

**"Independence and Interdependence in Tension:
Baptist Reflection on Others' Ecclesiological Realities"**

The Baptist Context

I am a Regional Minister serving the Northern Baptist Association in the north of England and also a part-time student on the D. Min programme in Durham University. This paper is related to my doctoral work which is considering the nature and parameters of corporate strategy in a Baptist context. The strong emphasis of Baptists upon the life, witness and competency of the local church congregation under Christ is witnessed to within the first clause of the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Declaration of Principle in the statement 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.'¹ That 'liberty' rightly reflects a sense of submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but it may also sit very comfortably with inherent attitudes of an independency that tends to emphasise local congregational life at the expense of the regional and national manifestations of church. Such an ethos and approach can be seen to have significant consequences for the way Baptists can act strategically and cohesively, collaborate ecumenically and speak as a national movement or organisation. From the outside English Baptists may seem to have a clear structure of a national union, subdivided into regional associations and then local churches. In reality it

¹ The full clause reads 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.'

is local churches which choose to belong to their relevant regional association and also to the national union, but the priorities in the way they organise their life and mission tend to focus on the local, and often in such a way that stifles, or ignores the possibilities of effective translocal co-operation.

The possibility of receiving from another tradition

Without being a full case study, some comparison with another denomination will be useful in identifying those theologies and practices of other denominations that may be received into the Baptist scenario with the potential to help Baptists improve their sense of interdependency and increase the effectiveness of the translocal expressions of their life. I have chosen to consider Methodism to see what can be gained by a comparison with the theology and practice of the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Methodism can be seen to contain elements that are familiar to the Free Church and Non-Conformist heritage of Old Dissent. The Methodist Church is a strongly centralised denomination which stands in stark contrast to Baptist practice, but Connexionalism, deeply rooted reality for Methodists, has found some expression in certain streams of Baptist life in the past. Also both bodies, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Methodist Church of Great Britain, have a history that includes the uniting of different groupings within their own traditions.

Methodism

In turning to Methodism it seems apt to quote a so-called Presbyterian Proverb cited by Martin Percy. ‘A Methodist: a Baptist who has been taught to read.’ The proverbial Methodist response is that a ‘Presbyterian is someone who finds Methodism a bit too racy.’²

As early as the 1740s, some of many ‘Methodist’ societies which were formed as a result of the extraordinary preaching minister of John Wesley were looking to Wesley for spiritual authority and wanted to regard him as their ‘Father in God’. By 1749 the growing sense of connexionalism was further expressed when the London Society was recognised as the parent society. Neil Cockling, in his contribution to *Regional Comparative Research Project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church* states that the societies were ‘united by a common discipline and single authority, and functioning in their respective cities as the local focus of regular preaching Circuit.’³ Wesley’s travels did much to develop a sense of national unity and by 1766 each circuit was expected to send a representative to the annual conference.⁴ In *Called to Love and Praise* Neil Dixon describes the first key distinctive feature of Methodism as being ‘an emphasis on “relatedness” as essential to the concept of “church”’.⁵

Connexionalism

² Mercy, Martyn, *Back to the Future: A Search for a Thoroughly Modern Methodist Ecclesiology* cited in Clive Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (New York ; London: Continuum, 2004) 204

³ Cockling Neil, *The Methodist Church: Newcastle and Darlington* in *Regional Comparative Research Project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*, 2008. 55

⁴ Carter, David, *Love Bade Me Welcome* 1

⁵ Neil Dixon, *Called to Love and Praise : A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999)4.7.1 cited in *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* 3.3 p84

It is the interconnectedness of connexionalism that pervades Methodism and is a significant distinguishing factor. Philip Drake states that ‘The responsibilities and mutual obligations that come with membership of the Methodist Church are expressed in terms of connexion. Connexion is a description both of the interrelatedness and the practical organization of the Methodist Community.’^{6 7} At the heart of the Methodist concept of connexionalism is the understanding of the Christian community as the ‘body of Christ’.⁸ Connexionalism gives witness to a mutuality and interdependence which reflects the Christian’s participation in the life of God.⁹ The Connexion is the joining together of churches, circuits and districts with the supreme decision-making body being the Conference. The 2005 Conference Report *The Nature of Oversight* states that Connexionalism ‘characterises an experience of belonging that is shaped both by interdependence and also by sharing holiness and witness, worship and mission. It is not exclusive to Methodism but is a way of being Church which is in direct continuity with the Pre-Reformation conciliar tradition.’¹⁰

