

RECOGNISING REALITY: WORLD METHODISM AND (RE-) ESTABLISHING THE CHURCH

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Introduction

Mission history has traditionally been written from the perspective of the missionaries.¹ This had peaked by the 1960s when the history of the establishment of churches that were becoming autonomous was being recorded. Often it was the missionaries who were handing over control of the Church that either wrote the history, or sponsored its publication.² Consequently, a missionary centric perspective is not surprising but perpetuates the myth of the central role of the missionary.

The most common way the Methodist Church has been established globally is by lay people who have been economic migrants... this is being replicated in contemporary Britain.

While products of their age, it would be inaccurate to portray such publications as paternal and narrowly focused on the role of the missionary and such publications did at least point to a more inclusive understanding of history that recognised the role of more than just the

official leaders. In May 2016 the Methodist Church and others celebrated the 200th anniversary of the death of Francis Asbury. The Church came close to repeating the errors of the past thereby perpetuating the myth of Asbury as the founder of American Methodism. He organised, consolidated, strategised and enabled further development, but Asbury went to the church that was already there.³

In this paper I argue that the most common way that the Methodist Church has been established globally is not by organised missionaries but by lay people who have been economic migrants and that this is being replicated in contemporary Britain.

Recording History

It is perhaps a fairly well known story whereby economic migrants from the British Isles moved to North America, established Methodist societies and in due course requested ordained preachers. The primary role of the Irish in this, through Barbara Heck and Philip Embury and the establishment of the first Methodist society in North America, is well documented,⁴ as is Wesley's commissioning of Asbury and Coke to minister to the existing Methodist people there.⁵ We can say with some

1 W.J.T. Small, ed. *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon 1814-1964* (Colombo: Wesley Press, 1964) is a classic example of this genre.

2 Hence the flowering of writing in the 1960s about missionary contributions eg N.A. Birtwhistle, *William Threlfall: A Study in Missionary Vocation* (London: Corgate, 1966). For a missionary perspective just prefiguring autonomy see C Davey, *The March of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1950).

3 <http://methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/great-success-for-event-remembering-an-american-saint> accessed 24/5/2016

4 K Cracknell & S White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 25.

5 R. Richey, 'Early American Methodism' in Jason Vickers, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 45.

confidence that Methodist lay people moved as economic migrants to North America and established Methodism.

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However, whether they established the Methodist Church is more than just semantics. If Methodism is a denomination, and defined by organisation, then in North America, and elsewhere, the forerunners of Methodism arrived as economic migrants, to be followed by clergy and other missionaries who organised and established the Methodist Church. No Methodist Conference took place before the arrival of clergy. However, this approach is a very ecclesial and clergy centric perspective. If Methodism is a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission',⁶ then Methodism was pioneered and established by lay people who were economic migrants. American Methodism as an organisation often dates itself to the arrival of its first clergy but as Richey remarks 'Candor might have led them to acknowledge that laity - women, men, youth, whites, African Americans, rich, poor - were often the initiators of Methodist organization and expansion.'⁷ This is, I consider, the historic norm.

In Antigua, Nathaniel Gilbert Senior, a plantation owner and colonial official, helped establish Methodism and then

invited Methodism to send a minister. And as the missionary legend goes, when Thomas Coke arrived on Christmas morning in 1786 he entered the established Methodist society to be greeted by a congregation of 2000.⁸ One incidental additional note was the further role of laypeople in that an Irish migrant to Antigua was employed by Gilbert 'in instructing the negroes and holding meetings in 1783', in effect a lay person carrying out most of the functions of an ordained minister although the largely slave congregation cannot be described as economic migrants in anything like the same way as those who had an element of choice, even if moving from the direst of circumstances.⁹ In Montserrat the Methodist pioneer was Kitty Dorest, a slave.¹⁰ Ghana Methodism began when a Christian study group of local lay people wrote to the Bishop of London in 1831 requesting a teacher be sent. The Methodists responded where the bishop did not.¹¹

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The congregations that were established were not church in the sense that could be widely recognised, chiefly through the absence of sacraments and clergy. Most of the other functions of church were present without the supporting infrastructure. Perhaps these initiators recognised there were forerunners and the request for clergy was a recognition that what was established was church in the sense of people gathering

6 'Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission', General Secretary's Report to the British Methodist Conference, 2011. This is a contemporary definition that seeks to capture something of Methodism's genesis and subsequent development.

7 Richey, 'Early American Methodism', p. 44. See also Russell Richey, Ken Rowe & Jean Miller Schmidt *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012), 1-7.

