

Rough Informal Energy: The Story of Primitive Methodism

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‘The morning proved rainy and unfavourablebut about six o’clock the Lord sent the clouds off, and gave us a very pleasant day. About noon the congregation was so much increasing that we were obliged to erect a third preaching stand by the side of the fir tree grove. The preachers seemed to be fired with an uncommon zeal. numbers were convinced and saints were uncommonly quickened, and the extraordinary steadiness and decorum... seemed to make a great impression. Many preachers were now upon the ground from Knutsford, Congleton, Wheelock, Burslem, Macclesfield, and other places. Persuasion dwelt upon their tongues, while the multitude were trembling or rejoicing around.’ Those are some sentences from the account by Hugh Bourne of the stirring events of two hundred years ago, 31 May 1807.

Primitive Methodism ceased to exist as a separate denomination 75 years ago, when it joined with the United and Wesleyan Methodist Churches to form the Methodist Church of Great Britain. It brought to that union 220,000 members, 1131 ministers, nearly 13000 local preachers and nearly 4400 buildings. There was a time when it was politically correct to look down on Primitive Methodism, as a shabby relation of the more socially acceptable and sophisticated Wesleyans. There has been a lot of snobbery and perhaps inverted snobbery too in our Methodist history. The word primitive was often used as synonymous with uncouth or crude; perhaps there is now a greater recognition that when it was first adopted it meant an attempt to go back to the authentic fountainhead, the root of the Methodist movement. But it was of course a sound bite already in use. John Wesley himself had used the phrase Primitive Methodism a number of times.

We commemorate today what happened on the hill called Mow Cop, a southern spur of the Pennines in North Staffordshire. It was an elevation where beacons are said to have been lit when the Spanish Armada was driven back, and when Wellington defeated Napoleon. By the end of the eighteenth century Hugh Bourne and other evangelists were exercising revivalist ministries in the area.

Hugh Bourne was born in 1772 at a bleak and isolated farmhouse on the edge of the North Staffordshire moors. As a child he learned much of the Prayer Book by heart and retained a devotion to the Church of England. As a young man he knew inner discontent and moral struggles. In the spring of 1799 in his farmhouse kitchen he read the spiritual letters of John Fletcher of Madeley, an associate of John Wesley. Bourne wrote:

‘He manifested himself to me and I was born in an instant, yea, passed from death into life... In an instant I had power over sin which I had not before, and I was filled with joy and love and glory which made full amends for the twenty years’ suffering. The Bible looked new, creation looked new and I felt a love to all mankind, and my desire was that friends and enemies and all the world... might be saved.’

Perusing a sermon on the Trinity by John Wesley was another important milestone.

Soon a Methodist farmer invited Bourne to a love feast on the Wakes Monday in the Methodist Chapel at Burslem. At the close Bourne said 'I was heart and hand a Methodist.' By 1800 he had established his own business as timber merchant and carpenter at the village of Harriseahead about half a mile east of Mow Cop. He was instrumental in the conversion of his hard-drinking cousin, Daniel Shubotham. He exercised an effective ministry of one-to-one evangelism. He was persuaded to preach and to lead a class and began to pray aloud at a prayer meeting. By 1802 Bourne had donated the money for a chapel at Harriseahead seating 200 people, which took its place in the Burslem Wesleyan Circuit. Bourne, incidentally, preached at St Peter's Street Chapel on this very site in 1827.

The other key figure in Primitive Methodism's early days, however, preached at the opening of St Peter's Street. He was William Clowes, born in Burslem in 1780. He was a member of the Wedgwood pottery family and apprenticed in the trade but early on fell into drunkenness, gambling and debt. When 24, he was converted at a prayer-meeting in Tunstall. and soon met Hugh Bourne who wrote in his Journal that 'Clowes grows up into God and our Lord Jesus Christ at a very great rate.' Clowes paid off his debts, opened his home for religious meetings and worked for the new Religious Tract Society. Hugh Bourne and William Clowes are depicted in close partnership on the Primitive Methodist anniversary memorial plates, but in fact there was often an uneasy relationship between them, marked by sharp exchanges on many subjects, including the consumption of alcohol. Each of them wanted to be credited with the foundation and the numerical success of the Primitive Methodist movement. They were very different people. Bourne was a reticent, prayerful, introvert. He had been converted by reading and the first Primitive Methodist Book Room was in his house. He was the editor of the Primitive Methodist Magazine. He became a superb manager of denominational affairs. Clowes was an effervescent emotional preacher and a pioneer out on the frontiers. His power base was in Hull and in 1822 he could write, 'Our Circuit extends from Carlisle in Cumberland to Spurn Point in Holderness, an extent of more than 200 miles.

