

EVANGELICALISM IN THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND

Ken Robinson

It is generally accepted that the Methodist Church in Ireland is more conservative than the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Though the island of Ireland is divided into 2, the Methodist Church in Ireland is one and ministers serve on both sides of the border. There are fewer members, local preachers and ministers than our sister church in Great Britain, and smaller circuits, but many would argue the evangelical ethos of the Irish Methodist Church still makes an enormous contribution to Irish society. Most Irish Protestant denominations tend to be low church with a broad evangelical ethos in contradistinction from the prevailing Catholic culture.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is a small church, numbering 50,000 members out of an island population of 4,000,000, yet the Roman Catholic Primate of all Ireland, the Archbishop of Armagh, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, representing the four main Christian groupings in Ireland are frequently interviewed and reported on. The Methodist Church in Ireland continues to offer Christ to all through worship, evangelism, friendship, compassion, care and engagement; all supported by individual and corporate prayer.

Irish Methodism has birthed 7 residential and nursing homes providing a caring, secure and sheltered environment for older people. This creates the opportunity for low key evangelism. Every home is connected to a local church and though

accommodation is not confined to Methodists the residents tend to worship in the nearest Methodist Church.

Over many years the Council on Social Responsibility has been in regular contact with politicians, often at their request, encouraging dialogue and compromise while holding them to account. The church often receives papers from various government departments seeking our point of view, thus this church, despite its size, has an enormous input into the decision making process affecting Irish life, north and south and helping to shape government policies that affect all citizens in both jurisdictions. This input was clearly demonstrated when the IRA invited Harold Good, one of our ministers to be one of only two witnesses as they decommissioned their arms, - a vital step in the peace process.

The 5 City missions, (3 in Belfast, 1 in Londonderry and 1 in Dublin) minister through social programmes and evangelism. They help those in need in all its forms but especially the homeless, hungry, refugees, alcoholics and poor through varied and imaginative programmes. Offering Jesus is part of the package.

Preaching, praying and pastoral care continue to bear fruit as people sit under the authority of the Bible faithfully expounded, listen to the claims of Jesus and are encouraged, supported and loved in their daily Christian experience.

Long established practices like chaplaincy work in hospitals, universities and prison along with continuing emphasis on education lead to exciting opportunities to share Jesus. Wesley College in Dublin was opened in 1854 and is one of Ireland's premier schools while Methodist College in Belfast which opened in 1865 is one of Northern Ireland's leading grammar schools. Both schools have an amazing record of academic, musical, dramatic and sporting achievement. The chaplain is a key figure in each school. It is thrilling to realise that future leaders in industry, finance, business and politics are being influenced as thousands of young people are reached every day. Ireland's agricultural base has not been forgotten. Gurteen Agricultural College was set up in 1947 by the Methodist Church and continues to provide superb training for young farmers. The chaplain has wonderful opportunities to get alongside young men and women, some of whom are away from home for the first time, and through friendship to share Jesus. A few years ago when the government of the Irish Republic began to rationalise the provision of farm education, Gurteen was the only non-government agricultural college that survived, - a testimony to the excellence of tuition.

Signs of renewal are evident in the rebirth of a number of older congregations. For many years the church in Killarney was only opened in the summer months but a retired missionary doctor and his wife, both Local Preachers, relocated to the town and began to work with and pray for

the locals. God answered their prayer in a mighty way with the church now open all year round and hosting 2 morning services each Sunday. The church in Waterford met in an old building with a small number attending, however an influx of people from other nations into the city has led to renewed life and vitality. The connexion has financed refurbishment and extension to the property providing for the needs of the growing congregation. Maguiresbridge in Co Fermanagh is a small village but the church there is bursting at the seams with an increasing number of young families. The old church in Moira, Co Down was demolished and rebuilt. Only opened last autumn already it has attracted new members and Maghaberry in Co Antrim was a dying cause before the Holy Spirit urged the leaders there to reach out to their Anglican neighbours and offer the Methodist building as a centre for united Christian worship. The building has been extended twice to accommodate the fast growing congregation. Craigmore Church was built in 1845 and for most of its life had a small congregation. It now struggles to accommodate all who attend for worship with increasing numbers of young families.

