

The Methodist Church and secularisation

2. A way forward

To be fit for the purpose of combating secularisation, the new Methodist worship must in future be moulded by the supernatural reality of God in such a way that every item in it, (hymns, prayers, sermons etc.) engenders encounter with the God Who comes (the nemesis of secularisation), and facilitates human interaction with the God who saves, (the evangelical imperative).

Redesigning Methodist worship to facilitate encounter with God begins with people who presuppose God's tangible intervention, who lead worship from a theology based in supernatural reality; in effect a 'top-down' model. Services will need to be tailored to provide openings for God to intervene through silence, prayer ministry, emotional space within music, preaching to response; openings of faith-filled 'risk' which only work if there is Spiritual intervention.

Correspondingly worship must aim to work from 'the bottom up', encouraging and enabling people to be open, prepared and receptive to divine encounter; touching their real worlds in their authentic language; teaching them to expect; giving them space to use and steps to take. If supernatural encounter occurs where God intervenes (top-down) into receptive people (bottom-up), then such encounter can usefully be regarded as the 'vertical' dimension in worship.

Renewed Methodist worship needs to become much more 'vertical'. In a worship service the 'vertical' should drive everything else, but valid 'horizontal' aspects will be retained and de-secularised by Spiritual ingress from the 'vertical' inputs, viz. Divine encounter (↓) leading to human reflection (→) leading to repentance (↑) leading to assurance (↓) leading to healing (↓) leading to interpersonal fellowship (→←). As a service progresses through time, the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' mix of activity can be visualised as a 'shape' or wave-form describing how the service functions as a 'joined-up' process of spiritual activity driven by Divine encounter.



Enabling this Spiritual activity to function well, must become the primary aim of worship. Service design must begin by first sketching the 'shape' of this function, i.e. what we hope will 'go on spiritually'. This might be quite general as in designing a time of approaching God. However it might involve an emphasis or overall character which is not a 'theme' in the old fashioned sense. This may come from a Spiritual conviction in the leadership as to "Where we need to go in our worship today", or from the sermon's core thrust, or from external factors such as Christmas or a war. Only then are items (hymns, prayers etc.) assembled to help this to happen. Everything 'in' the service must in some way enhance the functioning process. 'Process' thus takes precedence over 'ingredients'. A service should be regarded more as a verb than a noun. To this end items will need to justify their inclusion. We should begin by asking what kind of job each individual item can do. Does this hymn, reading or sermon simply teach people information, motivate them to lifestyle change, cheer them up or help them to relate to one another; does it sound good and go well, but remains 'horizontal' (and thus religiously secular)? Simply because a bible passage is in the lectionary, or a worship song is the very latest release will not do. When an item engenders

Divine encounter or helps reflect on such encounter, it can be included into the functioning 'Shape' of the worship event.

Take an item such as a hymn or song. Asking the right questions will inform how we use the multitude of songs and hymns we have. We can avoid endless debate about types of music, subjects of words, authors, theology, political correctness, preferences, traditions or trendiness and simply ask the question "What job can this hymn or song do, how will it function in engendering encounter?"

Hymns and songs can be classified by their function like this:

1 Praise	↑	Solely about God	Praise to the living God; Majesty
2 Worship	↑↓	Includes our feelings about God	Praise my Soul the King of Heaven; When I feel the touch
3 Fellowship	←→	Interpersonal	Let there be love shared among us; Brother let me be your brother
4 Credal	□	Statements of truth	Thy hand O God has guided

More general considerations might be

1. I/Thou language and relational syntax help deliver Divine encounter through singing.
2. Lyrics based directly on the biblical text help us hear God speak in a song
3. Repetition and simplicity are useful in giving space to express feelings and let grace impact us, rather than tackling dense theological propositions on every line. This applies to old gospel chorus hymns as well as many modern songs.

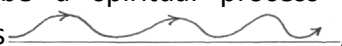
Bible reading is a vital part of the encounter process when we acknowledge that the whole Bible is sanctioned by God's Spirit. He put it on the page, and He will lift it off the page and speak into people's hearts. This does not involve an extreme conservatism in exegesis but it does take the 'vertical dynamic' of the Bible as 'God's Word' seriously. (The Liberal view of the Bible as men's opinions about God, means that the reading is horizontal, just from the reader to the hearer.) Encounter can be encouraged by an accessible translation, and using the required length, not the whole lectionary or padding to fill out time, or give an OT/NT 'balance' to the service. Listening to God speak must over-ride the formal conventions of "The Bible Reading".