There were other pockets of revival and cottage meetings in Staffordshire and South Cheshire. These allowed for spontaneous expression of faith. But these Methodist meetings, though they were described as lively and loud, were kept under strict control and could last only for an hour and a half. Some wanted more space to pray and Shubotham promised 'a whole day's praying on Mow some Sunday.'

A decisive influence was that of a freelance American evangelist called Lorenzo Dow, who preached in the locality in 1807. He came with news of the camp meetings that were a main feature of the revivalism on the frontiers of Kentucky and Tennessee. There at night the campfire meetings were marked by unrestrained and noisy excitement. People trembled and fell to the ground 'as if a battery of a thousand guns had opened upon them', and were then prayed with and counselled by one of the ministers present.

As is usual, such a movement was associated with rumours of sensuality, promiscuity, and undesirable fringe activities. Some thought Lorenzo Dow, like some other evangelists, was a fraud. But Bourne and his friends had their enthusiasm awakened. They realised the potential of the Camp Meetings for channelling the enthusiasm around Mow Cop. They would convict sinners and restore backsliders. And these Gospel assemblies could also become a powerful fast-paced counterattraction to the revelry of the local wakes weeks or fairs that were a byword for immorality and drunkenness...

So it was arranged that the first Camp Meeting should coincide with the August wakes. But before that there should be the day's praying on Mow Cop, which had been wanted for so long. This was something more than just traditional field preaching. At the meeting on Mow Cop on 31 May 1807 four preaching stands were created out of pieces of rock and people gathered as 'permanent praying communities' while the gospel was preached. Many thousands were attracted, some no doubt out of sheer curiosity. Bourne recorded that they listened 'with attention solemn as death.' It was not wholly a camp meeting as people dispersed at half past eight. As in America, the meetings were noisy and Wesley Hymns were vigorously sung. And though some of the excesses of America were missing, as one historian put it, there would have been no Mow without Dow.

By the early summer, before the Camp Meeting proper, the Wesleyan Methodist Conference at Liverpool was alarmed. The nation was engaged in mortal combat with Napoleon. There was fear of invasion from abroad and of republicanism at home. So in the tumultuous social and political climate Wesleyanism was firmly committed to regularity and good order. It was particularly worried about threats to ban preachers who were not pastors to a congregation. Fearful of anything that might tar Methodism with the brush of sedition and question its loyalty to the Crown, the Conference passed the following resolution:

Question; What is the judgement of the Conference concerning what are called camp-meetings?

Answer: It is our judgement that even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America, they are highly improper in England and likely to be productive of considerable mischief, and we disclaim all connexion with them.

In 1815 Sarah Kirkland founded a Primitive Methodist society in Derbyshire In 1816 a second Circuit was founded in Nottingham and in 1818 Loughborough became the third. In 1819 Primitive Methodism reached Lincolnshire, and in 1821 Norfolk. In the year 1821-22 the number of members grew from just over 16 to more than 25,000, an increase of 50%, though figures fluctuated wildly and membership was often a rather casual matter. Early in the 1820s Cambridge was in the Nottingham Circuit. It had been evangelised by Joseph Reynolds who wrote, 'Cambridge is a large county town and has hundreds of ministers in it yet very little preaching and thousands are living in iniquity. The few professing Methodists and other professing people are dead and formal. I have suffered a little persecution here but now it is dropping and thousands flock to hear the Word of Life. I have seen them in tears and souls are converted to God every day. Sinners are frequently falling down and crying for mercy. Hallelujah!'

