*Methodist History, 53:1 (October 2014)*

# RENEWAL, REUNION, AND REVIVAL: THREE BRITISH METHODIST APPROACHES TO "SERVING THE PRESENT AGE" IN THE 1950S

Martin Wellings

In the late 1950s, the British Methodist minister with the highest public profile was undoubtedly the Rev. Dr. Donald Soper. Born into a patrician Wesleyan family in 1903 and blessed with a rare blend of artistic and intellectual gifts, Soper proceeded from Saint Catherine's College, Cambridge, and Wesley House with a First in theology to a series of appointments in the London Mission. In 1936, after ten years in the ministry, and just seven years after ordination, Soper moved to Kingsway Hall as Superintendent Minister of Hugh Price Hughes' West London Mission, where he remained for the next forty-two years, retiring officially in 1978.[1]

As a compelling orator, a committed evangelist, an exponent of Wesleyan sacramentalism, and a left-of-center political activist, Soper bears comparison with Hughes and with J. Ernest Rattenbury. It may be argued, however, that he surpassed his famous predecessors in attaining public prominence and in attracting controversy. Agility of mind, facility of speech, and a flair for repartee, honed by weekly open-air debates on Tower Hill, suited the developing media of radio and television, and made Soper eminently quotable in the press. His combination of modernist theology, high sacramentalism, and Socialist politics, expressed with insouciant wit and unapologetic élan, thrilled audiences, delighted admirers, and reduced opponents to apoplectic fury. Rattenbury's leadership of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship may have cost him the Presidency of the Methodist Conference; Soper followed Rattenbury as MSF president in 1950, but was also elected Conference President by the Conference of 1952. Leslie Weatherhead, writing the *Methodist Recorder*'s profile of the new President twelve months later, noted that the Conference had "made the naughty boy their headmaster,"[2] and Soper's year of office found the President turning Wesley's chair into a soap box for provocative utterances. In his Presidential address to the Conference in 1953, Soper was politely skeptical about the impact of the much-heralded Connexional "year of evangelism" and dubious about the prospects for revival on which many Methodists were pinning their hopes. As his year of office continued, he spoke out about homosexuality in the Armed Forces and

---

[1] William Purcell, *Odd Man Out: A Biography of Lord Soper of Kingsway* (London and Oxford: Mowbrary, 1983), 47-58, 65, 72. Soper retained an office at Kingsway Hall after his retirement, and remained a presence at the West London Mission for the rest of his long life.

[2] *Methodist Recorder,* London [hereafter *MR*] (July 9, 1953), 9.

raised a storm by criticizing the Queen's implicit endorsement of gambling through her patronage of horse-racing. Speaking to the London branch of the Methodist Laymen's Missionary Movement in March of 1954, as Billy Graham's Greater London Crusade opened amidst a carefully orchestrated fanfare of publicity, Soper described the American evangelist's book *Peace with God* as "intellectual rubbish" and "emotional escapism" and dismissed Graham's understanding of the gospel as "spiritual fascism." Articles in the left-wing journal *Tribune* (beginning with an attack on Moral Re-armament) and advocacy of unilateral nuclear disarmament added to the challenge Soper presented to the politically, socially, and ecclesiastically conservative.[3]

Four years after the close of his presidency, Soper's presence at the 1958 Newcastle Conference attracted a protest in the shape of a "seedy-looking gentleman" with a hand-written placard who picketed the City Hall.[4] Inside the building, Soper made one controversial intervention in debate, which brings us to the subject of this paper. On Thursday, July 10, during discussion of the annual report of the Methodist Youth Department, Soper said: "It would be very hard for a casual visitor in this Conference to deny that he is in the presence of a dying Church." This statement provoked cries of dissent and demands for an explanation. Frank Cumbers, the Connexional Book Steward, "asked Dr. Soper to say why, if we were a dying Church, we were opening two new churches a week?" and "There were cries of 'Answer! We want an answer'!" The Vice-President, from the chair, tried unsuccessfully to stop the debate, and Soper was called back to the tribune to explain himself. With typical incorrigibility and characteristic skill, he repeated his statement while deflecting criticism with deft humor, and the Conference moved on to other matters.[5]

The brief clash between Donald Soper and Frank Cumbers in the Newcastle Conference raised an important question for their contemporaries, and one which has perplexed historians for more than a generation: Was British Methodism in the late 1950s a dying Church? Or was it one that was trying to adapt itself in order effectively to serve the present age? Or perhaps both? This paper will reflect on recent historians' perspectives on the 1950s and early 1960s, review the concerns of some contemporary Methodists, and explore several of the remedies offered in response to the challenges identified in that period.

A number of competing theories have attempted to account for the trajectory of British church life from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. The familiar starting-point, a classical model of secularization, argues that religious faith becomes less plausible and religious practice more difficult in advanced industrial and urbanized societies. The break-

---

[3]*MR* (July 16, 1953), 1-4; (November 12, 1953), 8; (November 26, 1953), 4, 10; (March 4, 1954), 13; (February 25, 1954), 16. For background to Soper's Socialism and pacifism, see Purcell, *Odd Man Out*, chapters 5 and 6.

[4] *MR* (July 17, 1958), 13; (July 24, 1958), 11.

[5] *MR* (July 17, 1958), 6-8.

down or disruption of traditional communities and norms of behavior; the spread of a scientific world-view diminishing the scope of the supernatural and the role of God; increasing material affluence promoting self-reliance and this-worldly optimism; and greater awareness and toleration of different creeds and ideas, encouraging religious pluralism and eviscerating commitment to a particular faith, all form components of the case for secularization. Applied to the British churches in general by Steve Bruce and to Methodism in particular by Robert Currie, this model traces decline back to the Victorian era and charts in the twentieth century a steady ebbing of the sea of faith.[6]

The classical theory in its various forms has been challenged from all directions in recent years. Local studies have qualified the claims of inexorable decline by revealing a much more nuanced picture of Victorian and Edwardian church life. Thus, in his study of Croydon between 1840 and 1914, Jeremy Morris demonstrates that the churches were holding their own well into the twentieth century, although signs of weakness were becoming apparent by the First World War.[7] Simon Green, in his survey of industrial Yorkshire from 1870 to 1920, sees real change occurring only from the 1920s, although he suggests that the methods adopted by the churches in the pre-war period to generate growth paradoxically rendered them vulnerable to competition from other "associational" organizations in the inter-war years.[8] Green's analysis has some affinity with the case advanced by Robin Gill in *The Myth of the Empty Church*, which also focuses on the institutional dynamics of the churches. Gill argues that the Victorians were poor strategists, building too many large churches, often against a backdrop of rural depopulation and a flight from the city centers to the suburbs, and thus overreaching themselves in generating excessive seating accommodation. The consequences for the competing chapels were debt and demoralization, fuelling decline.[9]

Morris describes attendance and membership figures as "the acid tests of a church's success,"[10] but these criteria have themselves been questioned. Grace Davie has argued for the persistence of religious beliefs through the twentieth century, even when those beliefs were not expressed in formal adherence to an ecclesiastical community.[11] This model of "believing without belonging" overlaps with S. C. Williams' study of "popular religion" in the London borough of Southwark between the 1880s and the Second World War, which paints a complex picture of the interplay of customs, beliefs,

---

[6] See M. Wellings, "A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die? A Historian's Perspective on the Future of Methodism," in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh, eds., *Methodism and the Future* (London: Cassell, 1999), 153.