Drake sees connexionalism as holding in tension issues of authority and accountability. Its very nature is found ‘in a pattern of interdependence and mutual obligation’ which excludes ‘arbitrary authority from above and a self-centred

⁶ Drake, Philip, *Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness* in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology* 131

⁷ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.6 p75

⁸ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.content&cmid=17>

⁹ Dixon, *Called to Love and Praise : A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church* cited in Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.1 p 73

¹⁰ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.3 p73

congregationalism from below.’¹¹ Connexionalism, then, stands at the heart of Methodism. ‘The Methodist Church speaks of its national identity as the ‘connexion’.¹²

Oversight

It is within the context of Connexionalism that it becomes important to consider the place of Oversight, before looking at the overall structures of the denomination. The report *The Nature of Oversight* describes the function of oversight as ‘ensuring that the church remains true to its calling.’¹³ There are two main strands through which Conference expresses its oversight: the ordained ministry, presbyters and deacons, and those with delegated responsibilities such as particular groups or officers.¹⁴ There is a clear recognition to be given the role of ministry in the general oversight of the connexion. Presbyters are to ‘play a part in the oversight of the Church and in its deliberations at all levels.’¹⁵

The report the *Nature of Oversight* states:

An important feature of the Methodist understanding of oversight since the time of Wesley is therefore that it has always been corporate in the first instance and then secondarily focused in particular individuals and groups (lay and ordained). The corporate body of the Conference itself is the primary authority for the exercise of

¹¹ Drake, Philip, *Joining the Dots* in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology* 135

¹² John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006) 231

¹³ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* p67

¹⁴ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.25 & 26 p81f

¹⁵ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.24 p81

oversight for the whole of the Methodist Church. As such, it is made up of lay people, deacons and presbyters, and each of these groups has its proper part to play in exercising oversight within it when it meets. They also play particular roles in the two main strands of oversight which the Conference authorises to embody and share its episcopé in the rest of the Connexion. Those two strands are the oversight exercised by presbyters and that exercised by corporate groups and particular office holders.¹⁶

Although there is clear structure and recognition of the role of officers the report recognised that within 'a primary oscillation of power between, say, a Circuit and the Conference (even if the final authority resides with the Conference) it is not always clear where initiatives are first taken.'¹⁷

'Oversight is therefore a rich concept. It includes elements of watching over, discerning, guiding, caring for and disciplining. These in turn can be grouped under headings which can appropriately be described as **governance, management** and **leadership**, but these expressions of oversight by no means exhaust it.'¹⁸

Local Churches

John Wesley encouraged his followers to meet together in societies and classes charging them to watching over one another for the good of their spiritual growth. Methodist members still belong to the local church / society and membership of the church is naturally a separate step from baptism which characteristically happens in infancy. The

¹⁶ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.22 p80

¹⁷ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* p62

¹⁸ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 1.8 p68

sense of commitment in membership is something that might be shared with congregational denominations, but its practical outworking is different. Local churches are responsible for their own programmes and property, and are linked with other churches through the circuit, district and ultimately the Methodist Connexion. They will be served by a minister who is appointed to their circuit and who will have responsibilities within the circuit.

Circuits

Clause 38 of the Deed of Union states that Local Churches ‘shall be formed into Circuits for mutual encouragement and help (especially in meeting their financial obligations) in accordance with directions from time to time made by the Conference, and the Circuits shall be arranged by the Conference in Districts in like manner.....’.¹⁹ The report *The Nature of Oversight* cites SO 500 (1) as stating that the Circuit ‘is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help...’²⁰ The report is clear that ‘local churches are not independent, primary entities but interdependent cells of the organism which is the circuit.’²¹

Normally a team of ministers is appointed to a circuit to exercise pastoral care across the group, but they are also given designated responsibilities for particular

¹⁹ Deed of Union Clause 38

²⁰ *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* Standing Order 500 (1) fn p84

²¹ *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* 3.2 p84

churches.²² Ministers may exercise a pastoral charge of a number of the churches and, along with lay local preachers, lead services in the different churches of the circuit according to the circuit Plan. Ordained and lay representatives share in the decision making of the circuit through its various committees.

The Nature of Oversight report did recognise some tensions in that ‘there has been a growing tendency in some areas towards local autonomy and congregationalism, which has shifted the balance away from the circuits to the local churches.’ The report states that without the close inter-dependence nurtured by circuits many local churches would fail to flourish.²³

Within circuit structures three types of groups have emerged. These are firstly the Circuit Meeting which is the primary source of oversight and governance under Christ. Secondly, the Circuit Leadership Team which is ‘subservient to the Circuit Meeting and thirdly meeting of presbyters and deacons appointed to the circuit.’²⁴ The Circuit staff meeting also provides an opportunity for supervision and support for each other and a place for the superintendent to exercise oversight.