Look more closely at this movement of the Spirit that led up to the formation of the Primitive Methodist Connexion. The spirituality was spontaneous. It was a vernacular lay spirituality, of the people. It was for both men and women. There was a passion for evangelism, for the harvesting of souls. One preacher, William Braithwaite knelt on the banks of the Trent and prayed. 'Thou must give me souls, Lord. Give me souls or I must die.' It thrived in the open air. One of the Primitive Methodist broadsheets pointed out that worship in the open air was first practised by Adam. If we look for a parallel in the history of English Christianity, we find it in the birth of Quakerism, which also began outside on the Lake District fells, and in the preaching of the founder, George Fox. Early Quaker writings had a critical effect on Hugh Bourne. He had visited the group called Quaker Methodists around Warrington, who had been outlawed by the Wesleyan Conference. He wrote, 'Here each one does that which is right in his own

eyes. They stand, sit, kneel, pray, exhort, etc., as they are moved. I was very fond of their way.’ Here was a particular variety of charismatic enthusiasm.

Both Clowes and Bourne were expelled from their Wesleyan societies. Clowes was told that he had attended Camp Meetings contrary to Methodist discipline, and so could no longer be a Local Preacher or Class Leader. Hugh Bourne was removed from membership in the Burslem Circuit. The Superintendent later admitted that the reason was ‘his tendency to set up other than ordinary worship.’ In 1811 the Clowseites and the Camp Meeting Methodists of Hugh Bourne joined forces to become the Primitive Methodists. The first chapel was built and class tickets were printed. The first tickets contained a text from the Acts of the Apostles; ‘but we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against.’ A preaching plan was made and issues of finance and polity were hammered out. There was a strong sense of community, expressed in the fellowship of love feasts, the sharing of bread and water in a democratised version of the sacrament.

Primitive Methodism at the start was democratic, egalitarian, and activist. It captured whole swathes of intensely tight knit, local working class communities, the pitmen of the Durham coalfield and the Midlands, the Staffordshire potters, the agricultural labourers of East Anglia, and North Sea fishermen. Towards the end of the nineteenth century about three in every four PM chapels were in villages. It was altogether less urban and bourgeois than Wesleyanism. Some Wesleyans were aware that they had lost this ground to the Primitives because their own ministers were mostly based in towns. Primitive Methodism gave whole communities a set of values, a coherent organisation and hope where a rapidly changing social order had meant dislocation and a feeling of injustice.

It claimed to be the Church not just for the poor, but of the poor, though studies suggest that the real strength lay amongst the semi-skilled manual workers rather than the lowest labourers. It gave them what they needed at this stage in the process of industrialisation, a community that valued individuals and gave them values and a sense of purpose. The leadership of the Societies was almost entirely male, though women in the membership outnumbered men by a ratio of five to one. It aimed at transformation of the community through the spirituality of the workplace.

At the time of the 1851 Religious Census the barrister Horace Mann remarked, ‘perhaps their rough informal energy is best adapted to the class to whom it is addressed.’ Early Primitive Methodism, though, actually forbade public speechifying on politics. The leadership like the Wesleyans understood the huge fear in the country of sedition and political unrest and Hugh Bourne feared that the camp meetings might be stopped if the Church became diverted from its evangelistic endeavours. But many members were active in the Trade Union Movement after it was founded in 1825 and used their transferable skills in both sacred and secular spheres. Later Primitive Methodism was marked by a strong tradition of political activism especially for its allegiance to the Labour Movement. and served as a kind of midwife in the birth of English socialism. You will remember the saying that the Labour party owes more to Methodism than it does to Marx. By 1903 a Primitive Methodist newspaper said clearly, ‘Toryism is the historical and persistent foe of the working classes...Cancel all engagements that interfere with election work. Seek first and seek only the Kingdom of God in the General Election.’

George Edwards, the Primitive Methodist Norfolk agriculturist, began to realise, he said 'that the social conditions of the people were not as God intended they should be.' 'In the village where I lived I preached my first Labour sermons.' 'I came to the conclusion that the labour movement was built on the very rock of Christianity and that I was as much serving God by preaching what I believed was the gospel of God, namely economic freedom, as when I occupied the pulpit.' In due course Edwards founded the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers and Small Holders Union. He held union meetings on Sundays but they had a strictly religious character. He went on to become Labour MP for South Norfolk. He was awarded the OBE and received a knighthood. But to enter the chamber of the House of Commons for the first time he had to borrow a suit –from a Tory.