[7] Jeremy Morris, *Religion and Urban Change: Croydon, 1840-1914* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society, 1992), 180-184.

[8] S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline. Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 383-390.

[9] Robin Gill, *The "Empty" Church Revisited* (Aldershot: SPCK, 2003), 135-138. This is a revised version of a study first published in 1993.

[10] Morris, *Religion and Urban Change*, 180.

[11] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

rituals, and practices in an area famed for low levels of measurable church attendance.[12]

Another dimension was added to the historiographical debate in 2001, when Callum Brown published his iconoclastic study, *The Death of Christian Britain*. In effect, Brown repudiated the entire chronology and methodology of secularization theory, claiming that the churches remained strong through the 1950s (despite the rhetoric of crisis reaching back as far as Thomas Chalmers in the 1810s and 1820s) and asserting that "really quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organized Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance."[13] Brown's theory has not gone unchallenged, and the argument generated by *The Death of Christian Britain* has prompted fresh studies of the 1950s, to see whether the post-war years did indeed witness an English religious revival.[14]

With this historiographical backdrop in place, we may turn to British Methodism in the 1950s. Two overwhelming impressions emerge from contemporary sources. First, and often taken for granted or overlooked by commentators and historians, there is a strong sense of continuity and of "business as usual." As evidence for this, the weekly publication and weekly contents of the *Methodist Recorder* may be cited. Even the printers' strike of summer, 1959, did not seriously impede the production of the *Recorder*, with its steady stream of news and comment, its columns of family announcements, its obituaries of ministers and "lay workers," its regular appeals for and acknowledgements of gifts received on behalf of Methodist mission agencies, its book reviews and devotional items, its advertisements for Sunday services and Christian holidays, its earnest editorials, whimsical (or ponderous) humor, nostalgic snippets, and aggrieved letters. While Margaret Harwood continued to dispense trenchant advice, Francis James to pen devotional articles "for the Quiet Hour," and "F.H.E." to enliven "Thursday Teatime" for readers of the "Junior Recorder," the rhythm of Methodist life could continue, almost regardless of the Suez crisis, the "H" bomb, and the depredations of those new "Edwardians" whose chosen epithet was soon abridged to "Teddy boys." Some Connexional leaders drew attention to the steady and unspectacular work of ordinary Methodists: thus Harold Roberts, in his Presidential retrospect in July of 1958, wrote of the "quiet witness" of many local societies, while W. E. Sangster, under the provocative headline: "Dying? The Evidence Shouts 'No'!" cited the innumerable "obscure saints"

---

[12] S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 1-23.

[13] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1

[14] See, for instance, S. J. D. Green, "Was There an English Religious Revival in the 1950s?" *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 7.9 (November, 2006): 517-538 and Richard Sykes, "Popular Religion in Decline: A Study from the Black Country," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 56.2 (2005): 287-307; esp. 287-289.

as evidence of God's continuing purpose for the people called Methodist.[15]

If Methodism was not paralyzed by anxiety in the 1950s, and if the regular pattern of church life was continuing in many places, nonetheless there was a sense of disquiet about the state of the Connexion, and this is the second overriding impression afforded by the records. Four sources of concern may be identified.

First, and most obvious to all, many of the statistics carefully collected, tabulated and published every year gave some cause for alarm. At the end of 1949, British Methodism claimed 744,326 members. Over each of the next eleven years, the Connexion never failed to recruit at least 20,000 new members, and in six of the eleven years, the total of new members exceeded 28,000. In only five of those eleven years, however, did the number of new members exceed losses, so that the membership at the end of 1959 had fallen by more than 10,000 in a decade, standing at 733,658. More worrying, losses exceeded gains every year after 1954, and the net loss increased every year, rising from 338 in 1955 to 3123 in 1959.

The Connexional statistics prompted anxious editorials in the *Recorder*, analyses of the losses (principally caused by people "ceasing to meet" rather than deaths or transfers to other denominations) and calls for renewed consecration. Editorial optimism expressed in late 1955 in the aftermath of the Graham Crusade: "The tide has turned. We must take it at the flood"—had given way four years later to a more dogged statement of the obvious: "The returns call for a more complete devotion and a sincere application by all ministers and members to the purpose of bringing men and women into saving contact with Christ, and enrolling them—and keeping them—in the membership of His Church."[16] For those with eyes to see, moreover, still more troubling statistics could be found in the Connexional tables. Methodism hemorrhaged children faster than adults, losing (according to Len Barnett of the MYD) 100,000 a year by 1958. The number of Local Preachers fell by several hundred every year through the 1950s. And, as Eric Baker reminded the Conference in his Presidential address in 1959, whereas the membership used to form the core of a larger congregation of adherents, many churches were finding that they had more members than worshippers and that the "fringe" of adherents had disappeared.[17] The hope that the union of Wesleyan, Primitive, and United Methodists in 1932 would result in a great "forward movement" had been cruelly disappointed: Methodism had declined in membership by more than 100,000 since Union, the number of Local Preachers had reduced by a third and the number of Sunday School scholars by half.[18]

---

[15] *MR* (July 3, 1958), 1; "Questions Methodists Must Answer," in *MR* (September 18, 1958), 9.
[16] "The Incoming Tide," in *MR* (November 10, 1955), 8; "Numbering the People," in *MR* (February 12, 1959), 10.
[17] *MR* (July 17, 1958), 6: Barnett spoke of a "ghost army": "President Calls for Action, Now." in *MR* (July 9, 1959), 1-3.
[18] Statistics printed in the annual *Minutes of Conference*, particularly 1933, 446-451, and 1960, 96-100.

