me have found it very worthwhile, but also very demanding of time and effort.

which various churches had taken on their premises. These included converting a redundant church hall into a youth training workshop/centre for youth business start-ups; opening a coffee-bar and 'listening post' aimed at young people; starting a day centre for the mentally ill and opening a Fair Trade shop.

In Whitley Bay the Churches Acting Together operate a scheme to provide housing for homeless young people in the town and many churches are actively involved in starting and running Credit Unions in the region. Drop-ins for the elderly, parent and toddler/playgroups, youth clubs are all normal activities in the life of many churches.<sup>254</sup> Rather than an, of necessity superficial, examination of all these, I have looked in some depth, with the help of a similar questionnaire to that used in Chapter Three, at a church known to me which is very active in this area:

### **Woodhouse Close Church, Bishop Auckland**

This is a joint Anglican/Methodist LEP, where the building is owned by the Methodist Church and the full-time minister is an Anglican priest<sup>255</sup>. It is situated in the centre of the large local authority-owned Woodhouse Close housing estate (population 5,400) on the south-west edge of Bishop Auckland. Woodhouse Close is one of the most deprived wards in County Durham, with high rates of unemployment, single-parent families, elderly people and households without cars. This multiple deprivation is the main reason why there is a local-authority funded full-time youth and community worker for the estate. This worker is based at the church, where there is also a team of part-time helpers<sup>256</sup>, also funded by the local authority. The previous youth and community worker has recently taken early retirement after 20 years service<sup>257</sup> – she is still an active member of the church, a local preacher and a paid part-time circuit lay worker. Whilst she has been replaced, her successor has no involvement in the spiritual life of the church.

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<sup>254</sup> Although, as was noted in Chapter Three, it is increasingly difficult for many churches to find volunteers prepared to work with young people and many church-based youth clubs have been forced to close down in recent years.

<sup>255</sup> The new incumbent's recent appointment (May 1999) followed a 16-month inter-regnum, not an untypical period for this church.

<sup>256</sup> Some of these are active church members.

<sup>257</sup> Jane Armstrong was awarded the MBE in 1996 in recognition of her outstanding work for the Woodhouse Close community over this time.

The church premises are used by the local authority twice-weekly (Tuesday and Thursday to coincide with Lunch Club) for the preparation of 24 Meals on Wheels for local distribution. The premises are also the base for the local Furniture Project, which recycles donated furniture to those in need on the estate; on average, it has 100 callers per week and makes 36 collections/deliveries. Also, the annual church expenditure includes significant amounts set aside for children and young peoples' work (6%), and for giving/local outreach, including money set aside to replace the furniture van (12%).

Clearly, this is by no means a typical church and has access to resources of people and outside funding which many churches could only dream of, but it does demonstrate the possibilities presented by a wide-ranging engagement with the local community. It represents perhaps an 'ideal type' church in this respect – it sees itself primarily as both a resource and advocate for the estate, its orientation is very much outwards to the local community. It is very accepting of local people, even when they do things which do not merit acceptance – its theology is very incarnational and would place a strong emphasis on the person and life of Jesus in its view of God.

The membership is about 80 and the average attendance at Sunday morning worship (the main service) is about 50 adults, including 10 Junior Church teachers, and about 20 children.<sup>258</sup> There is a relative absence of younger adults and particularly men in the congregation, but despite this, with the external help identified above, the following groups are sustained on church premises:

**Playgroup** – twice-weekly (Mon & Fri am). Qualified leaders, average attendance 24 (+ 12 parents). Service held monthly gives an evangelistic dimension.

**Parent and toddler group** – weekly (Wed pm). 20 children, 20 adults. Provides family support, plus monthly service again.

**Parent and baby clinic** – weekly (Wed am), Health visitors present, 25 babies + adults. Valuable source of health advice for families.

**Junior youth club** – weekly (Mon eve). 40 children aged 5-11. Qualified leaders + 10 volunteers – all are needed for what is very demanding work.

**Youth club** – weekly (Tues eve). Up to 20 members, qualified leaders. A difficult group with whom trying to develop friendship.

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<sup>258</sup> The high ratio of teachers to children reflects the difficult and disruptive behaviour of many of the children.

**Monday club** – weekly (Mon eve). Fellowship and friendship for special needs adults. 50 + 12 volunteers.

**Lunch club** – twice-weekly (Tues & Thurs lunchtime). 24 people. Provides fellowship and meets social needs.

**BAFAC** – weekly (Tues 10-3). For young physically disabled people. 6 members, meet for friendship and outings. When in, share meal with lunch club.

**Day club for elderly** – weekly (Thurs 10-2). 12 people + leaders. Housebound brought by taxi. Share meal with lunch club.

**Women's bright hour** – weekly (Thurs pm). Programme of speakers and activities to encourage Christian fellowship. Attended by elderly ladies, mostly church attendees.

**Ballroom dancers** – weekly (Wed eve). Provided by specialists from outside church.

**Friends in fellowship** – monthly (Wed eve) ladies group. 30, including some special needs and many non-church members. Programme begins with prayer and also includes services in church at Christmas/Easter

It is apparent that the church premises are in almost continuous use during the week by various parts of the local community, which reciprocates the acceptance of the church by viewing the church buildings as a community resource. Although most of the activities are primarily secular in orientation, they all offer friendship and support, often to people who lack that outside. The friendship and confidence which being part of the Monday Club has brought to special needs people has drawn some into the worship life of the church and some of the youngsters attending youth clubs come to Junior Church on Sundays. Also, the playgroup and parent and toddler group's holding of monthly services goes beyond what similar groups in Chester-le-Street circuit offer; these monthly services have also helped draw some parents to occasional, seasonal church services. Finally, some church members have joined as a result of becoming involved first through voluntary work – 'coming in through the back door and later coming to worship'<sup>259</sup>.

However, with slowly declining membership and worship attendance and an ageing leadership where too few people are doing too many jobs in the church, it may be thought that the church is failing in its mission. If 'success' is judged purely in numerical terms then this would be true, but I do not consider this provides the whole picture by

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<sup>259</sup> A quote from the completed questionnaire.

any means. My perception from a long acquaintance with the church, and from attending a 'community celebration' to mark the former youth and community worker's award of the MBE, is that the church is seen by many on the estate, who have no part in the worship life of the church, as a refuge, a place where support and help can be found, where people are more likely to be 'for them' than 'against them', in contrast to what is often for them a hostile world. In the words of the completed questionnaire:

'Many people who help with the community work feel they 'belong' to the church even though worship is not part of their lives. Comments like 'I go to church' may mean helping with the furniture or coming for lunch.'

Although in many communities people who do not attend their local church often still regard it as 'their' church, especially if there is any threat to it by closure or significant change, this is a more tangible feeling in Woodhouse Close which is based on being involved in what actually happens there, rather than mere history or geography. It is hard to put any quantitative value on this, but it may be making a real difference to the lives of many people, especially children and young people, when the address 'Woodhouse Close' represents a considerable handicap in dealing with educational establishments, welfare bureaucracy, financial institutions and potential employers. The church's policy statement reflects this perception of its role:

'The local community recognises the Church as a refuge, oasis, meeting point, advice centre and a place of peace and trust – God's house.... While there is a great complexity of action and activity, it is based on the simple aim of loving and caring for all in the community – 'from pre-conception to resurrection' – in the name of Christ'.

There are no groups meeting in homes and all the work the church is involved in with the community and young people is based on church premises, except for some involvement in local schools which is considered important by the church. Given the local circumstances and the fact that some of the leading church members do not actually live on the estate itself, it may well be that this emphasis on the church as a physical building, rather than a community of people, has more validity here than it would in most local churches. However, some detached youth work in the community may be worthwhile and a more obvious presence by church folk in some other community institutions on the estate, apart from schools, could be considered – the Boys' Club, the local pub, the sports centre/swimming pool, the magistrates' court.

The church itself recognises its weakness in terms of spiritual nurture and discipleship. There are currently no Bible study or prayer groups and the Ladies' Bright hour has a very similar format to a Methodist worship service. A lack of musicians in the church also prevents any move towards more contemporary worship, although there is a drama group led by a trained dramatist. In my view, the rather traditional feel of the worship here does not encourage attendance by people who are largely unchurched, or de-churched. The new incumbent does hope to involve the drama group in worship to encourage congregational participation and he also intends to begin a new prayer group, with the hope that they will then become involved in intercessions during worship. The church will need outside help with musicians if it is to broaden its use of music in worship; this could come from the rest of the Methodist circuit. A planned Bible study group may provide a training ground for leaders of further such groups and in the longer term the new incumbent hopes to introduce a formalised nurture/discipleship programme such as Emmaus. In addition, the lack of attention to pastoral visiting is to be addressed. Much of the work in all this development work will fall on the new incumbent, with some help from the lay worker. It would seem that the identification and training of suitable other lay people who can provide spiritual leadership in the church, as well as the more practical leadership which is already provided, is a matter of some urgency if the new incumbent is not to over-stretch himself.

What is important, in my opinion, is that in developing the worship and nurture/discipleship aspects of church life, quite properly in order to redress the current imbalance, the breadth and depth of the church's involvement with the local community is not allowed to suffer. Much research on youth and community work has stressed the need for **continuity** – ideally, this continuity should extend in the case of youth work to individual leaders. In Woodhouse Close the people feel they have been let down by enough agencies and people over the years and for the church to fall into this category would be nothing short of disastrous.

Overall, it could be argued that Woodhouse Close church has spent most of its energies trying to meet the social and physical needs of the local community and while it has done much especially in the areas of youngsters and people with special needs, this has been at the expense of meeting the spiritual needs of its own members as well as the wider community. The church would possibly agree with this suggestion, but I would argue that many of its members have, in reaching out to people in real need, been

witnessing more effectively than many Christians who would consider themselves more evangelical and, in the process, they have been developing their own spiritual lives – perhaps this has not been sufficiently theologically interpreted, though.

Furthermore, in its theological approach it has been meeting people at their primary point of need – as the old adage goes, a starving man needs bread, not theology, or as Max Weber expressed sociologically the different kinds of salvation which are appropriate for different social groups, beginning with sufficiency of food and justice<sup>260</sup>. Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as addressing a person's physical or emotional needs (for such as healing or social acceptance) before their spiritual need. Historically, the Methodist Church, especially in its early days, did much to address those kinds of needs, without compromising its evangelical theology. In developing modern models for mission we must avoid focusing only on the classical evangelical way of looking at salvation and seek to address the primary needs in our local situations. The greatest need both individually and collectively on Woodhouse Close estate, notwithstanding the unemployment and poverty, is probably for a sense of self-worth and the church does all it can to meet that need. Clearly, this church is not, in detail, an appropriate model for most other local churches, since it has evolved in response to the specific needs around it and has resources, especially people funded by other agencies, not available to most. However, the very fact that it is attempting, and to a considerable degree succeeding, to meet local needs must be a goal to which other mission-minded churches should strive.

### **KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTHENTIC MISSION-MINDED LOCAL CHURCHES**

In attempting to identify these key characteristics, I shall bear in mind the attitudes of an ideal type mission-minded church towards itself, the local community and God as set out at the end of the previous chapter. Also, the conclusions I have drawn from examining both New Testament and modern models of mission in this chapter and Methodist tradition in Chapter Two provide a classically Methodist context of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Finally, Croft's insight concerning the need for 'Rhythm' (of coming together in worship and going out in mission) and 'Road' (of discipleship) forms a very useful criteria against which to measure any such characteristics.

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<sup>260</sup> *Sociology of Religion*, 1965.

Already at various points I have stressed the need for **balance** between what could be viewed as a pair of opposites, such as evangelism and social action. Such balance is in my view an over-arching theological parameter, since it reflects both the nature of God himself – transcendent yet immanent; just but merciful – and the way he deals with his world – he has revealed himself yet remains mysterious; his Kingdom is now but not yet. I therefore set out my key characteristics as pairs, commenting that the ideal type mission-minded church will put equal emphasis on each characteristic in the pair, but most actual churches will, for reasons relating to their tradition or local situation, tend to put greater emphasis on one than the other. However, to have only one characteristic in each pair would, in my view, fatally weaken a church's missionary enterprise.

### **Openness – to God and to others.**

Any church's mission must not be seen as a local 'crusade', or a measure of the effectiveness of its minister, but as God's mission, ordained and empowered by him. Realisation of this will result in a genuine openness to God, a recognition of the need for a God-given vision for the church's mission and a desire for prayer. No local church can sustain a real commitment to mission without being open to God, energised and enthused by him, expecting him to act through his Spirit and committed to prayer, both individually and corporately. It would be unrealistic and inappropriate for a local church to become mission-minded before a significant proportion of its members, and the majority of its leadership, have reached this place themselves. For some churches, therefore, it will be necessary for its own members to undergo discipleship training through such as Emmaus/Alpha or cell church programmes before embarking on mission ventures.