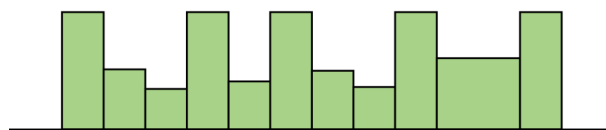
Prayer always looks as though it is vertical encounter but it is often subtly horizontal. It gets bogged down in long lists of human concerns, in pious language that doesn't really ask for much, fearing that nothing will happen. Prayer is often safely vague; 'praying for Africa' or 'asking for blessing'. Lots of church prayers amount to little more than affirming human solidarity. We need shorter, more natural, meaningful prayers. If prayer is really a vertical conversation, we will cry out authentically, be clear and succinct, involve 'open prayer' and make times for listening to a God who talks back; time for tears. Although prayer should not be just me, me, me, it must enable a vertical contact between me and God before I pray to Him meaningfully about third parties.

Preaching on whatever topic and in whatever style must first and foremost be top-down. It must not be our opinions about God, or about us changing the human condition or becoming nicer people. The sermon must be built around God addressing us. The Bible should be preached as His word, intelligently but without Liberal dilution. We should seek 'content rich encounter'. Elaboration and application of the Divine message should then be built around testimony, which being the previous experience of encounter can be a valid

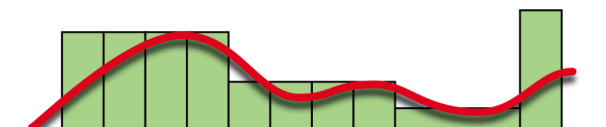
basis for expanding on what God is saying. Complimenting this with 'the bottom up' preaching, we begin with relevance, from where people are in their secular world and not from the ecclesiastical or social agenda. Having engaged the congregation, we infiltrate new possibilities for believing and we undermine their scepticism and unbelief. The Holy Spirit will naturally speak into their openness and the sermon can anticipate His working by offering a dynamic narrative. Initial encounter can develop into specific teaching, challenge to response, and possibly some kind of destination, (forgiveness, guidance etc.). Spiritual response is not confined to the end of the sermon, but can occur in 'waves' where we pause, are challenged by God, call on Him, reflect and then move on. The sermon thus becomes an evolving supernatural opportunity.

Building worship on supernatural dynamics means that some items can be introduced which do not occur in secularised, horizontal worship. Examples would be times of silence waiting for the Holy Spirit to fall on the people, listening to prophecy, and direct ministry times for healing or Spiritual re-filling. Specific vertical interventions such as healing, underline the fact that renewed worship is readmitting a wide range of miracle; 'Signs' to compliment the 'Word' within a totality of encounter.

This kind of thinking needs to be extended to the overall structure of a service. If this is to be a spiritual process pictured a wave form of its vertical and horizontal aspects , the entire contents need to be blended into an experiential narrative, a possible journey through which the congregation is invited to travel. The service structure must no longer impose its tradition and conventions (viz. no two hymns sung consecutively), so as to stifle what we want to go on spiritually. Items should occur in any order useful to the spiritual purpose, (notably lots of hymns and songs together). Items should no longer be viewed as 'Little bundles' of worship with firm boundaries between them giving a 'start-stop' feel to the service (viz. "please sit down and we will now have our bible reading"). Boundaries between items should not necessarily be boundaries in the spiritual process going on. Instead they can be transformed into 'living links' so that people's feelings can progress as seamlessly as possible; music transposed across a gap, or two items overlapping as prayers or verses are read over some music. A traditional hymn sandwich dominated by the characteristics and arrangement of ten items in a bar chart