The second source of concern focused on the structure and organization of the Church. Eric Baker drew attention in 1959 to the lack of central direction or co-ordination, following the previous Conference's rejection of a plan to give more coherent leadership to the Connexion.[19] Disgruntled members of Conference complained that the Connexional departments wielded too much influence, and that ordinary representatives had little opportunity to have their say. One Superintendent Minister even lamented the abolition of the Wesleyan "Legal Hundred," which, he claimed, had functioned as a second chamber in the Conference, able to challenge the secretariat.[20]

The structural issue which attracted most attention in this period, however, was the challenge of redundancy: in other words, the closure of failing local churches and the amalgamation of societies in close proximity to one another to release money, energy, and personnel for the development of new work in the growing housing estates, suburbs, and "New Towns." It has been said that the goal of the 1932 Union was the streamlining of Methodist resources and the resolution of the problem of "overlapping" societies competing for support in the same community; unfortunately the political price of achieving union was allowing ex-Wesleyan, ex-Primitive, and ex-United Methodist chapels to remain open with dwindling memberships but undiminished mutual suspicion.[21] Presidents of Conference inveighed against the attitude of those who were "bogged down in buildings" and who "think more of bricks and mortar than of people,"[22] but progress in healing long-standing antagonisms or overcoming tenacious local loyalties seemed painfully slow. When Northampton Methodists, for example, agreed to merge the ex-Wesleyan and ex-Primitive circuits and to tackle the challenge of two churches barely thirty yards apart, facilitating the redeployment of staff to new estates on the outskirts of the town, the *Recorder* hailed it as nothing short of a "miracle," and this was fully twenty- seven years after Methodist Union.[23]

A third and rather different source of concern revolved around the spiritual life of the Church. Sometimes spirituality and structures were juxtaposed: for instance, when Leslie Weatherhead proposed closing two thirds of the chapels in order to concentrate resources into fewer and larger churches, another minister retorted: "Methodism does not need drastic reorganization, but a new spirit."[24] Influential lay leaders like Cecil Pawson and Douglas Blatherwick wrote about the importance of the class meeting; Harold Roberts called for a rediscovery of rules as a mechanism for reviving spiritual disci-

---

[19] "President Calls for Action, Now," in *MR* (July 9, 1959), 1-3.
[20] "Mr. Bailey Wants Conference 'Spring Clean'," in *MR* (August 27, 1959), 3.
[21] See, for example, the analysis in Robert Currie, *Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenicalism* (London: Faber, 1968), 192-193, 287-289.
[22] "Mobility is Essence of Evangelism," in *MR* (January 1, 1959), 1. This article was Norman Snaith's "half-time report" during his Presidential year.
[23] "Northampton Miracle," in *MR* (October 1, 1959), 3. The Northampton situation was described as "one of the most intractable of all the problems of amalgamation."
[24] "We Can't Go on Like This," in *MR* (July 8, 1948), 7; the Rev. D. J. McNeill to Editor, *MR* (July 29, 1948), 11.

pline; Sangster devoted his declining energies to promoting "prayer cells" in a characteristically positive response to a perceived spiritual crisis.[25] In his Presidential address to the Conference in 1959, Eric Baker, speaking with the insight of eight years' service as Secretary, ascribed the Connexion's problems to two causes: "We lack direction, and we lack power." The second cause, he continued, was more serious than the first: "We are failing at the spiritual level," in commitment to public worship and to fellowship. Other ministers concurred, instancing churches which put social activities and entertainments above worship, prayer, and mission.[26]

It may be suggested that there never was a time when someone in Methodism was not lamenting a decline in spirituality and Christian commitment: this is a perennial complaint in all denominations and communions.[27] In the 1950s, however, the issue was perhaps more acute than at other times. Methodist leaders could sense the challenges and opportunities of the post-war world and were confident that the Church could make the most of them, if only it could be galvanized into action. Perplexed at the failure to make a really decisive impact, they looked to spiritual as well as structural weaknesses to account for the disappointing results of their campaigns and initiatives.

A fourth recurring source of concern reflected a perceived lack of connection between the Church and wider society. It is possible that Soper's somewhat Delphic utterance about a "dying church" had this in mind: the casual visitor to the Conference might not discern much of interest or relevance to 1950s Britain in the annual report of the Methodist Youth Department. Where Donald Soper spoke with less than his usual clarity, a younger minister, Rowland Goodwin, made the point more sharply. Writing a monthly column from the perspective of "a young man in the ministry," Goodwin described a jive session in a local bar and drew a vivid contrast between the vibrant and noisy social life of contemporary young people and the unkempt, shabby, and inaccessible premises of the local Methodist chapel.[28]

In a very different context a late nineteenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, when asked about the contemporary "crisis" in the Church of England, observed that the Church of England had always been in crisis.[29] There is much truth in the claim that churches are often simultaneously hoping for revival and preparing for impending disaster, and this may be particularly apparent when church history is viewed through the lenses of the ecclesiastical press and the reported utterances of denominational leaders. In the 1950s, however, crisis and opportunity did seem finely balanced. Although

---

[25] *MR* (July 3, 1958), 1; W. E. Sangster, "Let's Face These Pressing Needs," in *MR* (September 25, 1958), 11.

[26] See "President Asks for Action, Now," in *MR* (July 9, 1959), 1; R. Goodwin, "We Have Our Angry Young Men," in *MR* (March 5, 1959), 3; "A Protest," the Rev. J. Kenneth Lawton *et al* to Editor, *MR* (April 16, 1953), 13, protesting about "frivolous entertainments,"

[27] It may be found in Wesley: see Wellings, "A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die," 152.

[28] R. Goodwin, "But Think of the Trouble They Might Cause . . ." in *MR* (May 7, 1959), 6.

[29] Comment attributed to Archbishop A. C. Tait: *Churchman* (August, 1915): 602.

Methodist membership was in decline, the Connexion could still claim to be the third largest Christian communion in Great Britain, with huge resources of personnel and property to deploy.[30] If the Sunday Schools were shrinking, Methodist youth work was booming, as were the student societies associated with the new and newly expanding universities. Mass evangelism, spearheaded by Billy Graham, Tom Rees, and Eric Hutchings, seemed to be making an impact on British society, and although many Methodists were uncomfortable with "fundamentalism," the Connexion was still committed to an evangelical gospel. Ecumenically, conversations among the Free Churches and between Methodists and Anglicans promised real progress towards Christian unity. At home, Methodism sustained its social witness, both at local level and in the work of the Connexional Christian Citizenship Department, under the leadership of Edward Rogers. Overseas, Methodists were active in the World Council of Churches, in the emergence of autonomous and united churches in Africa and India, and in opposition to apartheid. The mood of the period, therefore, oscillated between hope and despair, excitement and frustration, as Methodists celebrated their achievements, identified opportunities, devised plans to address perceived needs, and struggled to mobilize a large but often inert membership into action. For the remainder of this paper three strategies developed "to serve the present age" of the 1950s and 1960s will be considered: first, reform and renewal; second, reunion; and third, revival.