However, this openness to God must not result in the church becoming a 'holy huddle', too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good. In Croft's 'rhythm' of worship and mission

'The congregation comes together for worship which feeds, nurtures and sustains its life and is sent out again in mission and service in the whole of society, building the kingdom of God. ...much of the building of the kingdom will take place in our wider society and the world'<sup>261</sup>.

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<sup>261</sup> Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p158.

For that to become a reality, there is a need for openness towards the local community, entering into a genuine dialogue with people, an openness that must be universal, remembering Wesley's dictum that we are called to go to 'Those who need us most'.

In a genuinely mission-minded church it is likely that this openness to others will also include other local churches. This ideally means more than a readiness to work with them, but also a preparedness to make positive approaches and adapt one's denominational traditions to the local church situation. Such genuine collaborative working will make mission more effective in the local community since if it is perceived that churches are divided and unable to work together this will put a severe brake on local mission. This will in practice prove easier in some situations than others.<sup>262</sup>

### **The journey of faith - with critical stages**

The Methodist tradition is to see Christian faith as a journey which begins at baptism (still mostly in infancy) and ends at death, but a journey with critical stages. Such stages would clearly include personal commitment to Christ and coming into membership of the church,<sup>263</sup> but also commitment to a particular service in the life of the church and filling of the Holy Spirit (often referred to, after Wesley, as 'the second blessing'). As has been seen, Wesley placed great emphasis on sanctification, the process by which a person grows closer to God and more committed to Christ along this journey. Furthermore, the most critical stage, that of personal commitment to Christ, can itself take place either as an event, eg in response to an 'altar call', or as a process over a long period of time, and the local church needs to be both sensitive to and provide for both possibilities.

The local church, through its mission strategy and programmes, needs to provide for personal faith development but also to have a clear framework whereby critical stages on an individual's journey can be marked and celebrated. Whereas all churches are required to periodically assess the need for membership classes for those ready to come into church membership, and provide such classes through the minister, many churches have neither a sustained programme beyond this initial stage, nor provide opportunities

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<sup>262</sup> I have found real difficulties working with a 'Forward in Faith' Anglican church on the one hand, and an anti-Catholic Pentecostal church on the other!

<sup>263</sup> These two points should be fairly coterminous, but this is not always the case.

for personal testimony for sharing either ongoing discipleship or passing critical stages. Furthermore, the fact that 'calls to commitment' are often frowned upon in local churches means that people are rarely challenged within congregational worship to face such critical stages. If a church is serious about calling people to faith and helping to develop that faith, then it must present such challenges, sensitively and appropriately. The Alpha, and to a lesser extent Emmaus, programmes encourage this, as do Willow Creek-style 'seeker services'.

The cell-based model provides opportunities for individuals to both be challenged about and to share stages of their faith journey, much more so than a church which only comes together for congregational worship. A possible weakness, however, is that over a period of time, cell members may not find their faith experience being deepened through the cell unless the cell programme is properly structured to provide for this.<sup>264</sup> The use of such structured discipleship training as Emmaus 'growth' material could help here.

### **Building a loving community - growing individual disciples**

In the Bible, the need for individuals to establish a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ is balanced, to a certain extent,<sup>265</sup> by an emphasis on the community of believers. Within that community, through both congregational worship and small-group fellowship, the faith of the individual Christian is sustained and the enthusiasm built up. The lives of individuals, the body life of the small groups and the worship of the congregation all need to be attractive and meaningful to other people if the local church is to be effective in its mission. All the models examined could have roles to play in this.

In our increasingly fragmented society, with its emphasis on the individual, the natural human instinct to be part of a mutually-supportive community is often an unmet need. The lessons from the New Testament church, early Methodism and modern cell churches are that becoming part of such a community can be an attractive point of entry for a non-Christian and is essential for a new Christian.

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<sup>264</sup> Some cell members in my church have expressed a desire for more in-depth Bible study.

<sup>265</sup> As a simplistic generalisation, the Old Testament, being at least in part a history of the Jewish people, is stronger on community, the New on the individual.

In terms of the actual activity of mission, in the mission-minded church this will be seen as both the task of individuals in their everyday lives through their networks of relationships and of the local church through its corporate programmes. Each needs the other. Overall, there is nothing more important in mission than developing loving relationships – not only because this has proved effective through the centuries, but because in doing that we reflect Jesus and his Gospel.<sup>266</sup>

### **Distinctiveness – engagement.**

Jesus himself made it clear that his disciples were to be ‘in the world’ but not ‘of the world’ (*John 17:14-18*). The need for a Christian community to be both distinctive from the wider community around it and yet also engaged with it has been stressed many times already. Warren commented: ‘A missionary congregation will, by definition, be both **distinctive and engaged**’<sup>267</sup>. This should be true not just at the level of the local church congregation as a whole, but also the small group and the individual church member. It will therefore be demonstrated both inside and outside the church building/institution.

Distinctiveness will be reflected in behaviour and ethics as well as faith and belief. However, this must not become an entry ‘test’ for those outside the church. True engagement means that **all** are reached out to and **all** are welcomed – but should be encouraged to travel the ‘road’ of discipleship, which must in turn lead to distinctiveness. Both the cell church and Alpha/Emmaus models can help here.

Engagement will be reflected in worship which is accessible to modern, unchurched people in language, form and content<sup>268</sup>, without compromising the Christian doctrine which underpins it and makes it distinctive. Willow Creek and, particularly in the British Methodist context, The Bridge can provide valuable lessons in this.

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<sup>266</sup> Mellor in Logan (ed): *Theology & Evangelism in Wesleyan Heritage*, 1994, p124.

<sup>267</sup> *Building Missionary Congregations*, 1995, p29.

<sup>268</sup> Given the quality of visual and audio presentations which people are familiar with today, this must include a recognition of the need for a reasonable level of quality in worship, without it becoming entertainment.

### **Living the Gospel – Proclaiming Christ**

Again, the need for a holistic approach to mission which balances both evangelism – proclaiming Christ – and social concern and action – living the Gospel – has been stressed already. However, in my experience it is rare for a local church to be both enthusiastic in evangelism and committed in its social concern/action. Without the latter, we can rightly be accused of being unconcerned with peoples’ physical, economic and emotional needs; without the former there is little to distinguish us from welfare/charitable agencies. Often it is the genuine concern shown for people in practical ways – love in action – which provides opportunities for evangelism; some would say it is only through showing love in action that Christians have the right to speak about Jesus. Woodhouse Close provides a model of this and also indicates ways in which social outreach can provide opportunities for evangelism. Also, where cell groups really engage in a positive way with the people living locally, helping them in practical ways, they can model the balanced approach which Jesus and Wesley demonstrated.

### **Planning ahead – grasping the opportunities**

It is a truism that most churches are not good at planning ahead and few actually attempt to do it, certainly more than a year at a time. Plans will be made for particular ‘mission’ campaigns, in Methodism often led by teams from Cliff College, but they are rarely part of a medium or long-term strategy. Some churches deliberately avoid such planning ahead on theological grounds, arguing that it prevents submission to the leading of the Holy Spirit. However, across the denominations, people are increasingly arguing for churches to plan ahead carefully and continuously; Robin Gill comments: ‘If long-term decline is to be reversed it will require a long-term set of strategies to achieve this’.<sup>269</sup>

Whilst the book of Acts would support the need for spontaneity in mission in response to the Spirit (eg 8:26, 13:2-4, 16:7-10), as Dunn points out there had been pre-planning in the selection of Saul/Paul (9:15,16) and his (mis-named) second/third missionary journey was in fact a sustained mission over a period of several years.<sup>270</sup> By implication, this would have needed organisation and planning, whilst also being open

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<sup>269</sup> *A Vision for Growth*, 1994, p98.

<sup>270</sup> Dunn’s commentary on *Acts*, 1996, pp171, 212.

to the Spirit leading in new directions as opportunities arose. Again, the early history of Methodism would support the need to both grasp opportunities which events and the leading of the Spirit presented (eg the formation of the first classes), but also to plan ahead and organise carefully.

Churches are increasingly encouraged to review or audit their programmes, especially with regard to mission, draw up 'Mission' or 'Vision' Statements and to make plans for putting those statements into practice. However, those plans, which could be for 5 years ahead, must never be so rigid that they cannot adapt to and take advantage of a sudden change in the local church (eg major structural problems with the building, the loss/influx of key people) or the community (eg closure of a major employer or community facility). In addition, the mission-minded church must, as it is continually open to God, expect to be led by God's Spirit in new, and sometimes unexpected, directions.

**In summary**, a church which in its theology, spirituality and programme of activities incorporates all the above characteristics, finding the right balance in each pair which reflects its local situation but includes elements of both, will be an ideal type mission-minded church. It will have the attitudes towards God, itself and the local community identified at the end of Chapter Three, it will draw in Methodist fashion upon Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience and will be living both the 'rhythm' of worship and mission and the 'road' of discipleship. It merely remains to briefly examine some of the implications for British Methodist churches of adopting this mission-minded approach.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MAKING BRITISH METHODIST CHURCHES MISSION-MINDED

#### BRITISH METHODISM – CONNEXION TO LOCAL CHURCH

The Methodist Church's organisational self-understanding is set out in the preface to Volume One of its Constitutional Practice and Discipline:

Each local church is a member of a larger body, subject to a common discipline and pattern of government, sharing in a wider life. The authority of Conference has its theological basis in this understanding of the church as a 'connexion' of local churches, circuits and districts, expressing their fellowship in the Body of Christ by their constitutional ties.<sup>271</sup>

An advantage of this 'connexionalism' is the potential it gives for rapid change in that once the connexion decides on a certain course of action, through Conference, then this can be implemented relatively quickly throughout the local churches, unlike in the Church of England, where authority is much more dispersed. However, despite this common discipline, local churches do have a fair degree of autonomy, especially in the way they carry out God's mission in their particular part of his world. From our ideal types, it is clear that the approach of some churches to mission is limited or even non-existent. At the time of writing, the connexion is drafting a document designed to enable local churches to review where they are in terms of their local mission, consider where they feel God wants them to be, and devise a programme to help them get there<sup>272</sup>. Hopefully, this will be adopted by Conference in 2000. Unfortunately, whilst the connexion requires all churches to have quinquennial reviews of their building structures, it is not currently anticipated that such reviews of their own life will be mandatory, but only to be encouraged.<sup>273</sup> Although there are arguments that a process which is forced upon a local church will not be so helpful as one which is voluntary, I feel that **such a review is an essential pre-requisite to developing an appropriate strategy for mission in a local church**. Unless it is required of them, some churches will never undertake this and will instead proceed from one ad-hoc programme (often

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<sup>271</sup> Brian Beck in: *Constitutional Practice and Discipline*, Vol 1, 1988, p v.

<sup>272</sup> The survey part of the review process has been drafted largely by myself, following my experience in Chester-le-Street. Gill advocates church audits for churches generally in *A Vision for Growth*, p97.

<sup>273</sup> In practice, it is likely that if a church is applying for grants of any kind it will need to have undertaken a church review. Also, it will probably be the case that prospective ministers will want to see the results of such a review before taking up an appointment.

someone's 'good idea') to another with no clearly-identified vision and no long-term strategy.

The relationship between local churches and circuits has been referred to in Chapter Two. Clearly, a local church which is enthusiastic and positive about mission needs the support of the circuit in such matters as staffing, finance and the preaching plan. In particular, continuity in the person(s) leading worship from Sunday to Sunday and also making pastoral contacts with those on the fringe or outside of the church, will help to assimilate new worshippers into the life of the church. In the great majority of cases, this continuity can in practice only be achieved by the church's ordained minister, but the need for that minister to preach throughout the circuit will often prevent that happening. I feel that this problem of lack of continuity caused by the circuit preaching plan can be a major stumbling-block to the successful development of mission in local Methodist churches, especially where the quality of local preachers is poor. Furthermore, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that many ministers have pastoral responsibility for several churches. In these circumstances, it is absolutely essential that lay people in the local church provide that continuity by taking on much of the pastoral work, especially with those on the fringe. A cell-based model, with its emphasis on developing every member in ministry, can help here.