may now be replaced by an integrated process

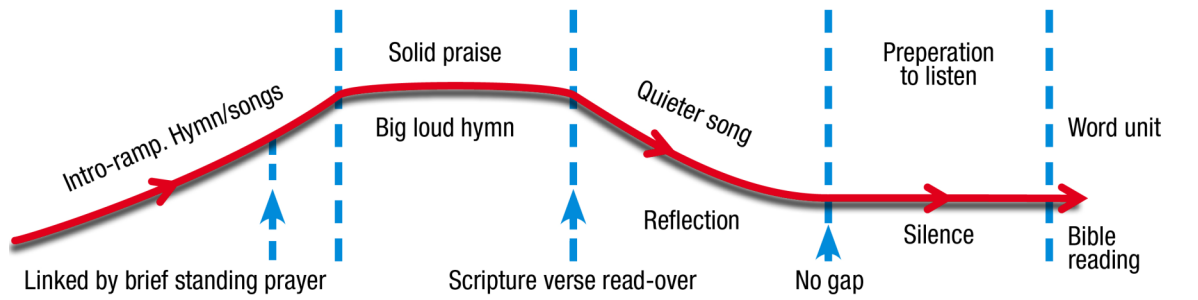


Abandoning structural conventions need not result in complex and unsustainable worship design, (like a Sunday School Anniversary!). In practice replacing 9 separate items with 3 clusters of linked items (a Worship Unit, a Word Unit and a Response Unit), works well.

A 'Worship Unit' can be predominantly singing of a sequence of songs or hymns with organic links and short prayers; a 'Word Unit' would be predominantly speaking the Bible

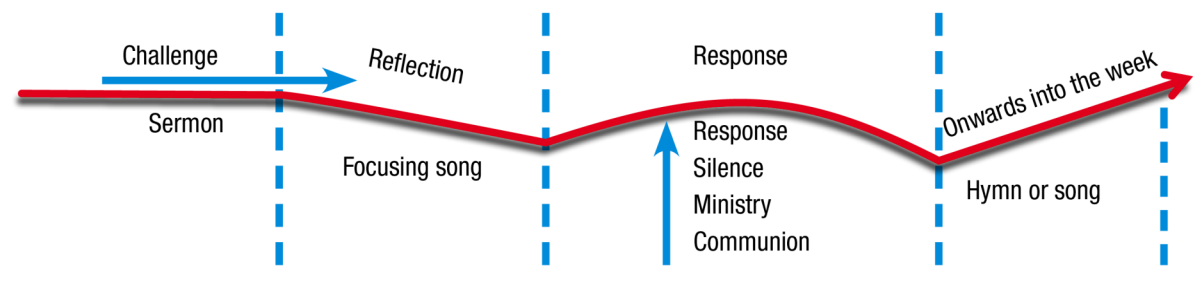
Reading and the sermon; a 'Response Unit' could mix music, prayer, meditation, silence, ministry, and/or Holy Communion.

Using our vertical model of encounter, a Worship Unit might be designed look like this:



At the end of the reflective song, the congregation might just stand in silence for a few minutes and only then hear the bible read into the 'Spiritual space' before subsiding for the sermon. This amounts to a 'soft ending' between the Worship and Word units. We can make a 'hard ending' in the content coincide with a change of item ('now we will take the collection and the children will leave us'), but the shape of the spiritual activity should wherever possible determine how items are handled and not as now frequently happens, the other way around!

A 'soft ending' to a Word Unit means that preaching to response is followed by an opportunity to do something with what you are experiencing. A Response Unit might look like this.



(The sermon is open ended without a grand climax; a reflective song follows whether or not people want to stand up; there is a phase of prayer, open prayer, prayer ministry or Holy Communion depending on the circumstances, i.e. what God has been saying.)

Because the intervention of God is crucial, some of the pattern is deliberately designed so as not to work without spiritual movement amongst the congregation, and thus it has to have flexibility to extend periods of prayer, drop hymns or change the final song depending on 'where we have got to'. 'Vertical' intervention is a matter of Divine Grace and sovereignty, so that worship planning is offered as an aspiration, almost a prayer from the worship leadership. It is to facilitate and engender encounter. The temptation to 'produce' worship, to 'make things happen' and to 'plan spontaneity' must be avoided at all costs. It is a modern form of secularising worship.

It is a truly inspiring end to a service to witness a scene of Spiritual 'untidiness', to find people praying with one another or in clusters, or sharing silence, or kneeling at the communion rail or departing for a church cappuccino, full of joy and conversation; touched and changed in some small way by having been met by Jesus. Such people grow as disciples,

they are evangelical about their Sundays and they bring their friends to experience what they have experienced.