Districts

The District consists of a number of circuits which are grouped into districts and are ‘characterised as fulfilling the same purposes as a circuit, but across a wider geographical

²² <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=openogod.content&cmid=19> and *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* 3.3 p84

²³ *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* 3.2 p84

²⁴ *Conference Report 2005 The Nature of Oversight* 3.7 to 3.9 p86f and 3.2 p84

area.²⁵ They are led by a district chair.²⁶ He or she also shares in the connexional leadership team which has an overview of the whole Connexion. Districts meet in synod twice a year, but the ongoing support that they offer to local churches and circuits includes: 'encouraging connexional priorities, offering and subsidizing training, giving pastoral care to ministers, deacons and key lay people, providing people who represent Methodism to the local media, having an overview of legal obligations, and organising large initiatives.'

There are three types of meeting that facilitate the good running and organisation of the District. Ministerial Synods provide an opportunity for the clergy to reflect and confer together, there are groups which act on behalf and serve the District Synod, and the District Synod itself.²⁷

Conference

At the heart of the Connexion is the Conference which is also central to the process of Christian Conferring throughout the Connexion.²⁸ The Agenda to Conference of 1975 stated that

'No one can understand British Methodism who does not recognise the central position and authority of the Conference. This body exercises a determinative influence over every part of the life of the Methodist Church. Its authority is very great and gives the life of Methodism as a

²⁵ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 3.13 p88

²⁶ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.content&cmid=679>

²⁷ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 3.18 to 3.20 p91f

²⁸ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.7 p75

whole that great sense of cohesion which finds expression in the term
'the Connexion'.²⁹

Conference embodies the purpose and life of the Connexion and 'gathers, celebrates and cements the connecting of the Connexion, not only internally between its constituent parts but also with its past and its future and with external bodies.'³⁰ It meets annually and is the final decision-making and policy making body about everything to do with the life and work of the Methodist church throughout the Connexion, although the ongoing work of Conference continues in the Methodist Council which meets four times per year.³¹ Conference is made up of lay and ordained representatives of the circuits, along with other appointees.

The wider Connexion has a range of meetings which reflect something of the structures of circuits and districts. The Connexional Leadership Team is a meeting of District Chairs and other officers, the Methodist Council oversees the ongoing management of the life of the Connexion and the Conference exercises the supreme oversight of the Connexion.³² There are a number of officers appointed to oversee and carry out the work of the connexion. The Secretary of Conference and the General Secretary exercise executive oversight, whilst the President exercises presiding oversight.³³

Translocal Ministry: Superintendents and Chairs

²⁹ Agenda of the Methodist Conference 1975.5 cited in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology* 36

³⁰ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.17 p78

³¹ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.10 p76

³² Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 3.22 and 25 p93

³³ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 3.29 p96

There is a sense in which all ministers, presbyters and deacons fulfil a role beyond that of the local church. Ministers serve circuits, not merely local churches, and then there are the specific roles of the Superintendent Minister and Chair of District. The Superintendent Minister leads the circuit team, encourages mission and engages in certain church administration tasks. If the circuit is the key unit of the Methodist Church where issues of strategy are considered, then the superintendent fulfils an essential task. Both Circuit Superintendents and District Chairs are primarily presbyters appointed by conference to particular translocal ministries.³⁴

Circuit Superintendents are expected to lead and support the ordained and lay team serving the circuit, be the chief officer of the Circuit Leadership Team and chair the Circuit Meeting.³⁵ As presbyters they fulfil the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility, but as superintendents they are charged with ensuring that this ministry is adequately fulfilled in the churches of the circuit by its ministers and preachers, and that the organisational life of the circuit functions properly.³⁶ They have the responsibility to 'help circuits to create strategy, and policy for their worship and mission, witness and holiness.'³⁷ They have leadership, management, governance and oversight responsibilities. The District Chair plays a significant role in stationing ministers, working with superintendent ministers and circuit personnel.³⁸ He or she has a strategic leadership role to fulfil in relation to the District and its structures.

What is it that Baptists could receive?