The circuit system, with its dependence on lay preachers for leading worship especially in smaller churches, is a potential source of real difficulty in practice. In most circuits the majority of preachers are over 50 and the approach to preaching and leading worship of many of them reveals a lack of empathy with and even exposure to modern culture. It can often appear to congregations which include significant numbers of younger adults and teenagers that an elderly local preacher is caught in a time warp, speaking a different language and failing to communicate in any meaningful way. Local preachers should undertake a programme of continuing development, but this is in practice not compulsory and often those who need it most will not participate – an inappropriate attitude for people in a leadership role to adopt.

It is sometimes the case that a good preacher is not a good worship-leader, and vice-versa, and the Methodist Church has recognised this by providing for the appointment and training of worship leaders. Quality in worship has been identified as important in drawing new people into the life of the local church, and in circuits where there is a

problem with the quality of its local preachers, it is important that a church which is serious about mission appoints and trains its own worship leaders and, where possible, invites preachers who will both encourage and challenge the congregation.<sup>274</sup> By doing this, of course, the circuit system is itself eroded but surely this is preferable to regularly experiencing worship which is dull, out of touch with the needs of the congregation and which ultimately undermines the mission of the local church.

In situations where the planting of a new congregation is needed as part of the mission strategy of a local church, possibly as a result of major housing growth or of an existing congregation growing too big, then this will need the active support of the circuit in all the areas mentioned above. The example of The Bridge showed how effective this can be when such support is forthcoming. In general, where one or more local churches are developing a more mission-minded approach, it is important that the circuit supports this, for instance through a more generous allocation of ministerial resources.

It is also important that the circuit assessment system of dividing the circuit's budget between local churches is sensitive to the needs and resources of a growing church. The normal membership-based system will be based solely on numbers of members, so a growing church will pay more regardless of its actual income and resources. The church centrally has advocated a 'share' system, where each church makes an annual 'bid' for the amount it is prepared to contribute. This, in theory, is a more Christian approach and potentially more sensitive to individual church resources, but does depend for its success on a certain generosity of spirit!

The positive aspect of the church-circuit relationship can be particularly relevant where local churches are small and would find it difficult to develop an effective mission strategy alone. It may be appropriate for a group of small churches in a circuit to review their mission together.<sup>275</sup> Alternatively, people from a larger church could be 'seconded' to a smaller church for a period to review, plan and help implement a mission strategy. The circuit system can be used positively to ensure that gifts which are available in some but not all churches are able to be used across the whole circuit. Local churches

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<sup>274</sup> A church of which I was a member for 16 years, West Auckland in the Bishop Auckland circuit, did this when it planted a new morning congregation and found it a very positive experience.

<sup>275</sup> This will be especially relevant where they serve overlapping catchment areas – such as West Pelton, Pelton and Perkinsville in the Chester-le-Street circuit.

which have experience of, for instance, running Alpha courses could provide leaders for another church in the circuit. However, such assistance should be seen very much as a **catalyst**, rather than provoking a situation where some churches are dependent on people from outside their own community to develop mission locally on a long-term basis.

Grundy puts forward the concept of a 'congregation which is a community of communities' where 'faith and life are shared in human-sized communities', by which he means small groups (or cells?) as a good model for local churches.<sup>276</sup> In many Methodist circuits, where most churches are relatively small, the local church is the 'human-sized community', which has major implications for the organisation of the circuit, particularly with regard to Sunday worship. In such situations local churches could come together for congregational worship on Sundays (and/or at other times as is appropriate locally) and develop their local Christian communities during the week as small-group, cell-type meetings. This would have the added advantage of enabling greater continuity in preaching and, hopefully, a better quality of congregational worship.

With regard to the local church itself, I would contend that the tradition, organisation and theology of the Methodist church all lend themselves to the adoption of a mission-minded approach. The church was born in mission and has a highly-developed awareness of the priesthood of all believers which is reflected in its law and polity. Furthermore, its Arminian roots should provide the impetus for an enthusiastic commitment to mission – all need to be saved, all can be saved through God's prevenient grace in Christ, but each individual has the God-given freedom to accept or reject Christ. Therefore, each individual needs to be presented with the truth of Christ in order that they can exercise that freedom on an informed basis. On a purely practical level, the rapid decline of Methodism in recent decades has created an added urgency to the need for a mission-minded approach. Why, then, given all this do so few Methodist churches (in my experience) have an enthusiastic and long-term commitment to mission?<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> *Understanding Congregations*, 1998, p70. Croft, in *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p199, takes this further and develops the cell church model into his 'Transforming Communities' church, where each small group is a dynamic centre for mission and growth as well as nurture and pastoral care.

<sup>277</sup> Witterington III, in Logan (ed), *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, 1994, comments that the following quote from Wesley to the established church of his time could equally be applied to

One reason lies in the ideal types previously identified – many churches have become predominantly like the remnant or institutional types, due to history and circumstances. Some triggers which may help move such churches towards being more mission-minded have already been suggested, but the essential pre-requisite to this for any church is a **spiritual enthusiasm**<sup>278</sup> which drives both the desire to evangelise and a compassion for people which is expressed in social concern and action. In too many churches, such enthusiasm is either absent or confined to an insufficiently-small minority. Warren's work for the Durham diocese confirms the importance of this underlying enthusiasm as the engine for a church's mission. Where it is absent or too limited, then the first task has to be to work towards its generation and increase.

A further explanation lies in the fact that, despite the history, theology and constitution of Methodism many churches have in practice become very dependent upon their ordained minister. For them, if the minister is not committed to mission and prepared to give a strong lead in that area, then the church will not be mission-minded. One hears stories (some of which should, of course, be taken with a pinch of salt) even of churches which have been committed to mission until a new minister arrives with a different outlook, and the mission grinds to a halt. A tradition of a strong leadership team in a local church, where the minister is one among equals, can help to overcome this particular problem. At this point the implications of local churches becoming mission-minded for the role of the minister should be considered briefly.

### **THE ORDAINED MINISTER – SERVANT, PASTOR, LEADER**<sup>279</sup>

The work of such as Schwarz and Warren has identified an effective partnership between laity and ordained minister as a key characteristic of growing, healthy churches. Warren uses two criteria to reflect the need for such a partnership: 'enabling leadership' and 'participative laity'.<sup>280</sup> Clearly, in a mission-minded church the whole membership will gladly share in taking God's mission forward in their local church.

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modern Western Methodism: 'How is it that you have taken food out of the mouths of the poor and spiritual food away from those who have never heard of Christ, in order to spend endlessly on the upkeep of buildings and programmes that only really benefit yourselves?' (p79).

<sup>278</sup> Such 'enthusiasm' should not necessarily be equated with charismatic fervour; it can with equal legitimacy be a spirituality which is expressed in traditional liturgy or quiet prayer.

<sup>279</sup> This broadly reflects Croft's Three Dimensions of *Diakonia, Presbyter, Episcopo (Ministry in Three Dimensions, 1999)*.

<sup>280</sup> *Growing Healthy Churches*, unpublished report 1999, p9.

However, as Greenwood points out, 'Theologically and practically, there is no truth in the assertion that the increase of lay ministry diminishes the role or power of the clergy'.<sup>281</sup> In fact, paradoxically it is likely that the minister of a mission-minded church will be **more** engaged in the leadership role than that of other churches. This is because her/his role as vision-caster and teacher in enabling and encouraging mission will assume more relative importance, and that of pastoral visitor and minister of word and sacrament less.

This has profound implications for the training and recruitment of ministers. Whilst training in leadership is now being included in college syllabuses, it is not a compulsory element.<sup>282</sup> Teaching on mission is always included, but tends to be biased towards the theoretical rather than assessing and preparing to use the kinds of models for mission examined here. There will be many ministers entering circuit with no experience of leading, and little knowledge of the content, of Emmaus/Alpha/cell church or other mission-oriented programmes. The recent 'Making of Ministry' report<sup>283</sup> emphasised the Church's twin foci of activity as 'worship and mission' (p10), and also stressed the 'inextricable linkage' of ordained clergy and laity in this linked activity (p16). This would surely point to an importance in ministerial training on the ordained minister's role in developing mission programmes involving lay input and even leadership, but this implication for the content of training was not developed and the report focused instead on issues around training colleges, numbers and finance.

This deficit continues into a minister's 2-year probationary period. When I began ministry I was told that my conduct of services and my pastoral visiting were the things which mattered. That emphasis was reflected in the assessment of the 2 years probation, at the end of which there was no examination of either aptitude for or exercise of leadership within the life of the church. There is, however, a general recognition at Connexional level that the training of probationers needs re-assessment and work on this is currently being carried out.

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<sup>281</sup> *Transforming Priesthood*, 1994, p144.

<sup>282</sup> In theory, the Methodist Church as a whole imposes no compulsion on any content of college courses; in practice other elements are considered essential.

<sup>283</sup> Methodist Council, 1996.

Again, the emphasis in the Ordination Service for Presbyters is on worship and preaching, the administration of the sacraments and on service to and caring for 'those whom Christ entrusts to your care'.<sup>284</sup> Although the final charge (p308) does include 'Welcome the stranger' and 'Seek the lost', there is a strong emphasis on worship and preaching and pastoral care for those inside the church, rather than mission to those outside, even indirectly through the leading and training of the laity.

Most ministers I know put the great majority of their time and energy into preparation and conduct of services and pastoral visiting, very little into energising the church into mission and training lay people for mission. This perception is confirmed in an unpublished study of 38 URC ministers in the Midlands<sup>285</sup>, which found that, despite an average working week of 52.5 hours, 'Church growth and development' languished in 5<sup>th</sup> place in importance behind preaching, administration (the fastest-growing area!), pastoring and the wider church. Clarke comments in this study (p20), 'If [paid, ordained] ministers are to become the proclaimants of the Kingdom in an unchurched society, which is the vision of tomorrow for some, a paradigm shift in use of time is necessary within the next decade'.

Perhaps here we have a key reason for the decline of most Methodist churches – if one is merely managing decline, then only pastoral visiting and the ministry of word and sacrament will matter. Also, a minister who is devoted to these two roles, with little lay support, will have neither time nor energy to exercise the leadership role and enthuse the church for mission.<sup>286</sup> Newbigin, speaking from a wide experience of mission, puts it as follows:

The minister is tempted to 'look after' those individuals and families who attend church, and they – in turn – expect him to spend his time doing so. The vision of the church as a body which exists for the neighbourhood and not just for its members, as the sign of God's rule over all, is much harder to sustain. ...Is it the primary business of the ordained minister to look after the spiritual needs of the church members? Is it to represent God's kingdom to the whole community? Or

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<sup>284</sup> *Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p302.

<sup>285</sup> Malcolm Clarke: *What are Ministers for?* 1998.

<sup>286</sup> It is easy to be drawn into this pattern – services have to be prepared for, pastoral visiting is generally reactive in nature; leading and training for mission are pro-active and require for most people a greater effort of will. However, once a mission-based plan and programme have been established, the minister has to plan her/his workload accordingly.

- and surely this is the true answer – is it to lead the whole congregation as God’s embassy to the whole community?<sup>287</sup>

As we have seen, to sustain this mission-minded model of the ordained Methodist minister’s role will require a major shift in thinking from the minister him/herself, the local church congregation and the connexion as a whole.

## **RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE**

The starting point of this thesis was the crisis of decline facing the Methodist Church in Britain and the need to respond radically to that if the Church is to continue to exist. In an attempt to respond constructively to that crisis, the purpose of the thesis was set out as the facilitating of mission in local Methodist churches. An examination of Methodism’s history provided relevant lessons for encouraging mission in today’s churches. A detailed analysis of one Methodist circuit gave indications of what is happening in practice today and pointed to three ideal types in their approaches to mission. The recent history of decline overall means that most Methodist churches are likely to exhibit predominantly remnant (typically for the smaller churches) or institutional characteristics (typically for the larger churches). Clearly, if decline is to be arrested, let alone reversed, characteristics of mission-mindedness must become predominant. Those key characteristics have been identified and contemporary models examined for their potential usefulness. Finally, the implications of this for the organisation and ministry of the church has been considered. Two key questions now remain: firstly, **can local Methodist churches be turned around to become mission-minded?** and secondly, **can the church’s decline be arrested and reversed?**

Throughout the thesis I have provided sufficient evidence and argument to show that the answer to the first question is a clear ‘Yes’, provided the people in a local church, particularly those in leadership, are sufficiently motivated. Such motivation must come ultimately from God, through their openness to him and experience of him – this I would approximate to the ‘spiritual enthusiasm’ referred to earlier as the essential precursor to mission-mindedness. Given that motivation, which in turn produces a desire to take the *Missio Dei* into the church’s local community, there are sufficient lessons and models available from Methodist history and contemporary practice to provide the basis

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<sup>287</sup> *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, pp236-7.

for local mission. Clearly, it would be wrong to assess a church's commitment to mission by the number of Alpha/Emmaus courses it has run/is running, or the number and rate of multiplication of cell groups, or the degree of use of any other models. Neither would it be appropriate to prescribe a model local mission statement, approach or programme because each church and local community are different. Local mission practice must be adapted to local needs and opportunities, bearing in mind the need for balance in the key characteristics identified at the end of Chapter Four.