8 J. Vickers, *Thomas Coke: The Apostle of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1969), 149-172.

9 G. Findlay & M. Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish* (London: Kelly, 1913) 37.

10 J. Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1760-1900* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 46-47. Slaves cannot be considered economic migrants themselves, due to the wholly forced nature of their movement, but within the breadth of the argument their forced movement was for economic benefit of slave traders and owners.

11 E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1995) 168.

together for worship, Bible reading, teaching and fellowship, but not church in the sense of clergy and sacraments. Rather than replicate this, the norm was to request this support.¹²

Methodism's first arrival in Sierra Leone was through lay initiation by economic migrants from England and particularly from Nova Scotia, both groups containing Methodist lay people and 'Methodist class meetings were begun a year after the Colony's settlement'.¹³ However, rather than extol this lay establishment of Methodism, a Wesleyan historian writing in the 1950s could only remark on the lack of missionaries, rather than the success in establishing the Church.¹⁴ Focus is generally given to the initiative in 1808 by Mingo Jordan 'a Preacher of Colour in Sierra Leone' who wrote to Adam Clarke with a number of requests including 'some Hymn Books, and the Preachers will be thankful for any apparel suitable for the work'.¹⁵ Part of the response to this request from an already initiated church of at least 40 worshippers¹⁶ was the sending of George Warren in 1811, who died after eight months, a pattern that was to be repeated all too often in Sierra Leone and west Africa.¹⁷ But, crucially 'Methodist laypeople were already active in Sierra Leone before he arrived'.¹⁸ Indeed, the British Methodist *Minutes of Conference* from 1792-98 annually recorded 223 Methodists in Sierra Leone. Findlay and Findlay recognised about 110

members of a Methodist society when Warren arrived.¹⁹ This use of 'society', a technical word within Methodism, may be careless terminology but does indicate the presence of an at least semi-organised Methodism before the first ordained minister came. The August 1892 *Wesleyan Missionary Notices* records the start of Sierra Leonean Methodism as 1792 with the establishment of the 'little Society', the use of the capital 'S' recognising an official Methodist entity.²⁰

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What western Methodist missiologists, to date, have not given sufficient attention to is the establishment of Methodism through lay people. This is not entirely missing and despite their focus on missionaries Findlay and Findlay affirmed about Sierra Leone that 'converts were themselves fired with missionary zeal'.²¹ More recent African voices are starting to reflect better the role of lay people. Isichie recognises that 'By far the most successful missionaries in nineteenth and twentieth century West Africa were Africans',²² although her assertion that, unlike in other

12 Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies*, 46-47.

13 Davey, *The March of Methodism*, 32.

14 Davey, *The March of Methodism*, 32.

15 Cracknell & White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 72.

16 L. Pratt, *The Methodist Church in Sierra Leone: From Mission to an Autonomous Church* (Freetown: Private Publication, 1990) 1.

17 Cracknell & White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 73.

18 Cracknell & White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 72.

19 Findlay & Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish*, 67.

20 *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, August 1892, 179.

21 Findlay & Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish*, 313.

22 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 156.

parts of Africa, in West Africa western missionaries were 'virtually invisible', it is harder to maintain.²³ In Pratt's discussion on the development of Methodism it was 'a layman in Kychom who kept the work going'²⁴ while the evangelism was largely by 'African ministers, catechists and teachers'²⁵ and by laypeople.²⁶ Moses Wilkinson has latterly been recognised as the senior lay leader and inspiration of this first Methodist community in Sierra Leone.²⁷ However, writing the 'definitive' Methodist missionary history in 2013, Pritchard describes the lay pioneers of Methodism in Sierra Leone and various Caribbean islands as 'local forerunners'.²⁸ While this clearly recognises the importance of lay people in initiating the church, it points to an embryonic state that awaited further development.

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This Methodist story is replicated, to a greater or lesser extent, in much of Protestant Christianity in the same areas. The Baptist Missionary Society sent its first two missionaries, in 1795, to Sierra Leone as there were 'many Baptists among the Nova Scotian population'.²⁹ It was not just

the Protestant laypeople who spread the faith. In the seventeenth century, as Roman Catholicism attempted to gain a hold in Sierra Leone it was 'resident Portuguese traders, inspired by real Christian zeal' who had 'begun planting Christianity among the local peoples'.³⁰ There are also indicators of a similar experience in other parts of west African Roman Catholicism, where the influence of returned slaves from Brazil is significant.³¹

What was historically true for the establishment of faith communities also resonates with the spontaneous development of denominations. Consequently, in the first hundred years of Sierra Leone when the role of professional western missionaries was small, much of the internal spread of Methodism in Sierra Leone was along trading lines linked to the efforts of local Methodists. Isichei notes that much of Methodism's spread beyond the Freetown area was because 'Creoles trading in the interior often built churches for their own use'.³² Many effective evangelists were lay people who were traders.³³ The nineteenth and twentieth century eastward migration of often impoverished Irish Roman Catholic lay people had a marked impact on British Catholicism. In the recent era a similar impact is being noted through the current movement of eastern European Roman Catholic lay people to Britain for economic reasons, particularly from Poland.