A similar career belonged to another Primitive Methodist preacher Joseph Arch, from Barford in Warwickshire, who founded the National Agricultural Labourers Union in 1872. Arch had left the Church of England when he saw how the stratified seating in the parish church reflected the social divisions of the village, with the poor on rude benches at the back. Primitive Methodism was associated with the struggles of the rural poor and the so-called revolt of the field.

Peter Lee has given his name to a new town in County Durham. He preached the Gospel in Primitive Methodist chapels up and down the county while he made his way from being coal hewer and miners' agent to being a County Councillor and Member of Parliament. 'We are all members of one body' was his foundational text. Mining was a particularly hazardous occupation. In Seaton Colliery in 1880 164 men and boys perished underground. A chalk message was found scrawled on a wooden plank, 'The Lord is with us. We are all ready for heaven. Bless the Lord. We have had a jolly prayer meeting, every man ready for glory. Praise the Lord.'

Primitive Methodism had a concern for mission. The first missionary meeting was held in 1811. The duty was urged of taking the Gospel to the 'dark and benighted villages of Derbyshire.' The first missionaries were sent to New York, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. At the instigation of the Norwich District the Conference of 1861 committed itself to an African mission. In 1870 two missionaries landed in Fernando Po, a Spanish island colony off the West coast of Africa, and a memorable first service was held in the house of a fervent Christian, Mamma Job. In the 1890s one of the missionaries in Fernando Po was Nathaniel Boocock and his memorial plaque is on the wall of this church. Later he worked in Nigeria. He lost his first wife in childbirth. His obituary records how he explored new areas and made exhausting journeys by boat. Stories from West Africa were to encourage the home Church for many decades. though the work was hampered by local opposition and by the mosquito. The work in Nigeria progressed quickly and was one of the impressive missions of the early twentieth century, despite the heat and the humidity. Outstanding medical work in clinics there included an assault on leprosy. At the time of Methodist Union in 1932, the General Secretary of the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society in Nigeria, was Frederick W Dodds, who later retired to Haslingfield. I met him once in Haslingfield Chapel when I was an undergraduate. His obituary notice says that for thirty years his name and that of the Ibo Church are one. It records his immense courage, physical endurance, and the long journeys he made on forest paths on foot or by cycle. When he became Chair of the District there, this meant an area half the size of England. Splendid service was also carried out further south in the Orange Free State and in South Central Africa. In North Western Rhodesia Edwin Smith reduced the native language to writing, produced

grammars and a dictionary and translated the New Testament. He wrote more than twenty books, mostly about Africa.

Back home, in its later phase, say from the 1870s PM became very zealous of its Nonconformist conscience. This included the Puritan conviction that the State should promote moral welfare, foster moral character and that political leaders should be of the highest probity. Good Primitive Methodists had to separate themselves from the ungodly ways of the world. This separation included strict Sabbath observance, avoiding alcohol and worldly amusements like gambling, dancing, especially the waltz, the theatre, and playing cards. The beetle drive was the chapel's rival to whist. Reading novels, because they would oust the study of the scriptures and also feed the passions and stunt the mind, knitting, sewing, Sunday sport, reading Sunday newspapers and later listening to the radio and doing school homework came under the same veto. The temperance ethos was particularly strong. In 1932 the Primitive Methodist Church claimed to have nearly a thousand Bands of Hope with 52,000 members. Put this against the context that in 1900 it is reckoned that 96% of family income was spent on necessities; to squander money could easily lead to degradation and destitution.

Today it seems almost obligatory for Methodist Ministers to declare their passionate loyalty to a football team but in 1894 the Primitive Methodist Connexion said that the associations of the football field were impure and degrading. Kenneth Lysons in his book, *A Little Primitive*, records how one of the Local Preachers in his northern circuit declaimed that the outbreak of the Second World War was divine retribution for Sunday cricket. Something of this ethos survived in places until well after the Second World War but in changed social conditions and in times of much greater affluence what was regarded as sinful is now seen as innocent recreation and more liberal outlooks have now largely prevailed. Many members' midweek lives centred entirely around chapel pursuits, sometimes for example a chapel could field a soccer or cricket team and there was no sharp line between the sacred and the secular. The down side of this was that there were often power games between families to gain ascendancy, with the hapless minister stranded betwixt and between.