Given my answer of a conditional 'Yes' to the first key question, it should also be possible to answer a conditional 'Yes' to the second. However, this depends not only on mission-minded characteristics becoming predominant in local Methodist churches but also on that mission successfully drawing at least as many new people into churches as are lost – ie a matter of numbers. Given the age profile of the Methodist Church as a whole, this is quite a task for the immediate future – most churches find they have to 'run fast just to stand still' with regard to membership numbers. Whilst some would argue that numbers are not important (I would agree that numbers alone do not reflect a church's commitment to mission and to have any lasting value numerical growth must be accompanied by spiritual growth), in the end sheer numbers cannot be ignored, particularly given the current situation in the Methodist Church and the questions surrounding its very survival.<sup>288</sup>

Sadly, for many local Methodist churches, the truthful answer to the second question is 'No' and here lies for me a key indicator – the **expectation** of a local church. If it expects to see God at work, peoples' lives being changed, new people being drawn into the life of the church, dynamic change in the church's worship and activities, people being led further along the road of discipleship, an impact for good being made on the wider community, then it must be mission-minded. This should result in numerical growth, although in areas of population decline or rapid change this may be difficult for even the most mission-minded church to achieve. In the end, there is likely to be a correlation between faith and numbers, in that a church which is energised by a faith which is worked out in commitment to both God and their local community through a genuine mission-mindedness will expect to see numerical as well as spiritual growth and will be more likely to see such growth occur. On the other hand a church which has

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<sup>288</sup> Schwarz, unlike Warren, used numbers to assess a church's effectiveness in mission.

lost faith following years of decline and measures its success in terms merely of survival from year to year, or which is entirely inward looking, will seek and expect neither numerical nor spiritual growth, and will be extremely unlikely to see any. Most local churches fall somewhere between these two extremes, but it is clearly apparent that even to survive in the long term, let alone grow, local Methodist churches must not only become more mission-minded but must expect to see God at work, possibly in new and unexpected ways, expect to see new people drawn into the life of the church and expect the church to grow both spiritually and numerically.

APPENDIX I

CHESTER-LE-STREET METHODIST CIRCUIT - SURVEY

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR \_\_\_\_\_ CHURCH

1. Please complete the following chart for your normal church congregation at each Sunday Service. (Extra chart provided for second service where appropriate)

Age	Male	Female	Total
0-4			
5-15			
16-24			
25-39			
40-54			
55-64			
65-74			
75+			
Total			

Adapted from Bible Society Questionnaire with Special Permission  
September 1997

2. Please list all groups within the church (including such as fellowship groups which meet in homes). For each group please give the following information:-

- (i) Type of group (eg Bible study, prayer, youth group, uniformed organisation, women's/men's meeting etc).
- (ii) How often they meet.
- (iii) When and where they meet (ie Tuesday evening at 19 Front Street, Wednesday afternoons at Church).
- (iv) Average attendance.
- (v) How much, on a score out of 10 is it geared towards
  - a) fellowship
  - b) outreach/evangelism
  - c) meeting social needs

Continue on a fresh sheet if necessary.

3. Pastoral Care

a. Is it the policy of your church to periodically visit all the homes of your church members?

Yes  No

b. If yes, how frequently are all the homes of your church members visited?

Once a month  Once a year

Once every 3 months  Less often

Once every 6 months

c. Is it the policy of your church to periodically visit all the homes of the people on your community roll?

Yes  No

d. If yes, how frequently are all the homes of the people on your community roll visited?

Once a month  Once a year

Once every 3 months  Less often

Once every 6 months

e. Does your church have a team of pastoral visitors?

Yes  No

If no go to question h.

f. If yes, how many pastoral visitors does your church have?

\_\_\_\_\_

g. What training, if any, have these pastoral visitors received? (Please describe)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

h. What other arrangements does your church have for the pastoral care of your congregation? (Please describe)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Outreach

a. Evangelism

Which of the following has your church undertaken in the past three years?  
Please tick all that apply)

- Distributing church or community newsletter
- Distributing other Christian literature, inc. Scripture
- Door-to-door visiting
- Local evangelistic missions
- Children's missions
- Evangelism through small groups
- Evangelistic services at your church
- Other?

b. Community service

Which of the following does your church run on a regular basis?

- Luncheon Club
- Sports activity
- Club for retired persons
- Open youth club
- Parents and toddlers
- Other (including any partnership scheme with local authority)

c. Involvement in community action/political issues

In which of the following does your church get involved on a regular basis?

- Housing
- Health Services
- Education
- Other

d. Indicate which, if any of the above, have been successful in drawing people into the worship life of the church.

5. Church Premises

In order for your church to fulfil its mission in the community:

- (i) How well situated are your premises geographically?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- (ii) How well suited are your premises in terms of rooms and facilities?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- (iii) Are your premises used by any local community groups or agencies (including health, local authority) - if so please describe.

- (iv) "Our church's resources (money, people, time) are being seriously depleted by the maintenance of our buildings" - please tick the box which best fits your reaction to this:-

Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree slightly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree slightly	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neither agree or disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>		

6. Church Finances

Please indicate the amounts you have spent in the following areas over the last 5 years.

	1992/3	1993/4	1994/5	1995/6	1996/7
Assessment					
Property					
Children/Youth Work					
Local Outreach					
Home/Overseas Missions					
Other giving					
Other					
Total					

7. **Your local area**

a) Please draw on the enclosed map the area you would see as your church 'catchment area'.

Mark each members' home with a red spot.

b) What would you consider to be the most important human needs in your area? Where are people hurting most?

8. Orientation

- a. In what ways has the church tried, through its regular activities to challenge people to make a new, or renewed commitment to Christ?

Very briefly, indicate what you have done in each of the following areas:

1. Worship
2. Sacraments
3. Preaching
4. Pastoral care
5. Children's and Youth work
6. Discipleship training
7. Leadership training
8. House groups
9. Healing ministry

- 8.
- b. Which of your church services attract "fringe" or unchurched people to your church?
  - c. How successful are you at drawing these people further into the church's life?

9. Partners in Mission

- a. List the other Christian churches in your area and indicate the extent to which you work with them. Estimate their membership in brackets.
- b. List local church associations in which your church is involved (eg Churches Together)

9.

c. Which churches or other Christian organisations do you feel are 'setting the pace' locally?

d. Have you undertaken any joint activities in Christian mission in the last 3 years? If so:-

(i) How successful were they? (please describe)

(ii) Did they reach the "fringe" of the church?  
Or go beyond the fringe?

10. Understanding where we are.

At a meeting of church stewards identify the church's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Only include those which are a clear majority opinion.

- a. List below your church's strengths and weaknesses in order of significance.

Strengths	Weaknesses

- b. List below your church's opportunities and threats in order of significance.

Opportunities	Threats

11. **Purpose**

Does your church have an agreed 'mission statement' or equivalent?

If 'yes', answer a) to d) below.

If 'no' go to e).

a. What is your church's mission statement, or equivalent?

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b. What are the three main objectives of your church for the next five years?

Place them in order of priority.

1. 

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2. 

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3.

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c. What must your church do to achieve these objectives?  
(Please describe)

d. What must your church stop doing to achieve these objectives? (Please describe)

11. (continued)

e. If you **don't** have a mission statement:-

(i) What do you see as the main purpose of this church?

(ii) What things are you doing to fulfil this purpose?

(iii) What more do you need to do?

(iv) What do you need to **stop** doing in order to fulfil it?

## **Chester-le-Street Methodist Circuit**

Rev Paul Worsnop, 9, Newcastle Road, Chester-le-Street, DH3 3TS. Tel 0191 388 3374

2 October 1997

Dear

### **Circuit Survey - Church Questionnaire**

As you will know, the first stage of my development work for the circuit is to carry out a thorough study of the area and its churches, in an attempt to identify potential needs and opportunities for mission in the circuit. I am therefore asking each church to complete a detailed questionnaire, a copy of which I enclose. You will see that it has been adapted from one which the Bible Society uses in its church consultancy work.

Once completed, I will look at the results of the questionnaires together with various information about the area of the circuit, which I shall collate. Hopefully, this exercise will help the circuit determine what the Spirit is saying to us in the context in which we find ourselves and guide us as to appropriate ways in which to respond.

I am sorry if the questionnaire appears rather large and daunting, but please do not feel intimidated by it. Clearly, for the smaller churches the task of completing it will be considerably less onerous since they will have fewer groups and activities. Also, I suggest that you pass some of the questions to other appropriate people in the church, such as Treasurer (Question 5), Pastoral Secretary (6) - I have made suggestions in the corner of the relevant pages.

With regard to question 2, about the various groups in the church, you will need to involve those who lead these groups in answering it; please answer all the elements of this since it is a very important aspect of the survey. Also, for questions which ask for statistical information, such as 1, you may well have someone in the church who likes doing this sort of thing, so please draw on their skill. If you can only give an estimate for any question, please indicate this with an 'E'. I have not asked for membership and attendance figures over recent years, since I can get these from the October returns.

You will see that I have asked the church stewards to complete question 10 together, since it is important that questions of opinion have some sort of consensus; your Minister should also be involved in this. You may well want to discuss other questions, particularly 11, with the minister and stewards and/or other appropriate people in the church. If you think it would be helpful, I would be quite happy to come along and help you through any of the questions, although it is important that I don't steer you in any way and any views and opinions are genuinely those of your church. Feel free to photocopy any pages you are passing on to others, but I would be grateful if you would collate the answers into a complete set before returning them to me.

Please use black pen throughout, except on the map, which is for question 7; where members live outside the area of the map, please indicate numbers and the approximate direction/distance in which they live - full addresses are not necessary.

I expect it will take between one month and six weeks for you to organise and collate the response to the questionnaire; if you feel it is likely to take longer I would be grateful if you would let me know. Meanwhile, if you have any questions about it at all please do not hesitate to give me a call.

With grateful thanks for your help.

Paul Worsnop

Questions to ask people in local community

1. Where do you feel people in this area are hurting most?

What are their most important needs?

2. How do you think the church as a whole is seen by local people?

What about the Methodist Church at .....?

3. What in your opinion could the church do, or do more, to help meet people's needs in the area?

The churches are at: Chester-le-Street  
Birtley  
West Pelton  
Pelton  
Perkinsville  
Gt Lumley

There are no Methodist churches at High Handenhold and Beamish – they come under West Pelton. Also, Ouston and Urpeth are closest to Perkinsville but may look to Birtley (or Chester). Newfield comes under Pelton.