New worship needs new forms of delivery. Usefulness must be paramount over preference for traditional or modern practices. Delivering a worship unit requires flow from one hymn or song to another, flexibility to repeat or cut sections, and the accommodating of short prayers or readings, whilst the music leaders need eye contact with the service leader and congregation so as to respond 'in real time'. Organs are not good for this. They are unsuited to playing modern songs with syncopation and rhythm. Organists are rarely prepared to adapt from playing hymns as separate items, and they are frequently remote from the service leader and the congregation. In actual fact, the new worship music needs to be led rather than accompanied, and this normally needs a good singer who can play guitar or piano. A music group is desirable but not necessary. Musicians who can play virtually any music can utilize a mix of the modern and ancient, not to placate factions in the congregation, but so that the strengths of each genre are available as and when required by the shape of the worship event. (Organs can play a great supporting role).

The over-riding need for flexibility and responsiveness means that data retrieval from multiple hymn books, and the announcement of hymn numbers is hopelessly cumbersome. Hands can be more usefully employed than in holding books! Data projection can provide words ancient or modern, verses and even lines edited for specific needs, instant repeats or progression to new songs. On screens or monitors we can present Bible readings of just the needed length and of any translation, tailored liturgy, sermon bullet points, pictures for meditation, intercessory prayer backdrops of that day's news, and notices with video clips. In anything but the smallest building, sound needs reinforcement or amplifying. Leaders can then speak with normal intonation which is so much more relational than public speaking mode, and during worship sequences readers' voices can be 'mixed in' with music which from a music group will itself need mixing. The use of modern music and technology gives the added bonus that in addition to fulfilling the tasks required by the worship, it proclaims a background message that Christianity is for the C21st.

All the aspects of service delivery should in their own ways be excellent. The technology, sound, projection, and lighting should all work well, it should not break down and distract everyone with crackling, or feedback, or the wrong words. Our people also need to be excellent in what they do. The music makers should be very good and not just think they are good. The Bible should be read by really good readers not just volunteers off of the rota; function before institution. Preaching quality generally needs improving. Preaching to response still needs good exegesis, homiletics, illustrations and diction. Evidence indicates that most Methodist preaching is adequate but not compelling. We may need to train a new generation of preachers to preach in a new way in the context of contemporary worship.

Worship does not happen in an environmental vacuum. Traditional Methodist chapels were boxes in which the 'Word' was preached, Victorian chapels added a wane Anglican symbolism and recent buildings have been functionally modernist. They all give out messages unacknowledged by the faithful for whom familiarity means they no longer 'see' their building and for whom maintenance is the main concern. Newly effective worship will need us to intentionally manage the interiors of our buildings, because they give out a pre-verbal message which will help or hinder Divine encounter. We need to rediscover the

evocative power of a managed environment (as did the builders of the Medieval cathedrals).

Many Methodist chapels are poor quality, utilitarian, cold and inhospitable, and their messages drown out the words and music of the worship leaders. Pews are not helpful, speaking of a rigid teaching setting, discouraging interaction and flexible response. Chairs need arranging around spiritual function, suggesting fellowship, enclosing holy space, offering movement for response. Lighting needs to create atmosphere and not simply illuminate blandly. Frosted glass of no merit is better replaced with plain so as to let God speak from His skyscape and world. Chapels may be old and even Listed but as with restored secular buildings their architectural strengths can be re-interpreted with light and glass and colour to speak of historical truth with a cutting edge. Loud primary colours (such as Methodist 'House blue'), gloss paint, stored clutter and administrative notices intrude an institutional noise which invades the 'soft space' helpful to personal feelings. Design should replace chance. The font of signage needs tailoring to the message, value statements and artwork should be well crafted and lit. Everything, coffee taste, (which is normally poor), toilet design (mirrors and hand dryers), plants (instead of cut-flowers) and heating, can all create a supportive ambience; a safe place, un-intrusive but user-friendly, a space which speaks clearly of an unseen *raison d'être* worth exploring. As with the music, preaching and technology, all aspects of a building should be excellent, 'saying' to everyone who comes in, "these people really care about their God, and they care about welcoming you to meet Him". Thus, an intentionally presented building can enhance people's pre-disposition to 'something significant going on there, something good, something real', and when in worship Divine encounter does occur, the building and its kit can inconspicuously reinforce peoples' openness and facilitate their pathways to responding.

Strategically the church faces a tough spiritual conflict when it seeks to promote encounter between God and secularised human beings. In a fallen world, this conflict cannot be avoided by Methodism simply redesigning its worship. However, we believe that God prevails. If Methodism is going to be an affective part of 'the Kingdom striking back' it will need to openly acknowledge that 'The Big Thing Now' is pushing back secularisation through supernatural encounter, and that to this end its worship will need to be born again.