Lively music, popular stirring tunes, fervently sung, were important features of the evangelism that above all sought conversions as it offered salvation – full, free and now. The hymn known as the Primitive Methodist Grand March was ‘Hark the Gospel News is Sounding. Christ hath suffered on the tree, Streams of mercy are abounding, Grace for all is rich and free.’ One social historian wrote that ‘music spearheaded its mission. It marked out the good life and pointed out the bad. It sang out the dead and sang in the reborn.’ The earliest song books were largely made up of choruses from America. Hugh Bourne published the *Large Hymn Book* for the use of Primitive Methodists in 1824. Hearty singing gave individuals a sense of identity and self-worth. It is recorded of a Primitive Methodist miner in County Durham that ‘just before his final breath the chapel brethren visited him and bawled hymns and prayers around his bed. He himself joined in the last two lines of Guide me O Thou great Jehovah – Songs of Praises I will ever give to Thee.’ The vigour and drama and colourful imagery contrasted with the decorum and the sedate hymns of the Wesleyans and the drone of the Anglican chant. A Suffolk rector of the established Church of England was, like many, bemused by the noisy worship of the Primitive Methodists ‘I often think with pain how mistaken these poor people are who groan and sigh and roar and make longer and stronger prayers than ever we do. But God forgive them, and me, and bring us to peace at the last.’ The Chapel preacher was sometimes equally dismissive of the Church and the vain repetitions of its liturgy, contrasting that with the inspired extempore

prayer of the chapel. One such is recorded as saying that he could stop the parson from preaching in three ways: - 'Take away your book and you could not talk, Take away your gown and you dare not. Take away your tithes and you would not. None of these things would stop me.'

There were of course many tensions between Church and Chapel besides the parish tithes, the burial of Methodists in the parish church graveyard; and above all the great friction over the provision of Church schools on the rates. In Toft there was a celebrated bust-up with the Rector in the village in 1905 when the local teacher declined to teach the catechism and for a while took the children elsewhere. We are just about getting over it now. The Primitive Methodists had many of their own elementary schools, though they were an impossible financial burden on the Connexion.

The bread and butter Sundays of the Church year were the time for the hymn sandwich in the chapels. Analysis of the content of hymnbooks is revealing. The hymns were about Christian experience rather than doctrine or the Christian calendar. In the Primitive Methodist Hymnal, there were a goodly number of hymns about death and the future life. Both heaven and hell were very real. Hugh Bourne in a children's address in the Potteries promised, 'you'll have a crown on your head, finer and grander than Queen Victoria's and when your daddies and mummies see you they'll scarcely know you.' Some suggest that Primitive Methodism flourished in areas where death was never far away, whether down the mines or out on the deep seas. Membership grew remarkably during the cholera epidemic of 1832. But the number of hymns about life beyond steadily diminished in succeeding Methodist hymnals, while the number for the Church year and the sacraments grew.

Worship contained all the elements of prayer, though penitence for sins was often very brief indeed, and it was not uncommon for the Almighty to be serenaded with all sorts of fulsome 'miscellaneous information about his attributes and character.' Extempore prayer could reach spiritual heights but it could also be badly prepared and tediously repetitive. It could also be quite quaint. In Flora Thompson's classic, *Lark Rise to Candleford* we hear of old Mr Barker telling the Almighty from the pulpit that it hadn't rained for weeks and that his carrots were mortal dry. Sermons were generally longer than today. Preachers preferred power to literary ornament, but they had a richness of illustrations, culled from published collections of the same. And sermons were not read. Heralds do not read their proclamation. But as with extempore prayer, this did not signify lack of preparation.

Eventually, however, the emotional fervour, the martial evangelicalism and the repetitive choruses and the spontaneity of the earlier years gave way to a more broadly based hymnody, some of it more vague and sentimental, and more ordered worship, including in a few places the chanting of Psalms and the *Te Deum* from service books. The once prized vulgarity became an embarrassment to those who sought respectability. Kenneth Lysons remembers a sharp conflict when a Local Preacher requested that the Lord's Prayer be said rather than sung, only for the organist to reply. 'Get on with th' preaching and leave the Lord's Prayer to me.'