People to go to: Doctors, teachers, shop assistants (especially post offices in villages), police, taxi drivers. This will be easier in the villages than in Chester or Birtley. A good contact for Chester would be the Community Development officers – Liz Robinson, assistant Neil Wilson (note that we don't cover Sacriston/Kimblesworth). Birtley comes under Gateshead Council

**TABLE I**  
**Chester-le-Street Circuit - Age Structure by Ward**

<b>WARD NAME</b> <b>1991 Population</b>	<b>0-4</b> yrs %	<b>5-15</b> yrs %	<b>16-24</b> yrs %	<b>25-39</b> yrs %	<b>40-54</b> yrs %	<b>55-64</b> yrs %	<b>65-74</b> yrs %	<b>75+</b> yrs %
<b>BIRTLEY</b> 12,126	6.2	13.4	13.0	21.0	18.5	10.8	<b>10.4</b>	<b>6.6</b>
<b>OUSTON</b> 3,289	6.0	14.7	13.7	22.3	<b>23.5</b>	11.0	5.8	2.8
<b>URPETH</b> 3,980	<b>8.6</b>	<b>16.4</b>	10.4	<b>34.3</b>	18.9	5.1	3.6	2.8
<b>GRANGE VILLA</b> 1,144	7.2	11.5	<b>17.9</b>	24.2	18.8	9.2	5.9	5.2
<b>PELTON</b> 4,826	6.4	12.8	14.1	24.4	18.0	10.0	8.8	5.6
<b>PELTON FELL</b> 2,565	<b>8.2</b>	12.5	14.0	19.4	18.8	11.6	9.2	6.4
<b>CHEST. NORTH</b> 3,982	5.0	12.1	11.9	18.8	<b>22.6</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>6.8</b>
<b>NORTH LODGE</b> 2,440	4.5	12.8	11.6	16.4	<b>28.6</b>	<b>15.1</b>	7.9	3.0
<b>CHEST. WEST</b> 4,391	6.0	14.8	11.8	19.5	16.3	11.2	<b>11.1</b>	<b>9.2</b>
<b>CHEST. CENT</b> 1,657	7.1	10.3	14.5	<b>29.2</b>	16.6	6.8	8.1	7.4
<b>CHEST. SOUTH</b> 3,953	3.8	11.5	10.8	16.7	22.0	<b>15.0</b>	<b>12.8</b>	<b>7.5</b>
<b>WALDRIDGE</b> 2,532	7.7	14.5	9.6	<b>35.3</b>	20.9	6.6	3.8	1.7
<b>HOLM. PARK</b> 3,515	5.0	12.1	11.0	20.3	21.3	<b>12.6</b>	9.4	<b>8.3</b>
<b>LUMLEY</b> 3,772	5.9	<b>15.0</b>	13.3	21.3	21.4	10.3	8.9	3.9
<b>TOTAL AREA</b> 54,172	6.1	13.4	12.5	22.4	20.1	10.7	8.9	5.8

*Source: OPCS 1991 Census, Small Area Statistics – my highlighting to emphasise wards with relatively high proportion of particular age-groups.*

**TABLE II**  
**Chester-le-Street Circuit – Economic Status and Unemployment by Ward**

**MALE**

**FEMALE**

	economic. active %	permanent sick %	unemployed or on scheme, %	16-24 year-olds, unemployed or on scheme, %	economic. active %	permanent sick %	unemployed or on scheme, %	16-24 year-olds, unemployed or on scheme, %
<b>BIRTLEY</b>	70	10	17	<b>23</b>	48	5	10	<b>15</b>
<b>OUSTON</b>	81	4	11	20	57	2	8	11
<b>URPETH</b>	85	4	7	15	66	2	5	6
<b>GR. VILLA</b>	73	<b>11</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>31</b>	50	6	<b>16</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>PELTON</b>	74	7	17	<b>25</b>	50	5	8	12
<b>PELTON FELL</b>	<b>68</b>	9	<b>27</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>43</b>	4	10	14
<b>CHES. NORTH</b>	70	7	10	16	49	4	8	13
<b>NORTH LODGE</b>	77	3	7	12	57	1	5	5
<b>CHES. WEST</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>39</b>	7	<b>13</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CHES. CENT</b>	78	5	12	17	58	3	7	9
<b>CHES. SOUTH</b>	<b>64</b>	10	13	18	47	4	8	14
<b>WALDRIDGE</b>	87	2	4	7	66	3	5	5
<b>HOLM. PARK</b>	70	5	7	15	50	2	5	10
<b>LUMLEY</b>	73	7	13	18	54	4	8	<b>16</b>

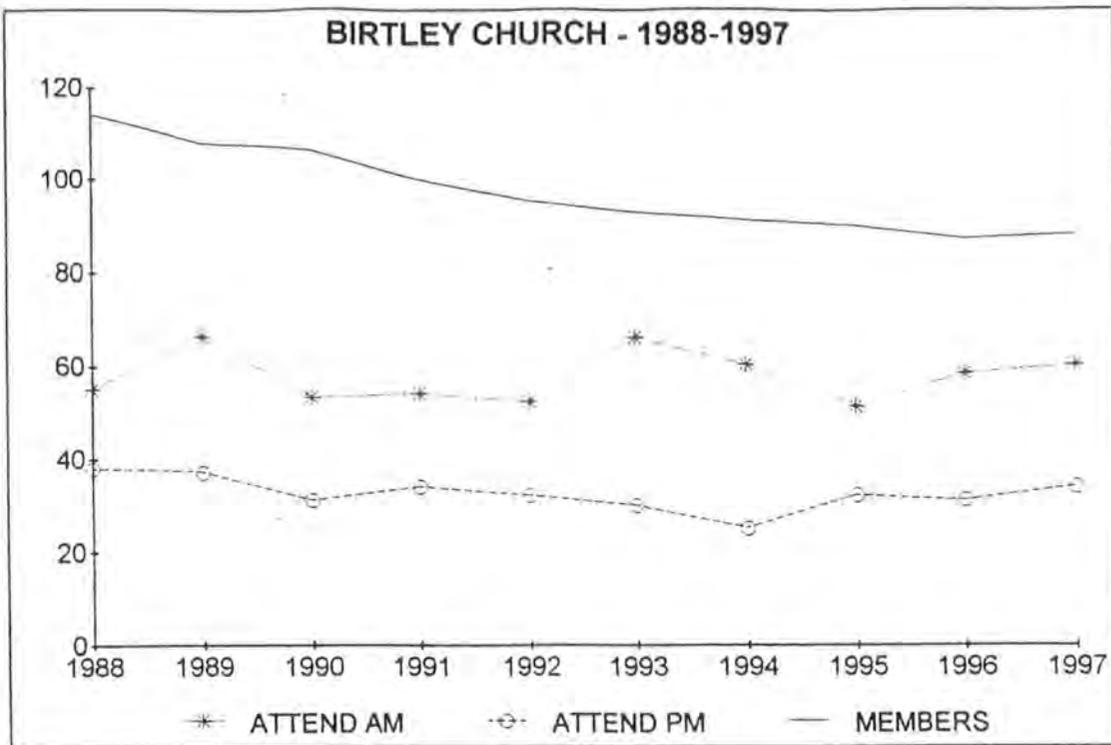
Source: OPCS 1991 Census, Small Area Statistics – my highlighting to emphasise economically deprived wards

**TABLE III**  
**Chester-le-Street Circuit - Social and Economic Conditions of Households by Ward**  
*All figures show percentage of total households in that ward*

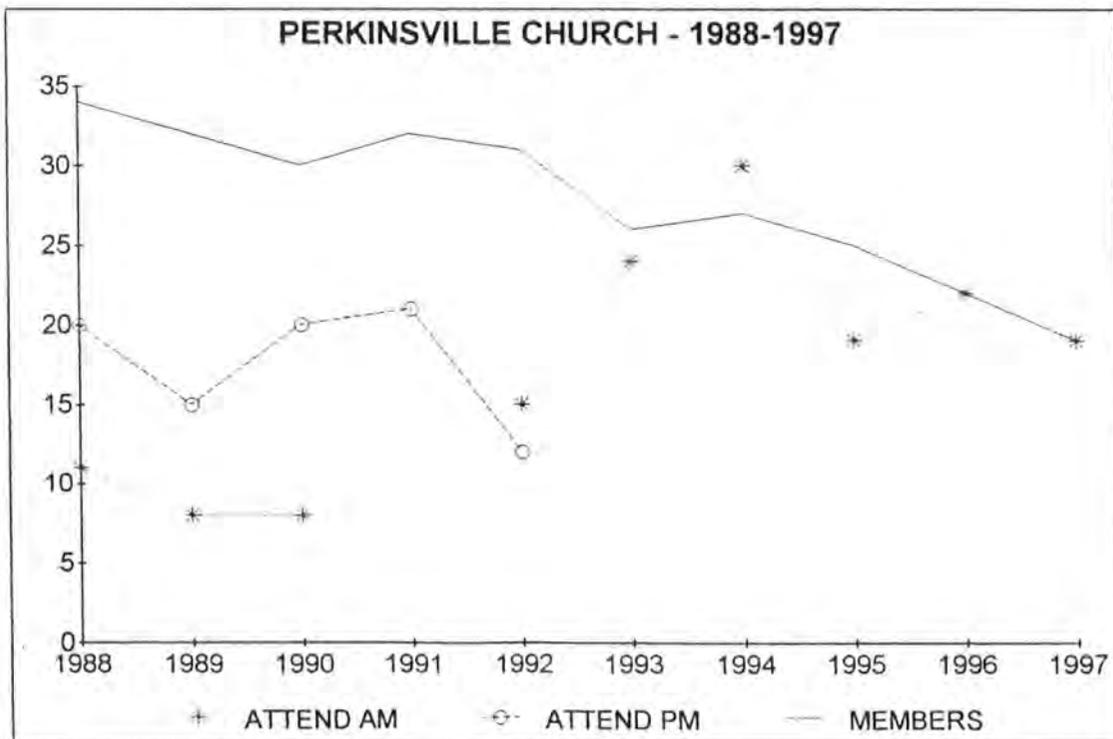
<b>WARD</b> Number of households	<b>% with no car</b>	<b>% with 2 or more cars</b>	<b>% owner occupiers</b>	<b>% Local Authority/ Housing Association</b>	<b>% with no Central Heating</b>	<b>% pensioners living alone or caring for dependent(s)</b>	<b>% moving into ward during previous year</b>	<b>% of 0-15 yr-olds in lone parent households</b>
<b>BIRTLEY</b> 4980	49	12	50	44	5	14	8	15
<b>OUSTON</b> 1182	20	30	80	17	9	6	6	10
<b>URPETH</b> 1495	14	31	87	11	5	6	6	5
<b>GRANGE VILLA</b> 505	43	10	70	15	31	13	11	12
<b>PELTON</b> 1952	40	15	58	39	12	12	8	11
<b>PELTON FELL</b> 1032	49	12	37	60	10	15	5	16
<b>CHESTER NORTH</b> 1633	36	19	65	33	7	14	4	5
<b>NORTH LODGE</b> 899	8	49	97	0	4	10	12	4
<b>CHESTER WEST</b> 1803	57	9	25	73	1	17	14	14
<b>CHESTER CENTRAL</b> 733	42	11	86	8	18	13	11	9
<b>CHESTER SOUTH</b> 1728	40	17	62	36	12	17	6	7
<b>WALDRIDGE</b> 1014	10	34	98	0	4	4	18	4
<b>HOLM PARK</b> 1405	25	27	93	2	10	16	4	6
<b>LUMLEY</b> 1458	31	23	78	19	4	13	4	12
<b>CLS DISTRICT</b>	34	21	66	29	8.5	n/a	n/a	n/a

*Source: OPCS Census Small Area Statistics – my highlighting to emphasise extremes*