The *Methodist Recorder*'s front page on November 20, 1958, carried a photograph of Irvonwy Morgan, Secretary of the London Mission Committee, and Oliver Phillipson, General Secretary of the Department of Chapel Affairs, standing in front of a military-style wall map showing the planned extension of housing in and around London. Captioned "Greater London Needs Churches Now," the report described Connexional initiatives to respond to the creation of eight "New Towns" in the Home Counties and listed some of the projects already undertaken to establish a Methodist presence on London County Council "overspill" estates and in the expanding suburbs.[31] This overarching survey, developed in detail in further articles into the spring of 1959, reviewed only the most ambitious of Methodism's many plans for church extension, the most visible element of a program of reform and renewal undertaken in this period. Faced with unprecedented shifts in population, the rapid development of new communities, and the consequent decline of city center and urban "inner belt" churches, Methodism responded with a vigorous program of church building and church planting. War damage helped the process, as redundant buildings were not repaired and compensation from the War Damage Commission was used to fund new work. Albert Hearn, making his final report to Conference on behalf of the Chapel Committee in 1958, claimed that Methodism was spending £2 million *per annum* on new buildings. Three years later, Phillipson reported that

[30] W. E. Sangster, "Questions Methodists Must Answer," in *MR* (September 18, 1958), 9.
[31] "Greater London Needs Churches Now," in *MR* (November 20, 1958), 1.

the Connexion had disposed of 2810 properties since 1932 and had carried through a £12 million building program over six years. In the London suburban circuits, for example, Ealing and Acton saw five building schemes in six years and Harrow eight schemes in ten years. At Little Chalfont, in the Buckinghamshire commuter belt, a typical new church was opened a stone's throw from the Metropolitan line tube station, to accommodate a Methodist society less than ten years old. A cluster of new churches, some of them dual purpose halls, was constructed to serve the expanding towns of Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage, and Welwyn Garden City. In Manchester, the vast new estate at Wythenshawe, built to house 100,000 people, was provided with a new church costing £60,000: significantly, the Methodist dignitary who laid the foundation stone was also Lord Mayor of Manchester and chair of the Corporation's Housing Committee.[32] Almost every issue of the *Recorder* in the 1950s carried reports of buildings refurbished, extended, or constructed on new sites as Methodism sought to reposition its plant for the post-war world.

As has already been suggested, reconstruction could serve the reorganization of the Church at society and circuit level. The new Spring Bank chapel in Hull, for example, opened in October of 1959, replaced four older buildings, two ex-Wesleyan and two ex-Primitive, from three different circuits.[33] The 1950s saw a steady stream of society and circuit amalgamations, not all as spectacular as the Northampton "miracle," but all testifying to progress in gathering the over-ripe fruits of Methodist Union. Slowly and painfully, "overlapping" was reduced and resources rationalized. In some cases, however, reorganization came too late, and the admission of defeat by a local society meant not amalgamation with another Methodist cause but the disappearance of the Methodist witness in a community.[34]

Further up the Connexional pyramid, 1957 saw a wholesale remodeling of the Home Districts, as the forty-six Districts established in 1932 were reduced to thirty-four. There were inevitable murmurs of discontent at the redrawing of the boundaries: for instance, Fred Pratt Green, Chairman of the new York and Hull District, found that the principal centers of the District did not relate readily to one another, and that the practicalities of travel militated against attendance at District committees.[35] This was a wider concern in the period, with complaints about long journeys home after evening meetings and requests for District Synods to move from midweek to weekend gatherings.

The advent of the new and larger Districts was partly caused by the move

---

[32] *MR* (July 17, 1958), 6; "Look on Credit Side," in *MR* (January 5, 1961), 1; "Greater London Needs Churches, Now," in *MR* (November 20, 1958), 1; "Builders' Log," in *MR* (October 8, 1959), 12. Mention should be made of the guidance offered by the Department for Chapel Affairs as early as 1946 in E. Benson Perkins and Albert Hearn, *The Methodist Church Builds Again* (London: Epworth, 1946).

[33] "Fourfold Union for Hull," in *MR* (February 5, 1959), 5 and (October 1, 1959), 2.

[34] W. E. Sangster, "Starting Again on Note of Realism," in *MR* (September 11, 1958), 1.

[35] *MR* (April 16, 1959), 13 (interview by George Parkinson).

to appoint "separated Chairmen": that is, ministers who would serve the Districts full-time, rather than chair the Synods in addition to holding circuit responsibilities. There were precedents for this, particularly in the Wesleyan strand of Methodism: W. H. Heap, for example, served in the East Anglia District in the 1920s as Chairman and District Missionary, without circuit duties,[36] and by the mid-1950s there were several Districts with separated Chairmen. In a series of reports from 1955 onwards, the Conference decided to give most Districts a separated Chairman and to redefine the Chairman's role in terms of pastoral care of the ministers, "evangelical leadership" in a fast-changing society, and efficient administration. It is interesting to note that the earlier reports emphasized strategic leadership and planning as the principal benefits of the change (1955), while later documents gave pride of place to the Chairman's role as "pastor *pastorum*" (1958). Whether the Anglican-Methodist Conversations and reflections on episcopacy had any influence on this reshaping of priorities is open to debate.[37]

As well as reorganizing the buildings and the structures of Methodism, a stream of initiatives sought to revitalize the Connexion's spiritual life. Three may be mentioned. The first was linked to the "Year of Evangelism" proposed by the 1951 World Methodist Conference. The WMC met in Oxford, and suggested a "simultaneous mission in World Methodism," beginning with a year of preparation in 1952, leading to a worldwide campaign in 1953.[38] The WMC's idea caught the imagination—or raised the hopes—of British Methodist leaders, and 1952-53 saw plenty of encouragement given to evangelism. The campaign was commended by the President and Vice-President of the Conference, Howard Watkin-Jones and Cecil Pawson, respectively. The President-designate, Colin Roberts, was known to be an effective strategist for evangelism, and he brought the resources of the Home Mission Department to bear on the preparations. Vincent Taylor wrote a series of articles on "Doctrine and Evangelism" for the *Methodist Recorder*. Above all, however, Sangster devoted his energies and enthusiasm to the cause, in a stream of articles and pamphlets. As has already been noted, and as Soper commented in his Presidential address, despite these efforts, the results of the year were disappointing: Methodism had seen "a thin but steady trickle of converts," but "whatever has happened revival has not come, at least in the time-honored sense of that much used and much abused word."[39]

---

[36] *MR* (November 26, 1953), 6.