Chapels took little notice of lectionaries and the Church calendar of festivals and saints' days. Words like Advent and Epiphany did not feature and services on Good Friday or Ascension Day rarely took place. There was however a wealth of special Sundays, Christian Endeavour, Overseas Missions, Watch Night, Temperance Sunday, Flower Sunday, Choir, Men and the Women's Own all had their day. But the three highpoints

of the chapel year were the Sunday School Anniversary, the Chapel Anniversary and the Harvest Festival. In many ways the Sunday School operated quite independently of the Chapel. The teaching was often rudimentary by teenagers but learning for the Scripture examinations and the annual prize giving encouraged attendance. Preparation for the SSA began months if not a year or two beforehand with the invitation of a special preacher. Practice took place for many weeks of music, recitations and other items to be performed by children, in their Sunday best, in front of a huge congregation of admiring relatives. Liberally augmented by visitors from elsewhere in the circuit the SSA had a menu of inspiring hymns and choruses. A magnificent tea was spread for the visiting preacher. Kenneth Lysons recalls his aunt, the hostess for the day, saying to the preacher, 'Come on, have some more trifle, you mustn't stop eating because you're full.' It was easy to dismiss this as mere entertainment with a strong 'feel-good' factor but there was genuinely sacrificial giving from people scratching for a living for chapel funds and the announcement before the final hymn of the total collection was eagerly anticipated.

There was no strong sacramental theology in Primitive Methodism and the term Holy Communion was rarely used; simply the Sacrament or the Lord's Supper sufficed. The congregation received the elements seated in their places and were ministered to by the stewards. In latter days the invitation to participate was extended to all who love the Lord Jesus and this included children, though in earlier days admission was by class ticket. The president at the service could be ordained or lay.

The leadership of the denomination was shared between travelling and local preachers. The locals played a more important part than in other branches of Methodism. They baptised children, took funerals, chaired meetings.

The early years of expansion, called 'the heroic period' of Primitive Methodism, were tough ones for the travelling preachers and their wives, often characters with immense courage. Hugh Bourne walked 40 miles a day with two or three hard boiled eggs and a little dry bread in his pocket. On one occasion after a thirty-mile walk he claimed expenses of two pence-halfpenny – 'a pennyworth of bread, a pennyworth of cheese and a halfpennyworth of treacle'. My only namesake in the Methodist Ministry, William Dolman, died in 1891. In a ministry of 43 years he served in 25 different Circuit appointments, nearly all in East Anglia. His obituary notice solemnly states, He plodded on and on. Many preachers had not the benefit even of a bicycle and lived miles from some of their churches, yet Primitive Methodist General Rules recommended that a minister who was not a Superintendent should make at least forty family visits per week. One suspects that this was more honoured in the breach than the observance. The ministers walked many miles, relied on the hospitality of the local saints and of course material rewards were meagre. Sometimes there was opposition from the Establishment to all kinds of Methodists and mobs could easily be drummed up by the clergy to intimidate itinerant preachers. One period of Methodist history was known as the Ranter and Rotten Egg age. The term Ranter was used from the very beginning in Derbyshire. The Ranters preached their three Rs –ruin, repentance and redemption. One preacher in Newark was drenched with water from the town fire engine but retorted, 'You can't quench the fire within.' It is not surprising that preachers, when some had offered for the ministry out of desperation rather than face semi-starvation in times of high unemployment, fell by the wayside. Well over a third did not last for more than four years. Some preachers began almost illiterate. George Edwards, already mentioned, started work scaring crows at the age of five for one shilling a week. His wife taught him to read. For the first service he led as a Local