23 Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 276.

24 Pratt, *From Mission to an Autonomous Church*, 10.

25 Pratt, *From Mission to an Autonomous Church*, 11.

26 Pratt, *From Mission to an Autonomous Church*, 15.

27 M. Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: The Loss of America and the Remaking of the British Empire* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 172-3.

28 Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies*, 46.

29 J. Alie, *A New History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Macmillan Education, 1990) 102.

30 Alie, *A New History of Sierra Leone*, 101-2.

31 Isichei. *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 160-1.

32 Isichei. *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 162.

33 Isichei. *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 156.

Contemporary Britain

Migration of Methodists to Britain is part of a relatively recent trend whereby people have especially come from west and southern Africa.³⁴ Many, although far from all, have found a home within British Methodism. The wave of migration by Methodists from the Caribbean in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in many joining established British congregations, and in a few areas becoming a majority.³⁵ Given the era, there was a level of racism that meant many migrants did not feel welcome and chose to join migrant led congregations of a wide variety of independent and denominational allegiance.³⁶

The new feature in British Methodism from the 1990s onwards is that a number of nationally related 'Methodist Fellowships', in reality congregations, have been established. Methodist Fellowships from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Fiji, China and Sierra Leone exist in a number of areas of Britain. A similar phenomenon has also transformed a number of existing churches. In London historic Methodist churches such as Wesley's Chapel (City Road), Methodist Central Hall (Westminster) and Walworth Methodist Church (Clubland) are today among the largest Methodist congregations in Britain with the large majority of their worshippers reflecting migrant communities.³⁷

It is migration, normally for economic reasons, that has led to this population

movement which has resulted in the establishment and development of Methodist congregations.³⁸ Of course, an economic migrant to twenty first century Britain is not the same as a late eighteenth century economic migrant to Sierra Leone but because significant factors for

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both were largely voluntary movement to better economic circumstances or escape from extremely difficult economic circumstances, the shared descriptor has validity. British Methodism currently records approximately 1000 congregations within which ethnic groups are at least a small minority, and perhaps 200 of these are where ethnic groups are at least a significant minority.³⁹ These include the language specific communities, but demonstrate that diaspora communities are an important feature of British Methodism, and their presence significantly exceeds those specifically ethnic congregations and Fellowships. The common and repetitive pattern is that lay people move as economic migrants, establish the Church, and clergy follow later. The 2014-15 British Methodist Church statistics showed more

34 For example, in 1992 there were 13,000 immigrants to UK from South Africa, in 2005 there were 64,000 and in 2009 there were 31,000. Asylum applications from Zimbabwe peaked in 2002 with almost 8,000 and from Sierra Leone in 2001 with almost 2,000. In 2006-7 the four African nations as points of origin whose former citizens were granted British National Insurance numbers were South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe – all countries with strong Methodist Churches and with established Methodist Fellowships in Britain. For statistics see Office for National Statistics 'Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, August 2012', and D. Owen 'African Migration to the UK' www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/crer/events/african/confp_david_owen.ppt, accessed 24-5-16. For the challenges in compiling such statistics see G. Quevedo 'Mapping Refugee and Migrant Communities in the UK' (ICAR Resource Guide, 2010).

35 J. Aldred, *Respect: Understanding British Caribbean Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), 83.

36 Aldred, *Respect*, 68-112.

37 <http://www.walworthmethodistchurch.org.uk/> accessed 25-5-16. The congregation has over 500 members, with a Sunday worshipping community of approximately 350.

38 For an expert treatment of this overall issue see A. Walls, 'Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History' *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol 5, No 2 (2002), 3-11. See also P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

39 <http://www.methodist.org.uk/ministers-and-office-holders/statistics-for-mission/2012-13-reports/excel-charts-2012-13> accessed 24-5-16.

than fifty congregations worshipping in languages other than English or Welsh.⁴⁰ Some of the Korean and Mandarin/Cantonese worshipping communities are relatively long established. There is a far more extensive parallel to this experience in USA United Methodism.