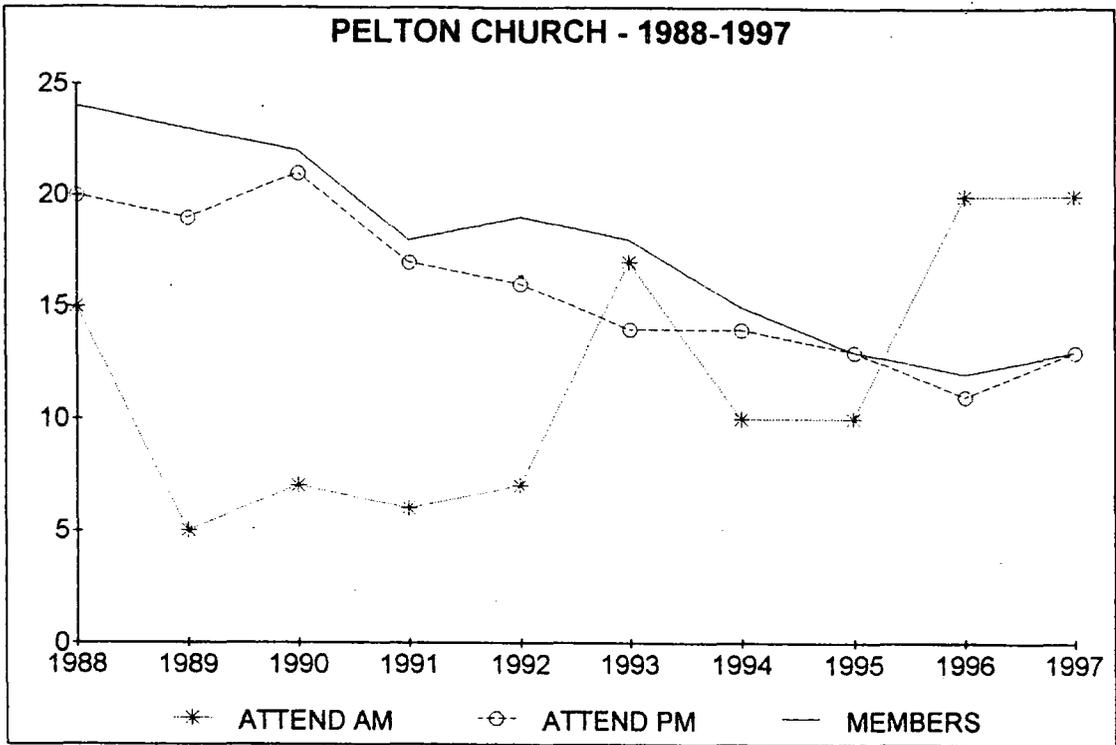
**CHURCHES IN THE CHESTER-LE-STREET CIRCUIT  
FIGURES 1 TO 7: 1988-1997**



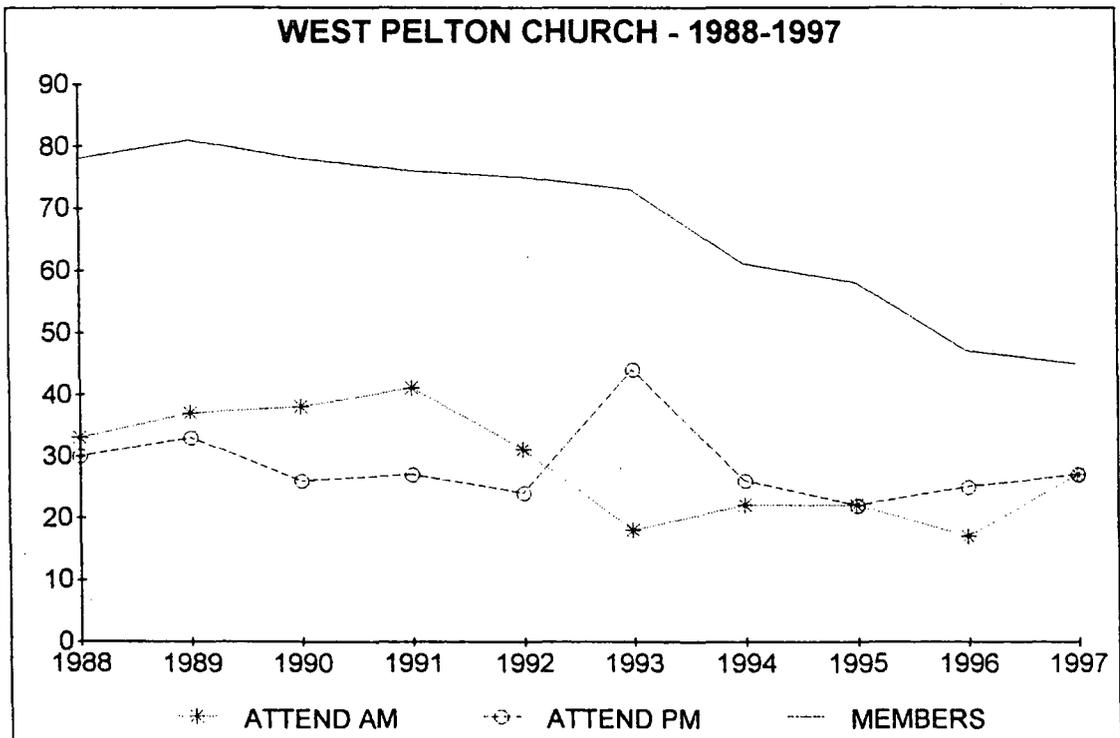
**FIGURE 1**



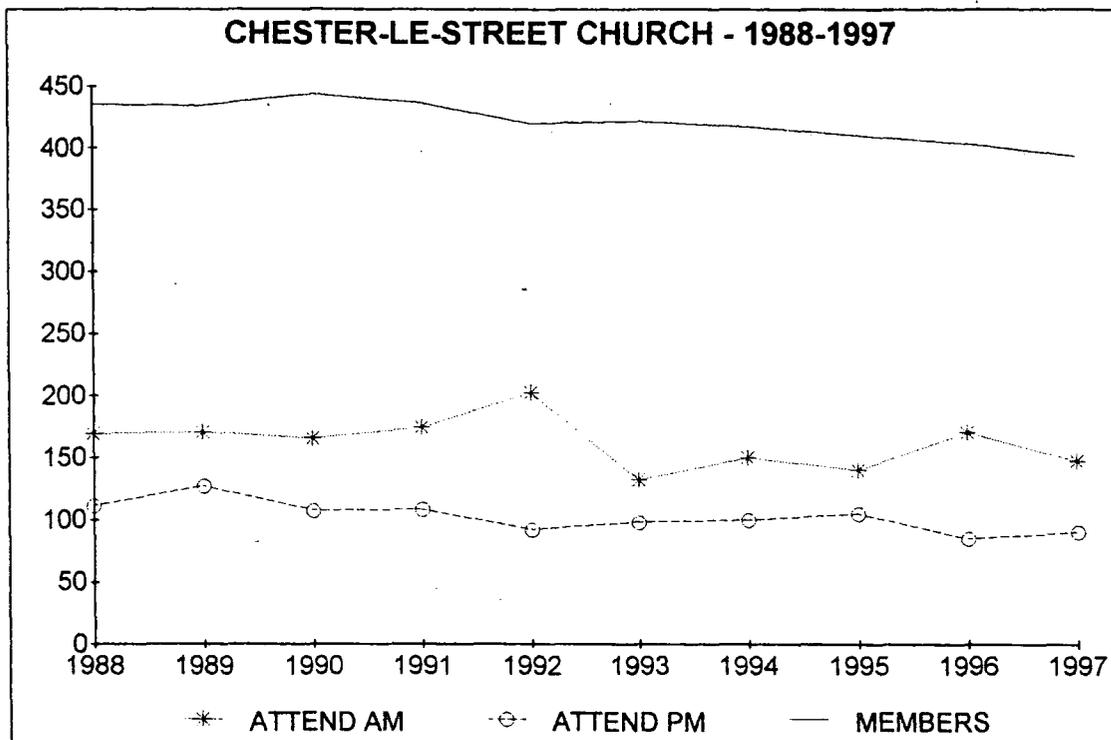
**FIGURE 2**



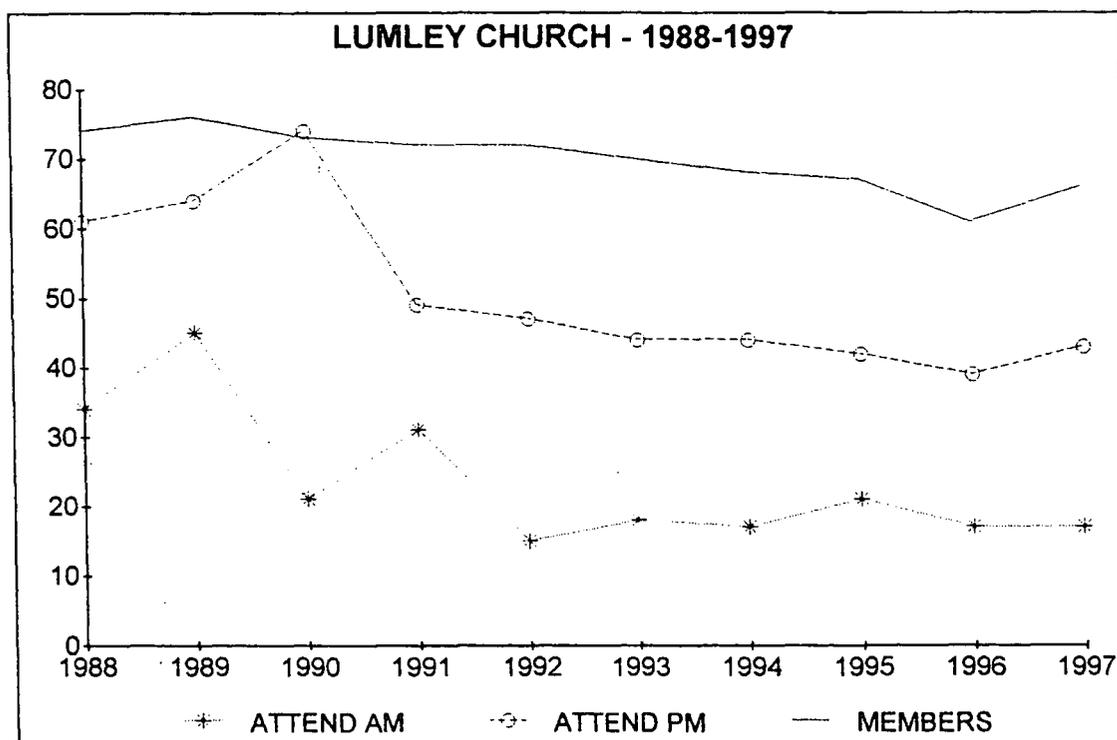
**FIGURE 3**



**FIGURE 4**



**FIGURE 5**



**FIGURE 6**

# MEMBERSHIP '88-'97 ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

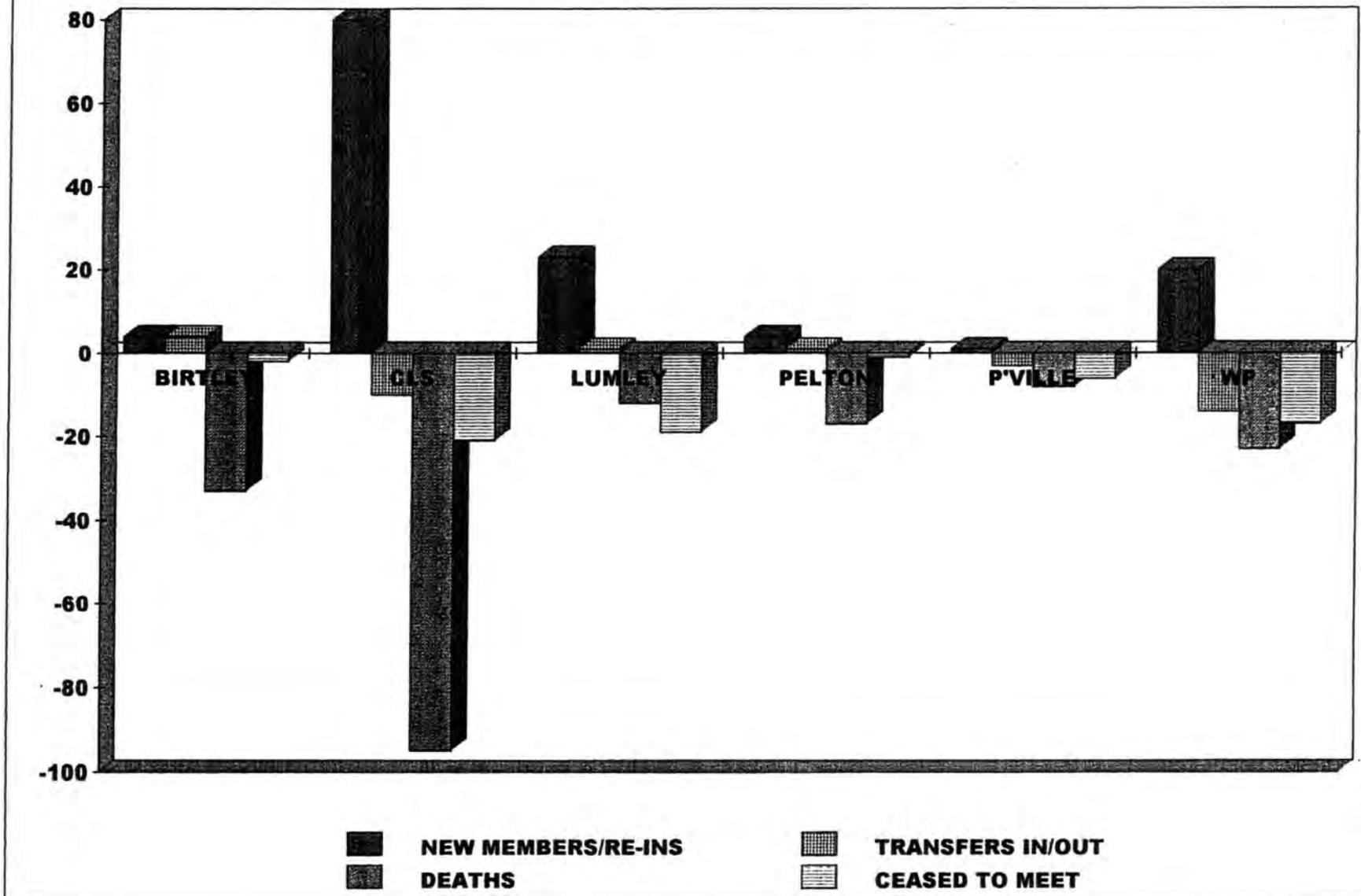


FIGURE 7

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BIRTLEY CHURCH - AGE OF CONGREGATIONS