Preacher he had to learn three hymns and a chapter of St John by heart and later admitted he had not been sure whether he was holding his hymn book the right way up. Some preachers were totally unsuitable. The Minutes of one Norfolk Preachers' Meeting in the 1820s show preachers removed from the plan for debt, drunkenness, quarrelling, non-attendance at the means of grace, not turning up for their own appointments, and for an offence called 'harvest frolicking.' Meanwhile in Cambridge in 1841 your predecessors in the Quarterly Meeting thought that the minister's bedstead was a superfluous luxury, so they sold it for Circuit funds and the preacher had to sleep on the floor. It is satisfying to relate that in the winter quarter they relented and the Circuit forked out seven shillings and sixpence. The Minute Books of the Cambridge Circuit record that the preacher was often paid in arrears and sometimes not at all. In 1857 it is recorded, 'we are unable to pay our Preacher his salary; but he is allowed to beg on the Circuit.' Later on life in the manse became more tolerable. By the 1920s a minister might earn £240 per annum, with the addition of fees and free accommodation. The average male wage at the same time just topped £150 a year. And so far as health was concerned the average lifespan for Primitive Methodist Ministers who died in the first decade of the twentieth century was 74 years. Life expectancy for men had not yet reached 50.

But like other movements that began amongst the working classes, Primitive Methodism with its severe Protestant work ethic embracing hard work, personal responsibility, thrift and suspicion of worldly pleasures, became a social escalator for the upwardly mobile and increasingly respectable. Some with a strong entrepreneurial bent from humble beginnings through their trade came to modest fortunes. Some laymen became prominent in civic life and William Hartley, of jam fame, was knighted. He was the philanthropic Father Christmas of the Primitive Methodist Church. He was responsible for founding the Chapel Aid Association, which baled out a church constantly hamstrung by debt. He championed the layman scholar A.S. Peake, whose patient scholarship avoided a fundamentalist crisis in the church and whose spadework advocacy did a lot to clear the ground for a successful Methodist Union. Hartley also created the prestigious Hartley Lecture and did a huge amount to improve standards of ministerial training, greatly needed as the ministers became more settled pastors and teachers and congregations became more educated. His concern for fair wages for his own employees was proverbial, as was his personal integrity. One grocer, confronted by a cynical customer, took a jar of Hartley's jam and exclaimed, 'That's the Nonconformist Conscience. Full weight and absolute purity.'

Following the classic pattern, then, Primitive Methodism evolved from a sect into a denomination, and by 1903 the Connexion called itself the Primitive Methodist Church, and soon after that had its headquarters at Holborn Hall in London, purchased of course by Hartley. Urban churches became more ornate in what has been called the 'mahoganification of Primitive Methodism.' The leadership of the denomination increasingly passed to the ministers and then title of Reverend began to appear. Women began to disappear from the ranks of the ministry as it grew more settled. The imagination could not yet cope with the thought of a woman in the manse. Examinations were introduced for Local Preachers though many did not avail themselves of them. A theological college for students for the ministry was established at Sunderland, which lasted until the arrival of what came to be known as Hartley College in Manchester. Analysis of the occupations of candidates for the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist ministries in the early years of the twentieth century suggests that any social gap between the two was rapidly narrowing. Incidentally theological education was opposed in Cambridge where it was considered it would be dangerous to

the piety of the young men – ‘what they would gain in Light they would lose in Heat.’ Elsewhere there was apprehension about young men so professional and gentlemanly that they could not blend with colliers, puddlers and tinkers.’

A distinctive feature of Primitive Methodism was its giving lay people a voice in the councils of the Church and its dissent from the more autocratic understanding of the Pastoral Office cherished by the Wesleyans. Pretension in clerical dress has often caused the feathers to fly in Methodism and many Primitive Methodist ministers never wore a clerical collar. At an early PM Conference it was laid down that preachers should dress plainly and avoid pantaloons and white hats. The priesthood of all believers was a well-championed phrase, though of course it easily became a threadbare cliché justifying an awkward individualism. In 1872 the PM Church introduced the office of Vice-President of the Conference. This was not however reserved for lay people but was often a stepping stone to the Presidency itself, which though open to anyone was rarely held by a layperson. There was a good deal of horse-trading, primitive and otherwise, about these matters, in what has been called the protracted chess game of the years leading up to the Deed of Union of 1932.

Theologically Primitive Methodism did not perhaps differ significantly from Wesleyanism. It had its own Articles of Religion but it was specifically stated that these were to be interpreted in the light of John Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and his books of sermons. It was probably more conservative and sometimes narrow, but contained nothing that was distinctively its own. There was some degree of tension between the branches of Methodism. For some Prims, the mere mention of John Wesley was red rag to a bull. One Primitive President famously remarked, ‘The living Christ is more to us than the dead Wesley.’ For the Prims there were, as Munsey Turner put it, fewer Anglican corpuscles in its bloodstream.