³⁴ Conference Report *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* 5 and 12 p2&6

³⁵ Conference Report 2005 *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* Item 18

³⁶ Conference Report 2005 *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* Item 24

³⁷ Conference Report 2005 *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* Item 30

³⁸ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=churchlife.content&cmid=1596>

It seems as though the Baptist stick of rock has independency written through it and the Methodist one has mutuality, but both affirm the importance of Christian fellowship and the covenant relationship of God's people and the call to watch over one another. Insights into the nature of covenant church and different practical expressions and out-workings could be informative for Baptists and a starting point for receptive learning.

Connexionalism as a word is not absent from Baptist history. One significant group in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was New Connexion of General Baptists.

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Its very nature is found 'in a pattern of interdependence and mutual obligation' which excludes 'arbitrary authority from above and a self-centred congregationalism from below.'³⁹ Could this speak to Baptists in a way that might provoke possibilities for them to hear the voice of God through the wider Baptist family and even the wider family of God when they gather in Church Meetings?

Circuit staff meetings provide an opportunity for supervision and support for each other and a place for superintendents to exercise oversight. Baptist ministry tends to be located in the call of a minister to serve a particular church rather than to be part of a team. There is openness among some to peer support and mentoring, but the question of an organised and formal supervision and support might be regarded as a step too far and an intrusion into the independence of the local which is also practically interpreted as the independence of the minister in his or her ministry. However, knowledge of other patterns and the possibility of voluntary supervision are not without merit and possibility.

³⁹ Drake, Philip, *Joining the Dots* in Marsh, *Unmasking Methodist Theology* 135

The Circuit Plan is very important in the regular life of the Methodist Circuit and whilst it has its merits in the deployment of lay, or local preachers and shares the presence of ordained ministry amongst the churches, it also has its limitations. These would include that relating to systematic preaching and teaching and to the cohesive development of worship. Whilst preaching plans are not totally unfamiliar to Baptists their use has not had widespread. Such plans may have been devised by a lay preachers association for use amongst the smaller churches who were not able to call and support their own ministry. What could be learnt and devised might be a much revised scheme related to serving a smaller number of churches and with ministers working in collaboration in the provision of teaching and preaching. It seems a waste that when a minister has given significant time and energy to produce a major series of preaching and or teaching it is not possible to be used again within the locality. Such actions may lead to greater trust between congregations that could facilitate mutual engagement in mission which would be appealing to Baptists.

There is clearly a commitment to lay representation in both denominations a cursory comparison of a Methodist Synod District Handbook with a Baptist Association Handbook reveals a far greater number of committees on the Methodist side. I suspect that Baptists would regard the Methodist system as over bureaucratic. However there is a challenge to be received about the role of lay people in the leading of worship and in the representative decision making of the wider Baptist community.

There is an interesting perception of ministry within Methodism that sees the minister appointed to the circuit as opposed to the church. The latter would be the Baptist practice. There is also something significant in seeing the presbyter as play a 'part in the

oversight of the Church and in its deliberations at all levels.’⁴⁰ This is not something that Baptists would naturally see for they would regard themselves as being inducted into the pastorate of the local church and that would be the prime, and sometimes sole, locus for their ministry. However, it should be noted that ministers are inducted in the name of the Baptist Union and are automatically given a place on the Assembly of both the Union and the Association. Such a right ought to indicate not merely a privilege to attend such meeting, but a responsibility to pray, speak into and work for the life of both Association and Union. This possibility for the recognition of wider responsibilities is there, but has been given a much lower priority. It might be time for Baptists to reconsider the wider responsibilities of their ministers, which in turn might lead to renewed association life and would begin to change the landscape of Baptist translocal life.

Two further aspects are worthy of further investigation. The role of the District Chair in relation to that of the Regional Minister would bear further consideration. Both are expected to fulfil a strategic leadership within their relevant regional and national bodies, but the context, expectations, level of assumed and real authority and *modus operandi* is different. In depth analysis is beyond the present scope of this paper. Similarly, the financial scenario and approach to the allocation of resources would prove an interesting area of investigation. Methodist Conference is a very deliberative and authoritative meeting whilst the Baptist Assembly has become less deliberative and more celebratory. Baptists could usefully regain some respect for the deliberative assembly under Christ discerning issues and policies to guide their life and mission, but there would be little interest in detailed decision making at that level.

⁴⁰ Conference Report 2005 *The Nature of Oversight* 2.24 p81

Reference, etc.

Carter, David, *Love Bade Me Welcome : A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002).

Cockling Neil, *The Methodist Church: Newcastle and Darlington in Regional Comparative Research Project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*, 2008.

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Methodist Conference Reports

The Nature of Oversight

What is a Circuit Superintendent?