[37] The developments and reports are summarized in George Thompson Brake, *Policy and Politics in British Methodism 1932-1982* (London: Edsall, 1984), 70-76. In *A History of English Christianity 1920-1990* (London: Collins, 1986 and later editions), Adrian Hastings describes the change as "a process of moderate episcopalization bringing Methodists one step nearer to the Anglican way of structuring the ministry," (citing the third [1991] edition, at 462).

[38] W. E. Sangster, "The World Methodist Mission: How It Began," in *MR* (January 10, 1952), 4.

[39] H. Watkin-Jones, "Do Not Wait Until 1953," in *MR* (April 3, 1952), 3; W. E. Sangster, "So Far, So Good," in *MR* (June 5, 1952), 4; *MR* (July 17, 1952), 3 (Roberts' Presidential Address); Vincent Taylor, *Doctrine and Evangelism* (London: Epworth, 1953), based on twenty articles in the *MR*; *MR* (July 16, 1953), 3. Others were more positive: thus Leslie Davison wrote of "grand work for God" in the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District, in *MR* (December 3, 1953), 1.

A second initiative was undertaken by an influential group of eighty lay leaders, the so-called "Westminster Laymen." who met in April of 1954, with Colin Roberts' encouragement, for a conference at Westminster College. The group's first meeting and its call to action, *Laymen Speak to Laymen*, was succeeded by a second gathering and a second publication, *Laymen Speak to Laymen—Again*. In April of 1959, 180 representatives gathered in Oxford to hear an "off-the-record" appraisal of Methodism by the President (Norman Snaith), a "trenchant" address by the President-designate (Eric Baker), and a series of recorded interviews with Church leaders including the Australian Methodist Alan Walker and Kenneth Slack of the British Council of Churches. The "Westminster" group comprised a Connexional elite, well-represented among Vice-Presidents and Methodists prominent in the regions. It saw itself as a "ginger group," concerned "that Methodism . . . must be revitalized, its traditional emphases reaffirmed, and its disciplines made to work effectively, and its faith in its Master and in its own mission restored." Besides rhetoric about a more effective partnership between ministers and lay people, however, it is not clear what the "Westminster" movement achieved.[40]

Reflection on the lessons, and on the meager results, of the Year of Evangelism, combined with observation of impressive church growth in the United States,[41] may have prompted Sangster to champion a third initiative at the end of the decade. In 1958—the year of Soper's "dying church" speech—Sangster led the Home Mission Department in a new emphasis on apologetics and on prayer, promoting "prayer cells" as a way of reviving prayer meetings without falling back into the mistakes which had undermined the effectiveness of the older gatherings. Sangster commended and promoted the new movement in the Methodist press, provided booklets to guide leaders, invited groups to inform the Department of their existence, and supplied a quarterly bulletin to support duly registered cells. Over a thousand cells had registered by the end of May of 1959, representing a membership of some 10,000 people. Sangster's emphasis on prayer dovetailed with Eric Baker's analysis of the spiritual weakness of Methodism in his Presidential address, and with his call for a renewed commitment to fellowship.[42]

Stepping back from the detail of building schemes, ecclesiastical restructuring, and initiatives in spirituality and evangelism, the activities reviewed under the broad heading of reform and renewal shared a sense of purposeful development and confidence in the ability of the Church, under God,

[40] "Laymen Call the Church to Action," in *MR* (April 19, 1954), 1-3; "Spiritual Lay Leaders Needed," in *MR* (April 16, 1959), 1-3. Leading Westminster Laymen included Douglas Blatherwick and Philip Race, Vice-Presidents in 1956 and 1957 respectively.

[41] During the Year of Evangelism, for example, American Methodism gained more than 200,000 members: see *MR* (December 17, 1953), 1.

[42] W. E. Sangster, "Let's Face These Pressing Needs," in *MR* (September 25, 1958), 11; W. E. Sangster, "Standing in the Need of Prayer," in *MR* (November 27, 1958), 11; (December 4, 1958, 13); and (December 11, 1958), 13; *MR* (May 21, 1959), 14.

to solve its problems, meet the challenges of the present age, and take the opportunities before it. The routine rhetoric of crisis was matched by strategic thinking, careful planning, and a great deal of prayer and hard work. This constructive approach to the challenges of the day was exemplified by Sangster, and seemed justified by the steady stream of new buildings, the growth of Methodist work among young people and students, the expanding suburban churches, and the impact of ventures like Bill Gowland's pioneering emphasis on industrial mission.[43] It should be added that there were other voices which, at times, were less confident about the capacity of the Church to connect with an increasingly affluent and increasingly indifferent society: Soper, for example, reflected in his 1953 Presidential Address on the challenges to theism and noted the prevalence of a wistful agnosticism in modern Britain.[44] The general tone of Methodist comment, however, and the general assumption of Methodist policy, was that if the Church reformed its organization and improved its methods, it would make a significant impact once again.[45]

Alongside reform and renewal as a response to the needs of the "present age" may be placed reunion: not the reunion of the divided strands of Methodism, but the quest for a wider Christian unity in Great Britain. Reference has already been made to the denominational competition which marked, or marred, the Church life of the nineteenth century, but this picture of sectarian insularity and suspicion needs to be qualified by the recognition that a variety of activities, institutions, and initiatives brought the churches together, albeit under carefully controlled conditions. Nonconformist grievances prompted alliances to secure civil equality or to resist perceived Anglican privileges; even to campaign for the disestablishment of the Church of England.[46] If the Liberation Society represented militant Nonconformity in opposition to the State Church, the Free Church Council movement of the 1890s emphasized the positive aspects of Free Church endeavor in evangelism, fellowship, and social reform.[47] Across the Episcopalian divide, evangelicals from the Established and Free Churches co-operated in the national committees and local auxiliaries of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and in the annual week of prayer organized by the Evangelical Alliance. Campaigning bodies and pressure groups were able to draw on an even wider circle of support, so that the National Vigilance Association, for instance, numbered among its patrons Cardinal Manning; a clutch of Anglican bish-