The first Conference had been held in 1820. Here emerges, however, one difference from Wesleyan Methodism worthy of our attention. Although the Conference was in theory the supreme governing body of the Primitive Methodist M Church it was for ages the District that held the popularity and the prestige. The Districts have been described as petty kingdoms. Ministers remained loyal to a district and this helped to create the flexibility where younger ministers were able to trail blaze new ideas and focus their energy into forging new initiatives. The initiatives for overseas missions, ministerial training, and the Sunday School Union all began in District meetings. These meetings had lively debates, not always harmonious, and often lasted for nearly a week. Until 1878 ministers were stationed at them. Right up to Methodist Union in 1932 probationer ministers were admitted, in the early years without a formal service, to the approved list at the District and not collectively at the Conference. The Conference, was small, only 80 members, and controlled by ex officio older ministers and veteran lay officers. Its proceedings received little publicity in the Connexion at large. Inevitably its image was somewhat staid. As it was observed, ‘Their qualifications blossomed with the coming of the first grey hairs or of baldness.’

Today we are very concerned about the whole idea of ‘Methodist identity.’ What does it mean to be a Methodist? One of the popular answers is that we have a strong sense of interconnectedness, what we call Connexionalism – the willingness to see the whole church as a network of resources to be deployed, as need dictates. The PM church, especially in its early days with its strongly democratic ethos and its staunch lay independent spirit, a weaker sense of this.

Now the past is a far off country and they do things differently there. Our world is much changed and we cannot just recreate movements from the past. Mere traditionalism is sterile and doomed to die. But we can see that the phenomenon of Primitive Methodist Christianity, which still even now stirs a chord in people's hearts, raises questions for us now.

One concerns issues of oversight, governance and decision-making. Does the taking of responsibility at appropriate levels in the life of the Church – mean that much could be decentralised or regionalised to a more local level – which policies could be determined there, which permissions could be granted, which grants could be made there. There is already more flexibility here than there used to be. Could the Districts come into their own, and the Circuits be made larger? District Chairs becoming diocesan bishops however might well be a shade less popular to those with those robust PM corpuscles in their blood stream.

Then there is the key commitment to the place of lay leadership at the heart of the church. The Primitive Methodist Church relied heavily on local leaders to sustain the life of the societies, its classes and cottage meetings, its prayer-meetings, love-feasts and Sunday schools These were all strong elements in a genuinely communal institution. Our present Prime Minister might well have called it 'the People's Church.' In many ways all Christian Churches have been declericalised, and all struggle with the declining number of ordained ministers. But measures have had to be taken to ensure the representation of an adequate lay component of 50% at Conference and in our Connexional Leadership Team is there are still only 5 lay voices out of 48.

A further aspect of this relates to the churches as learning communities. In a recent article Dr David Clark points how lay leaders were 'community educators.' In leading, nurturing, and instructing their class meetings and building them into instruments of communicating the gospel, he says 'they educated themselves as students of the world and amateur yet highly effective theologians.' Clark calls for the Church to reclaim this crucial Primitive Methodists legacy, the liberation of the laity, to build communities where they live and work that reflect the nature of the kingdom.

Much has been made of the romantic nature of Primitive Methodism. It stood alongside the Romantic movement in the arts and literature We need to see how people's hearts may be moved as well as their minds fed as we minister to the whole person.

Some will want to work out how the legacy of freedom from ecclesiastical formality and starchy hierarchies might work out today, others will want to identify the radical political issues with which a more courageous church might wish unequivocally to ally itself. Others might wish to revisit the Nonconformist Conscience and perhaps with Christians of all denominations work out what counter cultural lifestyle choices swimming against the social norm Christians might creatively adopt today. The thorny question of hymnody in worship is going to become increasingly problematic.

But in the end it is the story, the people, the journals, the memoirs, the obituaries, the accounts of that rough informal energy that matter. We can echo the simple scripture word that became more or less a Primitive Methodist motto, What God hath wrought!

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