For example, Ghanaian Methodist Fellowships were established in Britain through migration of Ghanaian Methodists for economic or study reasons.⁴¹ Some chose to become part of existing Methodist congregations, but for some of these desire to worship with fellow nationals in ways that were more socially and culturally familiar caused the establishment of a number of groups in the 1990s.⁴² Language was also a feature, but given the diversity of language use in Nigerian Methodism, English is the common language normally used and so it can be argued that it is for cultural and social reasons these

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Fellowships have developed, rather than for language usage which is more perhaps more significant in the establishment of Chinese, Korean and some other congregations. After the establishment of a number of groups, a part-time Ghanaian Methodist chaplain was appointed to

support and further develop this work. In 2016 there are 13 groups in London and additional groups in Nottingham and Glasgow. There are a number of other national examples that follow a largely similar pattern.⁴³ The Fijian Methodist Fellowships show a slight different pattern in that they are predominantly found associated with military garrison towns rather than industrial cities, reflecting the particular pattern of employment.⁴⁴ The Zimbabwean Fellowship is the largest of these groups, first established in 2002 and currently with 26 branches.⁴⁵ Given British Methodism's contemporary weakness in pioneering new congregations, these lay initiatives are significant for British Methodism.

Methodist Ecclesiology and Mission

The Methodist Central Mission, Dublin provides an interesting alternative model from the Irish Methodist Church.⁴⁶ Since the mid-1990s this congregation has grown rapidly from less than 50 to more than 150 worshippers and has helped plant or revive three additional congregations. The growth has been through immigrants, most of whom have been Methodists. A significant minority of the congregation have come from a non-Methodist background but been impacted by the witness of Methodist members of their community who have joined this church. Those from outside of Ireland form the majority of the congregation, which is notable for the diversity of national background. Dublin, and other Irish cities, have large

40 <http://www.methodist.org.uk/ministers-and-office-holders/statistics-for-mission/2012-13-reports/excel-charts-2012-13> accessed 24-5-16.

41 Currently British Methodism recognises ethnically and linguistically based worshipping communities as Fellowships, rather than as Methodist societies/congregations. Those who belong to such Fellowships are also expected to be a member of a Methodist society.

42 <http://www.s15777245.websitehome.co.uk/history.html> cited 24-5-16.

43 There is a parallel story for Nigerian Methodism <http://nigerianmethodists.org/>.

44 See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Plymouth-Fijian-Methodist-Fellowship/377854275598324>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AzOiOzZZp0>

45 <http://www.zimbabwefellowship.org.uk/> accessed 16-5-16.

46 <http://www.abbeystreetchurch.ie/home> accessed 12/11/2013. I was part of this congregation from 2001-2005.

enough ethnic populations to have a significant number of migrant majority churches, but not enough to have ethnic Methodist Fellowships.

A result of the growth in a congregation such as Dublin Central Mission is that in moving from a relatively small and aging congregation to one of a much larger, diverse and younger profile, this congregation has become noticed by some in the wider Irish community. Those, from nominal Roman Catholic and other backgrounds, who for Irish historical reasons may not previously have considered Methodism a potential spiritual home, now note a very different church and find it much more possible to join. This has been the Methodist experience in various parts of Ireland over the past 15 years. In December 2001 Dublin Methodist community membership was 2,217,⁴⁷ and in December 2011 it had grown to 2,614.⁴⁸ Given the overall decline in Irish Methodist community membership in the same era from 55,585 to 50,245, the missional impact of immigrants is significant, through directly increasing the Methodist community as they join, through their witness in various ethnic communities, and by helping to create a more attractive church for others.⁴⁹ In support of my thesis, it is lay economic migrants who are largely responsible for the growth of the church.

There is additional anecdotal evidence to point to a positive missional impact by migrants within the wider diaspora. This is not that surprising. Migrants, who often find

themselves as strangers in a strange land, associate with those from their background community for friendship, economic and social support. The absence of a wider family network in their new location means that rites of passage take on a different

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perspective and rather than being events where those key participants are primarily from a narrowly defined family group, the broader diaspora community are involved, along with others. This brings members of the diaspora into contact with the religious aspects of the community. From a Sierra Leonean Methodist perspective, the writing of Revd Dr Sahr Yambasu regarding his experiences in Ireland and involvement with the wider diaspora amply illustrates this.⁵⁰

There are two distinct bodies of literature that engage with diaspora (sometimes called reverse) mission.⁵¹ One considers an immigrant community that may have a non-Christian faith background as a locus for evangelism by the host Christian community. This is appropriate and has a distinguished history, but is not the primary context of contemporary Britain.⁵² The other, which resonates with the British/Sierra Leonean context, is where a diaspora community that is strongly Christian migrates and makes an evangelistic impact in both their diaspora

47 Methodist Church in Ireland, *Minutes of Conference*, 2002.

48 Methodist Church in Ireland, *Minutes of Conference*, 2012.

49 Some of these themes are developed in D. Boyd, *You Don't Have to Cross the Ocean to Reach the World: The Power of Local Cross-cultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2008).