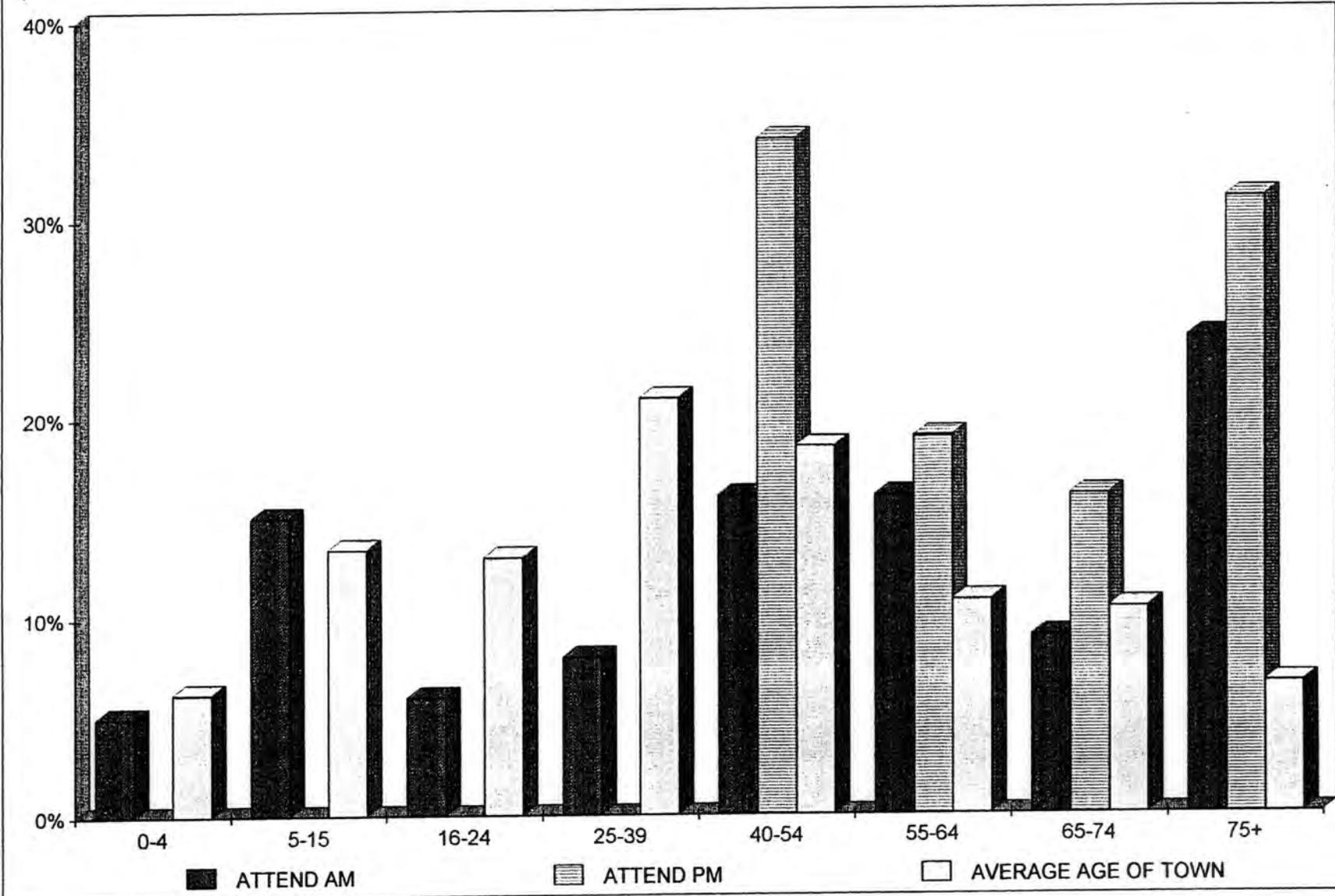


FIGURE 8

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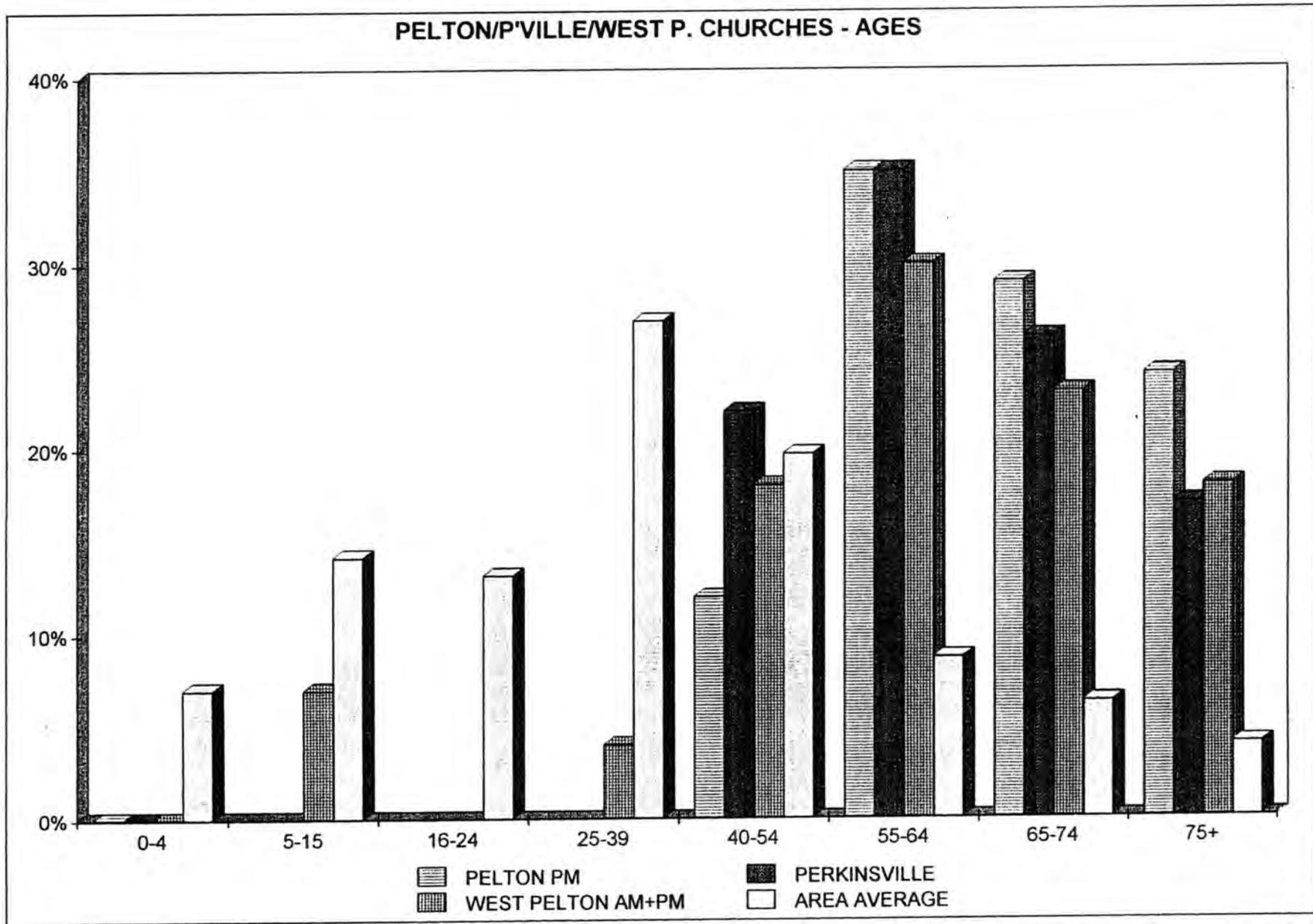


FIGURE 9

# CLS CHURCH - AGE OF CONGREGATIONS

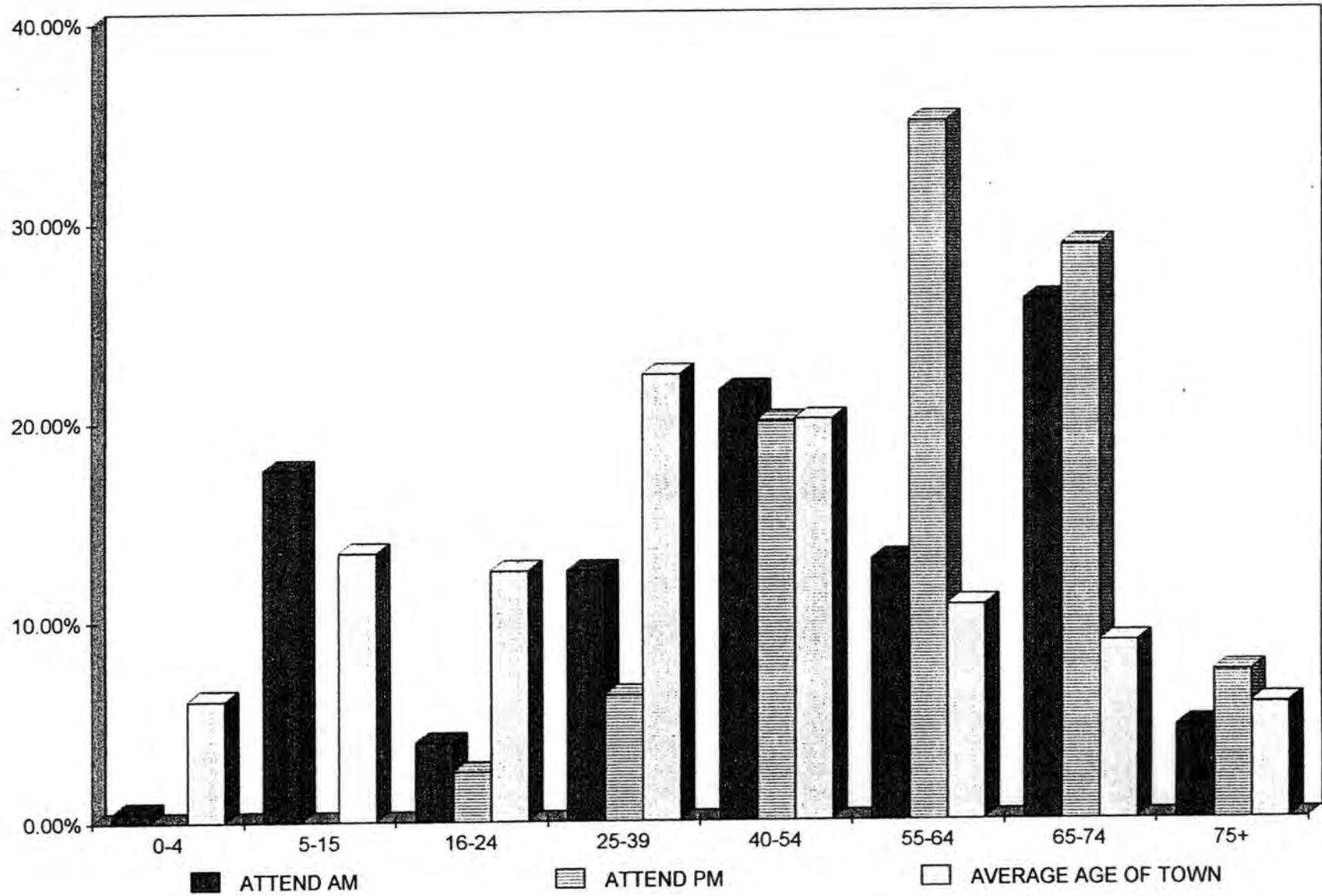


FIGURE 10

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### LUMLEY CHURCH - AGE OF CONGREGATIONS

