

Our Methodist Heritage

by Silvia Purdie, June 2015

The church in various forms and ways has given me many of the most profound and wonderful experiences in my life. I have been blessed with a rich and varied experience of worship, and I value a whole range of traditions. I would like to share some of these with you this morning, and in particular I would like to tell you something of the traditions of the three churches who together formed the Milson Combined Church.

Some of you were brought up in the Methodist, Anglican or Presbyterian churches, and some of you were not. Some of you carry warm memories of these churches, and for some of you they were places to escape from!

but let me tell you something of my story

First, this morning, Methodism. My spiritual roots are soaked deep in Methodism. The Methodist church started with a pair of brothers, back in England 270 years ago. John Wesley was the preacher-man. Charles put the faith to music. They were both Anglican priests, but found the church in their day to be desperately dull, dry as a bone, and locked up in privilege, pomp & ceremony while common people literally starved on the doorstep. In France the common people rose up in rebellion, slicing off the heads of royalty. In England the poor and the downtrodden heard a voice that rung with grace and compassion, and sung songs that praised Jesus Christ. John and Charles were part of a massive charismatic revival that swept through their country, lead by John Wesley on horseback, preaching anywhere he could, indoors or out. Charles had a sharp ear for a good tune, even bawdy pub songs, and he wrote poem after poem set to these tunes, thousands of them!

They were called Methodists because the initial team of men who lead the revival committed together to a demanding discipline of living that sustained their faith, and they were 'methodical' about it. They emphasized holy living and held each other accountable to high ethical standards.

During the 19th century the mad Methodists calmed down and became established as a denomination with buildings and ordinations and conferences, but they kept their missionary zeal. They were among the first to send missionaries to New Zealand. And Methodists were well represented among those English folk who set off to settle a new land. My ancestors came to Canterbury in 1886, and no doubt they sang all the way here on the ship.

Methodist Missionaries were also very active in the Pacific, including my father who was a Methodist lay preacher and missionary teacher. So I was born in Fiji, and my earliest memories of church are of the Indian Methodist church my parents attended, with Charles Wesley's hymns being sung loudly in harmony. Faith in my home centred on the piano which my mother played,

and I learned the faith in song. Faith was also to be put into action, which for my parents meant a staunch commitment to peace, an unstinting generosity to those in need and a willingness to work hard.

My 'home church' was Waiwhetu Methodist in Lower Hutt. My parents separated after our 2 years in Tonga. I was 12 and sorely in need of friends. My mother lost her faith, so I went alone to church, on my bike, over the railway line, round the corner. Waiwhetu Methodist was a warm, welcoming, lively community church. We had a great youth group, I taught Sunday school, I became Confirmed, and from there I was called into ministry.

It was much like hundreds of churches around the country, planted in every suburb after the war. Worship was predictable, ordered. Church was family. God was known in friendship and belonging. Ideas were open, short on dogma and big on acceptance; it was OK to not have answers. We were big on programmes, youth, children, a drop-in centre for the mentally ill, an op shop, activities for the elderly. This was busy-church, work to be done. It was real church, real extended family church. I remember the hall full of people for lunches and parties. I remember dressing up as a piano for a 'P' dance. I remember old people knowing my name and caring about me. I remember singing of my faith on my Confirmation day. Monthly communion, people come forward to kneel. When we do our traditional Communion we are doing it the Methodist way.

Every one of those churches, like Waiwhetu Methodist, is now aging and struggling. Almost none of the young people in that youth group stayed on into membership and ministry. The way we did church in the 1970s and 80s will not survive long into the 2000s. Which is a shame because it was good church, back in the day.

I was national Methodist youth co-ordinator, for 5 years in the early 1990s. I went to a lot of Methodist churches, and to be honest that included some of my worst experiences of Christian worship. In my time the church was going through a crisis of faith, and much preaching was more about a people than it was about God – I heard more about how we must be inclusive than I did about Jesus Christ. The Methodist church lost confidence in the Gospel, became scared to offend anyone, rationalized away the miracles, including the resurrection, watered down into a be-nice-to-everyone religion. The worst prayers I ever heard were lists of the problems of the world, with no real hope that there even was a living God who could do anything much about all those problems.

I also experienced the best of the Methodist Church. I went to London, joined in a youth rally which filled Times Square and packed out the Prince Albert Hall. I went to the great mother church of Methodism, I walked through John Wesley's home and saw the cupboard in which he would pray for a couple of hours every day.

I have been part of the vitality that the pacific cultures bring to Methodism, not to mention the amazing food when they feast!

I wonder what resonated with you from my story about the Methodist Church. I talked about the early beginnings of Methodism, of power in the Holy Spirit to transform a nation, bursting out of an old church to establish a new one. I talked about zeal to share the gospel in new nations and across cultural divides

I talked about my ancestors making the long journey to New Zealand and building homes and churches here

I talked about song and singing

I talked about one church where I knew that I belonged ... an extended family, a busy family, a loving place of growing in faith

I talked about a loss of faith and confidence, a fear of causing offence, a deep confusion as to what to believe in, dry preaching and depressing prayers
I talked about big gatherings, times of celebration and connection.

What have you know in your own life of these things?

I would like to highlight are two hard, hard challenges that confront me as I reflect on all this (and I'm not even going to talk about the issue of sexual ethics and homosexuality)

Underlying my experience of the Methodist church was a sense of lost glory. I remember one national Conference the President quoting from one of John Wesley's sermons in which he preaches passionately against churches who from whom the glory of God has long since faded, and I had the strong sense that Wesley himself would have been deeply disappointed with what the Methodist church of New Zealand had become.

The early Methodists knew the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, healings, conversions, rescuing the poor from poverty, preaching the gospel in ways that made sense to everyone ... and it all began one cold night when John felt his heart become 'strangely warmed' by the fire of the Spirit. Over the decades the church tamed this fire, became content with old embers.

The warning is to not let our cosy human community become our god, but to allow the majesty and mystery and might of King Jesus to keep on bursting us open afresh in every generation.

It is always so easy to make ourselves idols, in our own image, to worship. It is always so easy to settle down and fit in, blend in with the world around us. How do we let the fire burn?

Secondly, what I know of the Methodist church also contains a warning for us about work. We might have sung and heard about grace and peace, but what I learned from watching how people lived was that following Christ meant working hard, being busy. Projects, programmes, things to organize, rosters to fill, camps to run, mission overseas, government policies to fight against. All good things in themselves. But little time for rest, little value on stillness. There was a frenetic edge to it, which I now see as a 'salvation by works' theology. It's our job to make the Kingdom of God a reality! We are going to work our butts off to do all we can to a human society that is the way it should be. John Wesley said it himself:

"Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can."

I remember one year the Communications Department made a poster which read "His only hands are ours" ... and then there was a ferocious debate about whether they should have said "God's only hands" ... how dare they refer to God as 'He'!! But the much bigger issue for me is the basic message itself. Yes, we can be God's hands, but (God help us!) we are certainly not God's only hands. I will not slip into the heresy that says that God's kingdom stands or falls on my effort! I will not believe this.

I had to go elsewhere to learn how to pray. I had to find other roots into silence and a God who meets the longings of the human heart.

The church is not all about the church. We here at Milson Combined Church are not all about being a church. We are about the worship and praise of Jesus Christ.

I chose the reading from James, about the importance of expressing our faith in action, and this is a strong conviction of the Methodist church, and it rings true for us here at Milson too. But we also need to hear again the verse from Paul's letter to the Romans that forever stands in tension with that, and with this I will close:

Romans 3:22-24: This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.