[43] Gowland contributed a monthly article to the *MR*, entitled "The Church on the Factory Floor"; see also David Gowland and Stuart Roebuck, *Never Call Retreat: A Biography of Bill Gowland* (London: Chester House, 1990), chapters 5 and 6.
[44] *MR* (July 16, 1953), 3.
[45] Thus Norman Snaith's contrast, after six months of Presidential travels, between Methodist churches which would make the angels rejoice and ones which would make them weep, in "Mobility is Essence of Evangelism," in *MR* (January 1, 1959), 1. Snaith's article was predicated on the assumption that change was possible.
[46] See, for example, Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Suffolk, UK: Woodbridge, 1999).
[47] E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 26.

ops; Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army; the Baptist Dr. Clifford; the Congregationalist Andrew Mearns; and the Wesleyans Percy Bunting, Hugh Price Hughes, and Thomas Bowman Stephenson.[48]

The closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth saw a growing commitment to move beyond cooperation toward reunion, prompted partly by the concerns of the missionary societies and partly by the interdenominational work and experience of the Student Christian Movement. Dissatisfaction with division bore fruit in a series of ecumenical conferences, from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 through the Life and Work and Faith and Order meetings of the 1920s and 1930s to the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948. From 1919 onwards, negotiations were under way to inaugurate a united church in South India; and this process came to completion in 1947. Ecumenical cooperation, therefore, was on the agenda of all the churches in the first half of the twentieth century, and there was a clear shift from an older evangelical assertion of the reality of spiritual unity in an invisible Church toward a belief that Christians should work for intercommunion and the visible unity of the Body of Christ, in obedience to Jesus' High Priestly prayer in John 17 and for the sake of effective mission.[49]

British Methodism played a full part in the endeavors of what Horton Davies has called "the ecumenical century." It was a maverick Wesleyan, Henry Lunn, who invited Anglican and Free Church leaders to meet at Grindelwald in 1892 to confer on reunion, while Hugh Price Hughes was a leading advocate of the Free Church Councils and Congresses.[50] Methodists were active in the Edinburgh Conference, in the Life and Work Movement, in the Faith and Order gatherings, and in the negotiations leading to the creation of the Church of South India. Methodist leaders like John Scott Lidgett, Newton Flew, and Harold Roberts, in successive generations, were closely involved in the quest for Christian unity.[51]

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the cause of reunion in England offered two possibilities. Free Church Union had been canvassed at various points during the twentieth century,[52] but despite the continued existence at national

---

[48] Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance. Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 234-235. Bunting was chairman of the executive committee of the NVA.

[49] See Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (London: SPCK, 1954); and Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement towards Union 1900-1947* (London: Lutterworth, 1965).

[50] Jordan, *Free Church Unity*, 20-30; Sir Henry S. Lunn, *Chapters from My Life. With Special Reference to Reunion* (London: Cassell and Company, 1918), chapter 12. Lunn observes that Hughes was anxious to exclude the Unitarians from the Free Church Councils (178).

[51] On Lidgett, see Rupert E. Davies, "The Ecumenical Statesman," in Rupert E. Davies (ed.), *John Scott Lidgett. A Symposium* (London: Epworth, 1957); and Alan Turberfield, *John Scott Lidgett: Archbishop of British Methodism?* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2003), parts 5 and 6; on Flew, Gordon S. Wakefield, *Robert Newton Flew, 1886-1962* (London: Epworth, 1971), chapter 7; on Roberts, John H. Lenton, *Harold Roberts* (Peterborough: Foundery, 1995).

[52] For instance, by the Baptist leader J. H. Shakespeare in 1910: John A. Newton, "Protestant Nonconformists and Ecumenism," in Alan P. F. Sell and Anthony R. Cross, eds., *Protestant Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century* (Cumbria, UK: Carlisle, 2003), 361.

and local levels of the Free Church Federal Council, and the disappointment of some Methodists at the lukewarm response of the Council in October of 1959 to a scheme to bring together Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians, connexional energies were largely devoted to exploratory "Conversations" with the Church of England.[53]

Formal discussions between the denominations can be traced at least as far back as the "Appeal to All Christian People" issued by the Lambeth Conference of 1920. The immediate cause of the "Conversations" process, however, was Archbishop Fisher's 1946 Cambridge University Sermon, "A Step Forward in Church Relations," in which Fisher invited the Free Churches to consider taking some form of the historic episcopate into their systems as a way of facilitating intercommunion.[54] The archbishop's initiative produced a positive response, and the resulting discussions between representatives of the Free Churches and the Church of England led to the report *Church Relations in England*, published in 1950. In 1952 and 1953 the Methodist Conference, alone among the Free Churches, declared its readiness to proceed with the Conversations provided certain conditions were met, although concern was expressed from the floor of Conference that Methodist leaders might be out of touch with the rank and file of the Connexion on episcopacy. In 1955 the Convocations of Canterbury and York also agreed to proceed, and a committee was set up, with broad membership but somewhat ambiguous terms of reference. This committee published its first report, the *Interim Statement*, in the summer of 1958.[55]

When Harold Roberts presented the *Interim Statement* to the Methodist Conference, he acknowledged that the group's discussions had been wide-ranging and exploratory, pressing beyond the immediate vexed question of episcopacy to common ground on the Scriptures, the Creeds and the sacraments, and differences on the theology of the Church. Roberts welcomed this broader approach to the issues underlying the search for unity, but critics like David Foot Nash and Kingsley Barrett were quick to observe that the Conversations group had not only expanded the range of topics under consideration, but had also redefined the goal of the process, replacing intercommunion with an explicit commitment to organic union. The Conference agreed to "refer the interim report to the thought and prayer of the Methodist people," encouraging that "wherever possible the statement should be considered by joint meetings of Anglicans and Methodists in circuits and parishes." Although the resolution was eventually passed *nemine contradicente,* the debate in 1958 revealed the existence of deep disagreements within the

---

[53] "That 'Faraway Union'," in *MR* (October 8, 1959), 1. Jordan was only cautiously optimistic about the prospects for Free Church Federation in the final chapter of *Free Church Unity*, published in 1956.

[54] This section of the paper draws on John Munsey Turner, "The Walk to the Paradise Garden," in his *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England, 1740-1982* (London: Epworth, 1985).