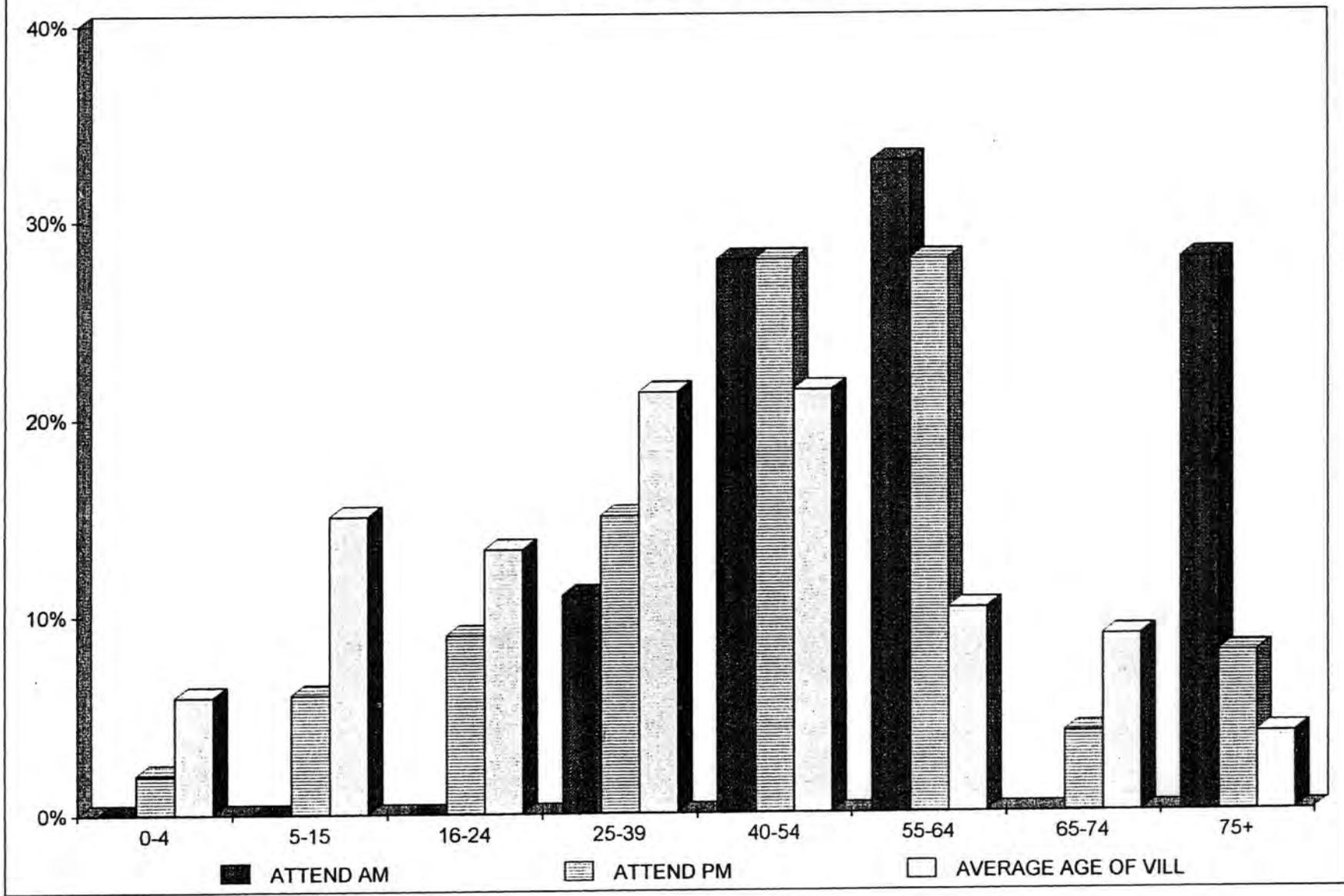


FIGURE 11

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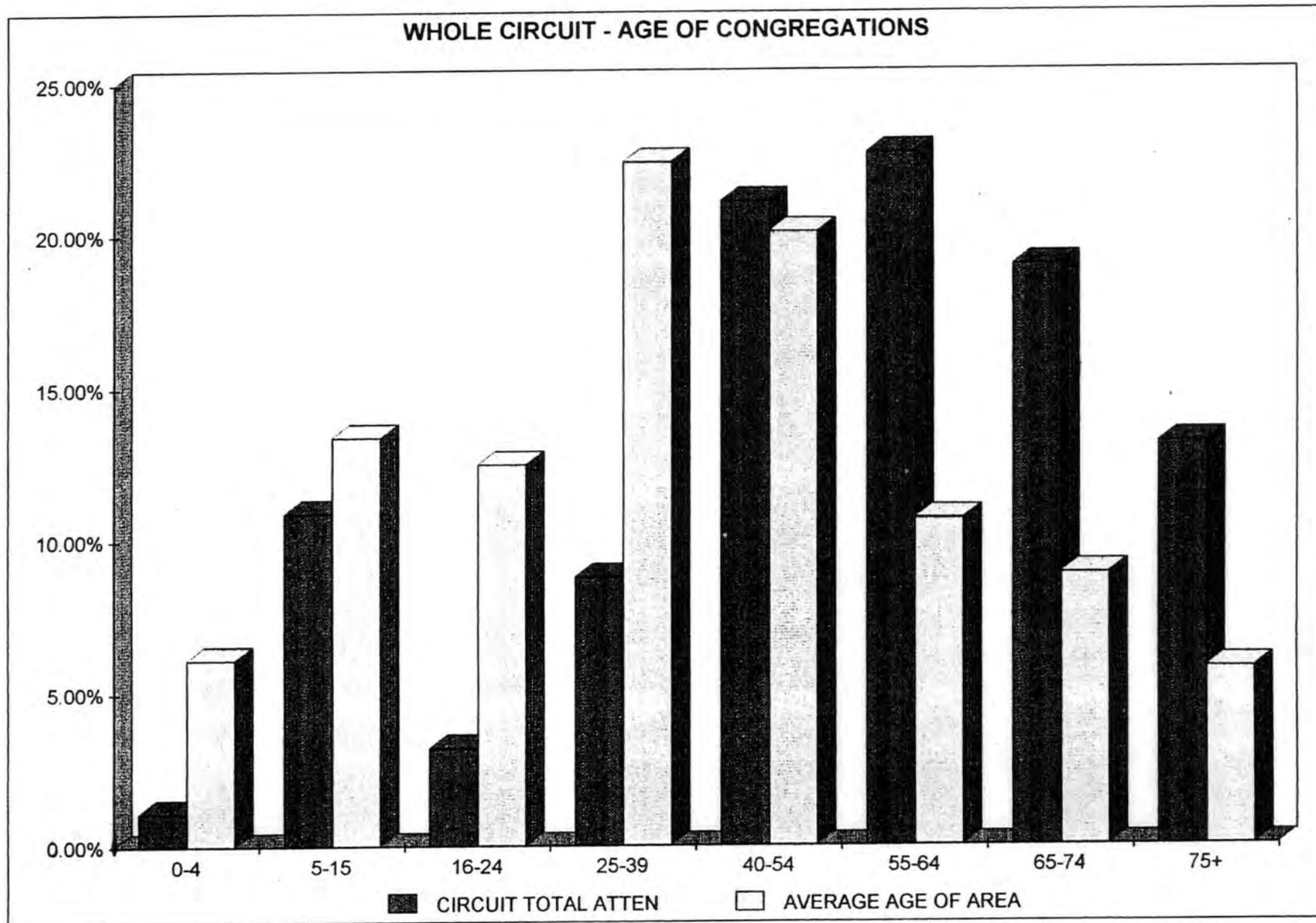
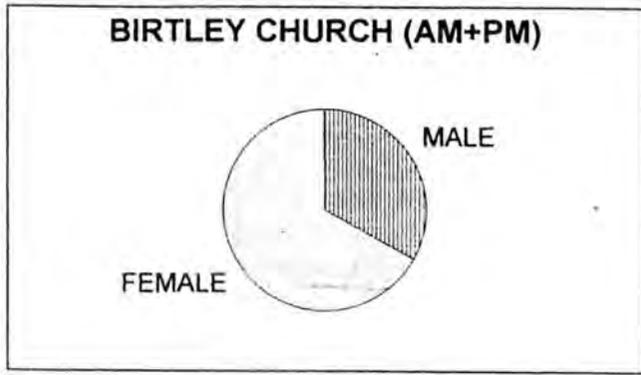
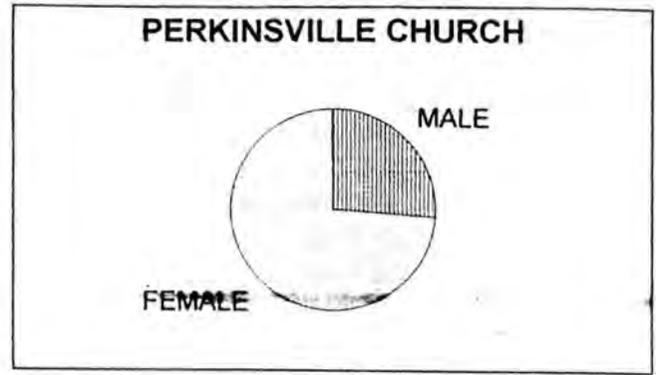


FIGURE 12

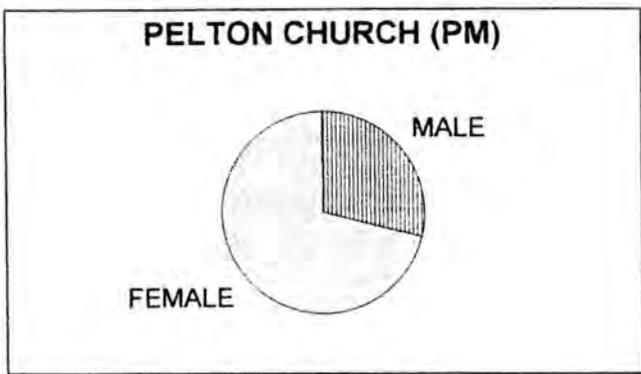
*FIGURES 13 TO 18: MALE/FEMALE SPLIT OF LOCAL CONGREGATIONS*



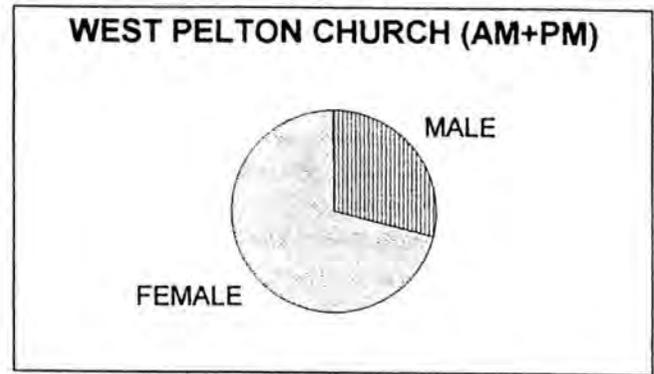
**FIGURE 13**



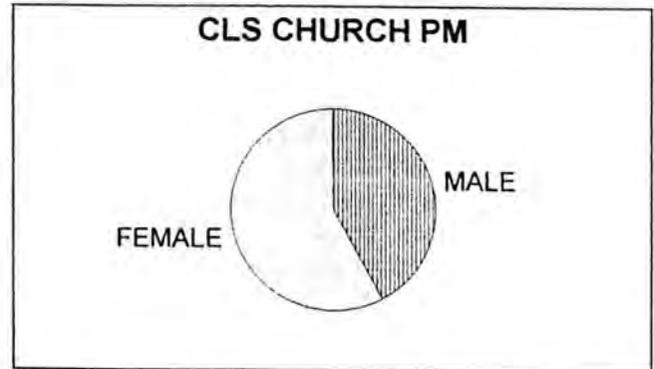
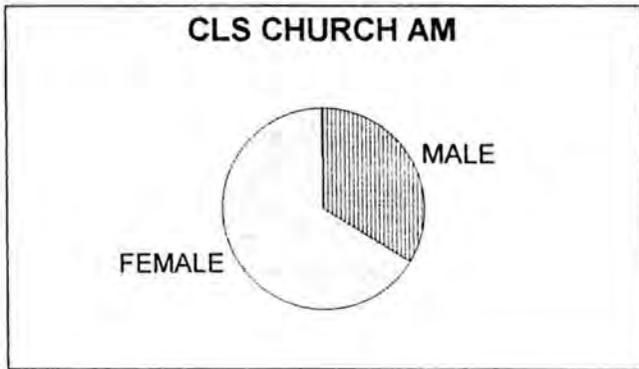
**FIGURE 14**



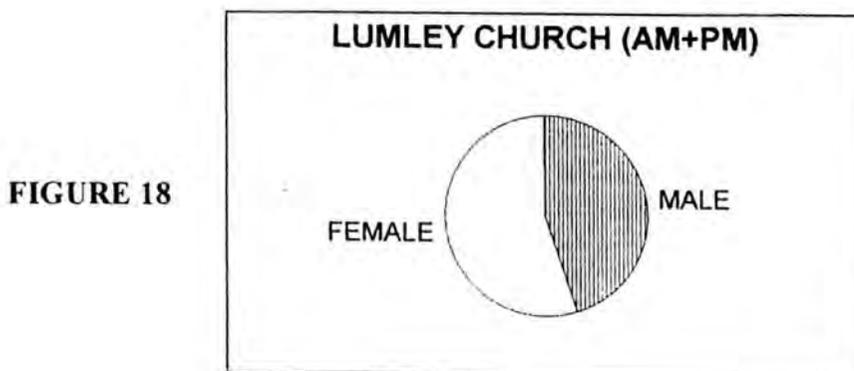
**FIGURE 15**



**FIGURE 16**



**FIGURE 17**



**FIGURE 18**

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