



# THE KEY TO REVIVAL

Ben Juliano

## BEN JULIANO BELIEVES THE KEY TO REVIVAL IS FOLLOWING GOD'S LEAD.

I was recently introduced to the term 'Crisis PR' while watching the Netflix documentary 'The Great Hack'. Whenever companies experience some great scandal or disaster, they can hire a crisis public relations firm to reinvent their image and get them back on track. If a company handles a crisis effectively, they can often come out of it stronger than was possible before. It suddenly occurred to me that this is a pretty good analogy for the history of the Church. It is often the crises of the Church that God uses to bring about fundamental change, taking us back to basics, resulting in the explosive growth of His Church and the transformation of society. It is at these times that God's people can truly be referred to as the Glorious Church.

This was certainly the case for John Wesley - when he began his ministry the Anglican Church was in complete disorder. Many Anglican clergy had lapsed into deism - belief in a detached and distant God. Churches were empty and gin houses were full, with vulnerable women and children left to die on the streets. But it was into this tragic situation that God brought John Wesley. Under his leadership an entire nation would be brought back not just to churches, but into a relationship with the living God.

I believe that we stand at a similar point in history and that radical change

is necessary if the people called Methodists are to play a defining role in the renewal movement which has already begun and in which I am fortunate to have played a small part. It is my hope that my story as it is so far will serve, not just as entertainment but, in the words of Charles Wesley 'a trumpet voice on all the world to call'. A blueprint for what it might mean to reclaim vibrant Methodism for the 21st century. Not an institution, but a people united by a common vision and values intent on seeing God's kingdom come.

Here is my challenge to you: stop reading for a moment and tear this article out of the magazine. Then grab a pen, highlighter or however else you like to take notes. Expect God to speak through the details that jump out at you. When you're done, go back through your notes and ask God what he might be saying to you. Then figure out how you can get involved in what God is doing. He has a job for you to do as Methodism's 'sleeping giant' awakes.

My life did not begin normally. I was born three months early and as a result developed Cerebral Palsy. A disability caused by an injury to the brain which means that brain and body do not communicate correctly. It can take a variety of forms but in my case it meant that basic motor skills and walking did not come easily. It was a miracle that I survived birth at all and I didn't walk independently until I was two and a half and a whole host of other medical issues

made my childhood difficult. Wesley used to refer to himself as 'a brand plucked from the burning' and I like to think of myself that way too. I can see with hindsight that God's hand guided me from the moment I was born.

Having said that, it's only in the past few years that I have begun an intentional relationship with God and begun to walk in step with His Spirit. My dad is a Methodist minister in Florida and growing up I went through the motions of church but it wasn't until the unlikely arrival of MET's Chair David Hull in my small town that I encountered God for the first time. He had been invited by my dad to deliver a series of talks entitled Rekindling the Flame. On the first night he introduced himself as the Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together and the Chaplain of John Wesley's school in Bath and announced that there were places available for American Methodists. As he preached on Jesus' words in Revelation 2:29: 'Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches,' I felt God say very clearly that I needed to go to Kingswood School to be his witness. It was a jarring experience and extraordinarily powerful.

When David, his family and my family spent time together that night, I told everyone what I felt God was saying. It seemed crazy, I was in my penultimate year of high school and the expense of sending me to boarding school in a foreign country with such a large family to support was unthinkable. I

never wavered in my belief that God's promise to send me to England would be fulfilled and by a miracle, generous donors stepped up to pay my way for the two years.

I arrived at Kingswood knowing I was supposed to be God's representative in a challenging environment but I was shocked to find that there were only five Christian students prepared to come to a meeting. I had no idea where to begin. But I was convicted that before I tried to evangelize someone else, I had to evangelize myself - develop a real relationship with God.

In my first weekend at school, David invited me to a meeting of district Methodists being held onsite where Gary Best, a former headmaster and prolific author of books on Methodism was speaking. He spoke about what it would take to revitalize Methodism and suggested the first step was to begin reading the Bible every day. To my horror an older gentleman sitting directly in front of me muttered 'That's a bit much.' Later, the same man remarked that he had more important things to do like playing golf.

It was at that moment that I came face to face with the deep challenges that lay ahead. Angered by his comments, I began to read my Bible. I had no reading plan or notes, I just read it. Even though it was a crude method, God honoured my obedience and every time I opened his Word before I went to bed, He met me powerfully. The air was charged with electricity.

It is my unwavering belief that if we want to see the renewal of the Methodist movement and to participate in the revival that is sweeping the nation, all we need to do is start simply. We need to read God's Word and expect Him to speak. Both personally to us as individuals but also collectively as the Church. There is nothing new about this approach. Wesley said of the Bible:

*'I want to know one thing,—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!'*

Preface to Standard Sermons

And he expected to hear God and to see Him act on his behalf in the practical and supernatural, devoting three hours each morning to prayer.

Shortly after I began my reading and praying routine, my dad called to say that he had just discovered an evangelism tool called Alpha - a series of discussions designed to introduce people to the Christian faith. Each session began with a video and food, he thought it would be perfect for a school setting. I watched one of the videos and was speechless. They were like something I could watch in the cinema and clearly articulated what it meant to be a Christian but also was a safe space for people to explore faith. The man who pioneered Alpha, Nicky Gumbel of the Anglican HTB Church in London became an instant hero. David and I decided to launch an Alpha Course.

I gave a talk at one of Kingswood's Whole School Service introducing Alpha and invited people to join while David organised the first session. It was fantastic. 10 kids came to the first session but the second, third and fourth passed with no one showing up. I was devastated and figured I must be doing something horribly wrong. My dad suggested that I contact Nicky Gumbel to see if he could offer any encouragement. Even though part of me wanted to, deep down I thought he was crazy. The vicar of a 5,000-strong Anglican church, pioneer of the world's most effective evangelism tool tried by 27 million people, would surely not give me the time of day.

Still discouraged, I went on HTB's website, scrolled a bit and clicked on a random talk. I remember nothing about what Nicky and his wife Pippa said in the talk but I do remember that they read a letter they had received from somebody and I thought: 'Maybe they would reply if I sent them an email. I did, not expecting to hear anything back.

I will never forget walking home from school a few weeks later to find an e-mail from Nicky and Pippa Gumbel in my inbox. I think I cried. They were so encouraging and even sent a personal video encouraging people to come to Kingswood's Alpha. When my parents heard the news they decided they were going to fly to the UK in a few months' time so that we could attend HTB's Leadership Conference which is held every year in the

Royal Albert Hall and welcomes Christians from all over the world.

My parents and I managed to meet Nicky and Pippa the Sunday after the conference and I am proud to call them and their entire team my friends and mentors. Needless to say, I went back to Kingswood emboldened. HTB and churches like it, look a lot like Wesley's churches would look like had they been planted today. My friend Pete Wynter, a pastor at HTB has even called for a 'new generation of Wesleys'.

After achieving my A-Levels at Kingswood, I left the UK to attend university in Florida. It wasn't a few months after I settled back in that David called to say he was filming the WHOTWAY video series and needed a host. I couldn't resist the invitation. And in a ridiculous turn of events, just weeks later filming was complete. Nicky called me to ask if I would speak at the Leadership Conference to 5,000 people. I opened my talk with my dad, Nicky and David in the audience by saying I never could have imagined being asked to speak at the conference God used to transform my life. I guess He's brought me full circle and I can't wait to go around again.

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