50 S. Yambasu, *Between Africa and the West: A Journey of Discovery* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2013)

51 I try not to use the term 'reverse' mission as it implies the norm was from the west to the south and east and so there is a new development that is the opposite of the norm. This was the case for a specific period in history, but not the norm throughout the history of the expansion of Christianity.

52 As an example of this see E. Wan *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Western Seminary, 2011) and from a Methodist perspective A. Jebanesan, *Changing of the Gods* (Delhi: ISPCH, 2003).

and the host community.⁵³ Adogame points to two main aspects of this form of this diaspora or reverse mission in the missional impact on the Nigerian diaspora of the Redeemed Christian Church of God⁵⁴ and the missional impact beyond the diaspora community of the Embassy of the Kingdom of God Church for All Nations in Kiev.⁵⁵ Some who consider the role of African Christians in UK have failed to recognise the missional impact.⁵⁶ Others recognise this as the main issue.⁵⁷

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There is a significant reason to be cautious. A weak Methodist ecclesial understanding allows a variety of approaches to pragmatically develop but gives no underpinning of coherence. Consequently advantages of separate congregations within the life of a circuit are largely lost in the current understanding of the Methodist Fellowships. This can be contrasted with the establishment and growth of ethnic denominations such as the Chinese Church in Britain,⁵⁸ or various Korean denominational initiatives.⁵⁹ These two Asian initiatives, found across much of the world, have

resulted in strong churches that make an effective missional impact within their diaspora. They show clear awareness of the needs of second and third generations who have a different relationship to national background, culture and language. While the Methodist Fellowships are in their first generation, they act more as refuges than independent congregations. They reflect a version of what has been left behind in Nigeria etc, rather than a creative engagement with the new context. As migrant populations assimilate, the future of these Fellowships is uncertain when the need for refuge is lessened.

Into the Future

To a significant extent, the effective ending of the Methodist Missionary Society at the annual British Methodist Conference in July 2013 is a final recognition that the Methodist version of the western missionary project, that flourished from approximately 1815 to around 1975, has come to an end.⁶⁰ The task for British Methodism to spread the Gospel to areas of British influence, and beyond, has been substantially completed. Strong independent Methodist denominations have been established in much of Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. American Methodism complemented this in areas of particular American influence, including significant parts of Europe due to the ethnic background of American Methodists and some returning to their ancestral countries. British Methodist

53 As an example of this see A. Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

54 Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, 182-184.

55 Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, 184-189.

56 C. Chike, *African Christianity in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Author House, 2007) offers a helpful historical and sociological understanding but fails to actively consider evangelistic aspects.

57 I. Olofinjana, *Turning the Tables on Mission Stories of Christians from the Global South in UK* (London: Instant Apostle, 2013) and to some extent P. Jenkins *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

58 For example see <http://www.ccil.org.uk/en/ccil/> accessed 28/11/13.

59 For example the Korean United Methodist Church in USA, see <http://www.koreanumc.org/site/c.kqLSIYOxGnF/b.4560555/k.BE5D/Home.htm> accessed 28/11/13.

60 'Report of the Methodist Missionary Society Working Party', The British Methodist Conference, 2013.

withdrawal has matched the diminution of British colonial possessions and influence in an era of a rapidly weakening British Methodist Church.⁶¹ Today the British Methodist story is not of mission 'from everywhere to everywhere' but rather of lay led church pioneering initiatives from the world Methodist community in Britain.

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Methodism, like the majority of Christian communities throughout history, spread through the largely unintentional witness of lay people who moved location due to economic factors.

The contemporary challenge to British Methodism is to recognise this better and act upon it. The future of Methodist mission is well served when Methodism understands how it actually has spread, and creates better mechanisms to follow and support its lay people in new places to be church with a measure of self determination, rather than just Fellowships that are significantly controlled.

One-hundred years ago Methodist missionary historians glimpsed this truth when they wrote that 'In India, as elsewhere, Methodism has followed the British flag and outrun the missionary'.⁶² The future is in acting on this insight and empowering Methodist lay people as they continue to migrate around the world parish.

61 For example in 2005 Methodist membership was 294,819 and in 2010 it was 237,744, a decline of 19%.

62 Findlay & Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish*, 119.

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