[55] Turner, 193-196; Newton, "Nonconformists and Ecumenism," 366; Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 99-103; *MR*, Conference Sketch (July 30, 1953), 9.

connexion.[56] As usual, the letters page of the *Recorder* allowed the protagonists to continue their arguments, and the paper carried correspondence from such heavyweights as Foot Nash, Roberts, Thomas Tiplady, and E. Benson Perkins up to the end of the year, and beyond. An article by Gordon Rupp claiming that constitutional and limited episcopacy would have been endorsed by Methodists from the Wesleys and Jabez Bunting to Wilbert Howard and A. S. Peake drew a furious response from Elsie Harrison, who developed her case into an assertion that ecclesiastical history could be divided into parallel Episcopalian and Presbyterian strands, that Methodism belonged properly with the Presbyterians and that "Methodism is not the child of the Church of England."[57] Despite long-range bombardment by correspondence and a dozen critical memorials from the circuits, the 1959 Conference voted in favor of continuing with the Conversations.[58]

The 1959 vote occurred with Norman Snaith, an avowed critic of episcopacy, in the Presidential chair. Snaith was a member of the Conversations, and supported the continuation of the dialogue; indeed, he expressed regret that Barrett had not accepted an invitation to join the group. It is important to remember, therefore, that both advocates and sceptics in the late 1950s could emphasize the provisional nature of the conclusions reached by the Conversations and predict an indeterminate process of negotiation with no preconceived results.[59] It was only in 1963, with the publication of the final report and its recommendation of a two-stage scheme of union that divisions became sharper and debate more acrimonious. Whereas in 1959 only isolated voices questioned the representative nature or integrity of the committee, after 1963, Methodism was forced to choose between the majority and minority reports, with pressure groups lobbying for and against the scheme.[60]

Adrian Hastings offers an unsympathetic appraisal of the impact of the Conversations on Methodism in the next decade: "Methodism in the 1960s, while awaiting union, had little history, except for an unprecedented rate of numerical decline. At the end it was left with only a smack in the face."[61] In the late 1950s, however, the Conversations, although important and controversial, did not totally dominate the Connexional agenda and certainly did

---

[56] *MR* (July 10, 1958), 6-7.
[57] E. G. Rupp, "Methodist Churchmanship," in *MR* (December 11, 1958), 13; "Anglican-Methodist Conversations," Elsie Harrison to editor, *MR* (December 18, 1958), 7; "Anglo-Methodist Conversations," Elsie Harrison to editor, *MR* (January 29, 1959), 7. Mrs. Harrison's broad-brush approach to church history recalls the discussion of "Methodism" as "a recurrent form of Christianity" in Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (Harmondsworth, 1963) (citing third impression of the second [1985] edition, London: Epworth Press, 1994, at page 11).
[58] "Conference: The Conversations will go on," *MR* (July 23, 1959), 7.
[59] Thus, Harold Roberts, in Lenton, 7; Gordon Rupp, "Methodist Churchmanship"; "Conversations on Unity," in *MR* (July 10, 1958), 10: "It cannot be too plainly said that these conversations do not commit anyone to anything."
[60] One speaker in 1959 asked, "If any of the representatives in the Conversations have one foot in the Church of England?" in "The Conversations Will Go On," in *MR* (July 23, 1959), 7; Brake, *Policy and Politics*, 104-108.
[61] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 549.

not have a major impact in the circuits and districts.[62] The ideal of joint parish-circuit discussions of the *Interim Statement* envisaged by the committee was not realized in many places, but the process of exploration at local level could itself generate fresh ventures in collaboration and mission. Much was made, for example, of plans for a new shared Anglican-Methodist building at Herne Bay and of a scheme to divide the parish of Woodford, Essex, into two, with the Derby Road Methodist church (re-named Saint John's, after Mr. Wesley) becoming the parish church of one of the new parishes.[63] At this stage the Conversations and the quest for full visible unity remained the preoccupation, hope, or fear of relatively few Methodists.

Among the plethora of statements, declarations, manifestoes, and pamphlets circulating in the wake of the 1963 *Report* on the Conversations was a substantial booklet entitled *Towards a United Church: A Biblical Approach to the Issues Raised by the Anglican-Methodist Conversations*. Strikingly similar in cover design and color to the official *Report*, *Towards a United Church* was not part of the family of documents associated with the Conversations published by the Church Information Office and the Epworth Press. It was, rather, a critique of the proposals by members of the Methodist Revival Fellowship.[64] Engagement with the Conversations process in the 1960s was an unusual, and controversial, departure for the MRF, and one which was to have unhappy consequences for the Fellowship. In its essence and aims, MRF stood for a third response to the challenge of the "present age": a recall to prayer, and a longing for revival.

The language of revival was common currency in Methodism in the 1940s and 1950s, as it had been for decades, and it was used in a variety of ways, some overlapping and some contradictory. In the religious press, the term was sometimes employed to denote a new lease of life for a struggling local congregation, so that when the *Recorder* published a story about the fresh activities generated by the arrival of a new member in the society at Little Houghton, it did so under the headline, "Northampton Policeman Revives Village Chapel."[65] The language of revival was also used, however, to describe a new turning to the Church by a largely indifferent population. Sangster and the other advocates of the 1953 World Methodist Campaign hoped and believed that well-organized and prayerful evangelism would generate a revival in this sense; enthusiastic supporters of the Billy Graham Crusade believed that the impact of Harringay indicated that Britain was indeed on the verge of a spiritual awakening. Successes in evangelism at local level were thus liable to be written up as "revivals" too, so that a Cliff

---

[62] Only twelve of the 926 British circuits sent memorials about the Conversations to the 1959 Conference; District Synod reports in the *Recorder* do not give much space to the issue.
[63] *MR* (July 16, 1959), 6; *MR* (August 20, 1959), 4.
[64] The contributors were John Job, Howard Marshall, Arthur Skevington Wood, Wilbert Putman, John Bedford, Roland Lamb, and Robin Catlin. I am grateful to Dr. John Job for the loan of this pamphlet. For a brief history of the MRF, see A. Skevington Wood, *The Kindled Flame* (Ilkeston: Moorley's Bible and Bookshop, 1987).
[65] *MR* (May 27, 1948), 3.

College campaign in St. Ives in January of 1953, which brought one hundred people to respond to the gospel (curiously, only thirty-five of them for the first time), appeared under the headline, "Stirring Revival Scenes in the South West."[66]

For some Methodists in this period, therefore, "revival" had almost become a synonym for successful evangelism, with the vocabulary of revival one of the options available to the staff reporters of the *Methodist Recorder* covering local missions. For other Methodists, however, the notion of revival was imbued with a cluster of other associations, and brought in its train a series of beliefs, assumptions, practices, and priorities. To give an example, in the spring of 1959 the *Recorder* printed a correspondence on the problems of persuading ministers to take appointments in the North of England. One contributor was Kenneth Battye, a Huddersfield Local Preacher, who wrote lamenting the low spiritual condition of his local churches. On the eighty occasions he conducted worship in 1958, he complained, only twice was he asked to advertise a prayer meeting. There was a need for "a Holy Ghost revival," for prayer, for commitment to the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, and for a courageous denunciation of "worldliness" in the Church.[67] This combination of conservative theology, evangelical spirituality, and pietist ethics marked Battye as a traditional exponent of Methodist evangelicalism who was as uncomfortable with the more liberal or sacramental theologies of the period as he was with the Church's practice of associational sociability.