The Methodist Church in Ireland has entered into a covenant relationship with the Church of Ireland and over a period of years has explored what closer working relationships might look like. The Archbishop of Armagh accompanied by Episcopal colleagues participates in the ordination service and lays hands on each of our presbyters. This has resulted in an acceptance by the General Synod and the Conference of Interchangeable Ministry as the Church of Ireland recognised Methodist ordination. Looking to the future this arrangement will become even more of a blessing as secularism increases and will allow for united evangelistic ministry especially in small rural communities. Church planting has happened in Blanchardstown in Dublin, Kenmare in Kerry and Millstreet in Cork along with Cavan town. It is thrilling to see how the Holy Spirit is working in each of these places, and though small numbers meet to worship together they wait on God for the next steps in their development.

On the north coast of Ireland, the Surf Project operates. A former PE teacher and his wife had the vision of offering Christ through the medium of surfing. Their work has branched out with

invitations from several schools that send their children for a week to learn how to surf, and to learn more about Jesus. Since it started a few years ago, literally thousands of young and some older folk have been enriched and many brought into a closer relationship with Jesus.



In Lurgan Co Armagh, the container ministry which started 25 years ago has sent 40-foot containers to all parts of the world. The church built a warehouse where redundant equipment from schools and hospitals is repaired, packed and shipped abroad following requests from overseas. Recent gifts have included hospital equipment, computers, and theological books to Romania, Zambia, the Gambia, Malawi and Sierra Leone. When the doors of each container are closed, the volunteers gather round, join hands and commit the container and its contents to God. They praise God they have never had to pay a bribe to guarantee safe arrival.

The need for faith-sharing and evangelism encouraged the Irish Methodist Youth Department to invite young people aged between 18 and 25 to volunteer as young evangelists for 1 year. Now in year 31, it is difficult to overestimate the impact this initiative has had on individual churches and in the lives of those who served since a number have come into full time ministry.

The various departments of the Conference came together last Autumn to host 'One Mission' This was attended by over 500 people and was a day of vision casting, waiting on God and praying for the future direction of Irish Methodism while seeking his grace, love mercy and power. Arrangements are in hand for One Mission 2.

The influence of Cliff College has been extensive in Irish Methodism and in other Irish churches. Several hundred Irish Methodist students travelled to Cliff and many were later ordained.

The above suggests that God is actively working within the Irish Methodist

Church and we are truly thankful for that. There are 2 areas of concern though: The Faith and Order Committee of the Irish church in common with churches around the world is examining the subject of Human Sexuality. No reports have been brought to Conference yet. The committee organised a day conference and promised every theological point of view would be represented. On the basis of this Headway Ireland asked if their views could be presented and were invited to contribute to the conference by suggesting a speaker who would represent the evangelical point of view. The Rev Vaughan Roberts from Oxford accepted our invitation and spoke wonderfully on the subject with clarity, conviction and grace. There is no doubt that his presentation made a powerful impact on the day. Headway Ireland had previously met with representatives from the working party and spent several hours arguing for the Biblical interpretation of marriage. As Headway Ireland keeps a watching brief we welcome the prayers of our friends in Great Britain and trust the Irish Conference will stand firm.

The other matter requiring your prayer is the restructuring of Irish Methodism. Prior to July 2019, there were 8 Districts superintended by part-time District Superintendents who combined their District work with their circuit responsibility. After much prayer and debate, Conference decided to reduce the 8 Districts to 3 larger areas and appoint full time District Superintendents. The rationale for this change is to release more time and resources for our members and ministers to engage in outreach, evangelism and prayer. Our hopes and dreams are that in every circuit throughout Ireland, the time now freed from bureaucracy will result in more emphasis on reaching out in the name of Jesus.

As we step out in faith we continue to look to the Lord and trust he will send even more of his renewing Spirit. We pray many will come to know Jesus that they will be grow in their discipleship and that he will anoint us afresh with gracious loving power from on high.

Ken Robinson retired from the active ministry of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 2018 after serving for 41 years. He was District Superintendent in the Lakelands District and the Portadown District. He is secretary of Headway Ireland.