The MRF reflected and represented this range of conservative attitudes.[68] Founded in 1948 as "The Aldersgate Fellowship" by a small group of ministers, theological college students, and lay people drawn from the milieu of Cliff College, the Southport Convention, and the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, the movement was relaunched as the Revival Fellowship in 1952 and was given permission to add the word "Methodist" by the Conference of 1955.

It was the only explicitly conservative evangelical group in the Methodism of its day, and its members sometimes felt isolated and beleaguered. After its very modest beginnings, however, the MRF expanded in membership and activities. From twenty members in 1948 the Fellowship grew to 600 members by 1956 and almost 1,200 by 1962. A duplicated foolscap circular letter was succeeded by a quarterly newsletter, which eventually evolved in 1960 into the magazine *Sound of Revival*. In April of 1953, the Fellowship held its first Prayer Conference, and this became an annual fixture in the calendar, soon moving to the autumn and to The Hayes Conference Centre at Swanwick. In the autumn of 1958, the MRF doubled the attendance at the

---

[66] *MR* (January 29, 1953), 6.

[67] "Spiritual Conditions in the North," Kenneth Battye to editor, *MR* (February 12, 1959), 9.

[68] See, for example, "'Spiritually Starved'," the Rev. H. A. Anfield to editor, *MR* (April 9, 1953), 11, about a local church with a busy social program, but no spiritual meetings and "no message," and "Entertainments and Revival," the Rev. F. Ockenden to editor, *MR* (December 24, 1953), 10, lamenting the loss of the traditional Methodist prohibition of drama and dancing; Anfield and Ockenden were both members of the MRF.

conference and filled The Hayes with nearly 170 people; "one of the older Methodist ministers, visiting the conference for the first time, remarked that it was like the old times and with this spirit abroad there was hope for the continued evangelical usefulness of the Methodist Church."[69] The reference to "the old times" was telling: MRF sought to serve the present age by recovering the spiritual emphases and thus the spiritual power of the past; the Fellowship's founder, John H. J. Barker, made this clear when he persuaded the Epworth Press to publish a lightly-edited centenary reprint of William Arthur's classic text *The Tongue of Fire; or the True Power of Christianity* in 1956.[70]

Although the founders of the MRF had close, albeit unacknowledged, links with the "fighting fundamentalists" of the 1920s and 1930s, the Fellowship concentrated on a positive policy of prayer, study of revivals in history, and disseminating information about contemporary movements of the Spirit. The Fellowship was distinguished by a clear theology of revival, which was set out by John Barker in an early RF newsletter:

> Primarily it [revival] is NOT the regeneration of sinners, although this is a common concomitant, but the quickening of God's People by the Holy Spirit. The very word "Revival" indicates a renewal of life which has been dormant or diseased. Revival results in a greater consciousness of God, and this leads on to a greater consciousness of sin and lack of holiness, followed by its confession. Revival is indicated by increased activity of God's people in worship, in the study of His Word and in witness to the outside world. The latter results in conversions which are often the chief evidence of Revival to the outsider.'[71]

For Barker and his colleagues, the Church needed to be renewed by the Holy Spirit in order "to serve the present age": reorganization was not the answer, nor was a new strategy for evangelism. It may be seen that this approach and emphasis made some MRF members sympathetic to the broader stream of charismatic renewal in the 1960s.

Eric Baker told the 1959 Conference: "As long as I can remember, we have been told that revival is just around the corner. The trouble has always been that by the time we have turned the corner the revival has disappeared round the next corner." For Baker, this was a call to action, and he offered the Conference a program for the immediate strengthening of Methodist worship and fellowship. For the MRF, the key to revival was not activity and organization, but prayer, holiness, and fidelity to Scripture.[72] The activism of the 1950s came to be seen as ineffective and the ecumenism as misguided by many MRF members and the majority of its leaders.

Two events reported in the spring and summer of 1959 were, respectively, eerily prescient of Methodist preoccupations in the 1960s and strangely sym-

[69] "'Full House' for Revival Fellowship," in *MR* (December 11, 1958), 7.

[70] John H. J. Barker, "Biographical Note and Introduction," in William Arthur, *The Tongue of Fire* (London: Epworth, 1956 [abridged centenary edition]), 7-10.

[71] Undated RF circular, probably spring/summer, 1952.

[72] "President Asks for Action, Now," in *MR* (July 9, 1959), 1; RHLL [Roland Lamb?], "My Vision for the MRF," in *MRF Newsletter* (July, 1959), 4-5.

bolic of Methodist fortunes in the1950s. In May, Mervyn Stockwood was consecrated as bishop of Southwark.[73] At his consecration and enthronement Stockwood wore a mitre presented by Methodist ministers who had served in East Bristol during his time in the city: a harbinger of the debates on the "Conversations" which would absorb so much time and energy in the 1960s. As the patron of "South Bank religion," moreover, and diocesan bishop to John Robinson (of *Honest to God* fame), Stockwood would oversee developments in theology and church life which would present a fourth, radical, option to Methodists seeking to "serve the present age." This option, only hinted at in the 1950s, would challenge or reject all the approaches described in this paper: reform and renewal, reunion and revival, and it would seek to respond to a far deeper crisis than the disappointments of the earlier decade.

Stockwood's consecration attracted little attention in the Methodist press. Far more important, seemingly, was the announcement at the Bristol Conference in July of the retirement of W.E. Sangster, after nearly a year of enforced inactivity.[74] Sangster—driven from his desk at the Home Mission Department by the progressive muscular atrophy which was to kill him on Aldersgate Day of 1960—had preached for the last time just after the Conference in Newcastle, at which he had spoken of the need for prayer and for more effective apologetics. He represented the colossal effort expended on evangelism in the 1950s, and he stood for a sane, realistic, but hopeful evangelicalism which recognized the challenge behind Soper's "dying church" speech but which would not cease to strive for spiritual renewal in Church and nation. Sangster's reluctant retirement, as the decade drew to its close, marked if not the failure of that endeavor, then at least the end of an era, and the steady ebbing of confidence in the ability of the Methodist Church to renew itself, to make an impact on British society and thus successfully to serve the present age in the changing conditions of post-war Britain.

---

[73] *MR* (May 7, 1959), 4.

[74] *MR* (July 16, 1959), 4-5; Paul Sangster, *Dr. Sangster* (London: Epworth, 1962), 341-366.