

METHODIST CONFERENCE: LLANDUDNO 2003

Presentation of *Let Your Light Shine* Dialogue

The formal presentation by John Ellis, the Secretary for Business and Economic Affairs, was "interrupted" noisily by a man in a hard hat and overalls (aka the Rev Andrew Letby) along the following lines....

J ...Excuse me for a moment, Mr President: I seem to be suffering an attack of the Prince William party problem. *(Turning to A)* Hello, Working Class Man *(hereafter WCM)*.

A Hello Middle Class Methodist *(hereafter MCM)*.

J WCM, are you lost? This is the Methodist Conference, nothing relevant to you.

A No, MCM, I am interested.

J We'll have to remit to the Faith & Order Committee the question of whether someone like you can stay. But while they make up their minds we'll have plenty of time to kill. I expect, WCM, you're from the North?

A Newcastle-upon-Tyne actually, MCM.

J I think John Wesley may have reached there. He certainly got as far north as Finchley. But at Conference you won't find working people - they're mostly ministers. And the Conference works on a different plane from you, WCM. Conference would never fritter away its time on the sorts of things you're interested in - booze, sex, gambling. It deals with the higher things of the Gospel: Faith and Hope and amending Standing Orders. So I can't imagine why you're here.

A Well MCM, in my Children's Bible I notice Jesus kept on meeting people where they worked: sorting out their fishing quotas; changing shekels into euros; working for the Government. Don't you still do that sort of thing?

J Not sure, WCM; my minister certainly never asks about my work. We used to have some people called - what was it - Industrial Chaplains.

A And still do - *(strips dramatically)* - I'm one!

J Oh pull the other one, WCM - you don't seem either old or boring.

A Some of us are young and dynamic!

J But you won't pull the wool over the eyes of a sophisticated audience like the Methodist Conference. These people know that Industrial Chaplains are sad, grey, burnt out ministers looking for a quiet job before they sit down; the sort of ministers who just can't cope with the dynamic, forward-looking, imaginative, informal, internationally contextualised, locally grounded, innovative, objective-driven, joyful, youthful, energetic ethos of the circuit meeting.

A Which Circuit's that then?
Mind, in a way *us* Chaplains do have unofficial circuits I suppose - one of mine is an airport. (3500 members -staff, and nearly 4 million on the Community Roll - passengers)

The other day I was in the crew room of one of these new fangled low cost airlines. A crew was just coming on duty - ready to fly to Alicante (that's a resort that working class people go to for their holidays) and then back to Newcastle immediately followed by a

return trip to Belfast, and still home in time to tuck the kids up in bed. *How's that for locally grounded and internationally contextualised?*

They sometimes seem to be all those other things you said as well - but can you imagine how physically demanding and emotionally stressful a life like that is. They rarely get time to stop and consider what's happening but they appreciate a Chaplain coming to see them - taking an interest in them - someone who really tries to understand what they have to put up with but has time to listen - and above all shows a real respect for them.

Now there's a chance to put the Gospel to work (if you'll excuse the pun!).

J But what about...?

A These are very serious issues and earlier this year I was one of the authors of a submission to the Government consultation on behalf of airport chaplains from across the country. We were able to add a theological dimension to these important discussions.

J That's impressive. But what help is it to the 3,000 rural chapels in the Connexion?

A We have rural chaplains too. Stand up anyone here who is a rural Chaplain with such an important ministry that it has been recognised ecumenically by election as a Canon of Lincoln Cathedral. *(Alan Robson stands, to wild applause.)*

J And he's a member of Conference too. So you Chaplains stay integrated into the life of the Church as well as that of the workplace.

But I wonder whether you understand the pressures on MCMs. I know God loves me when I'm arranging the chapel flowers [aside: there's no stereotyping in this sketch].

I know God loves me when I'm doing the circuit accounts. But what did He think when I told that teacher she was being made redundant? Her bursting into tears didn't help me at all. I know she's 57. I know her husband is an invalid. But what choice did I have? I have to meet my budget or other jobs are lost too.

And my minister wouldn't understand: she doesn't have to meet a single target and still has a job for life. I tell her, it's not the gaps on the Preaching Plan that keep me awake at night.

A The Gospel is about a God who suffers alongside us and who is part of every aspect of our lives. Workplace Chaplains are one way we try to show that.

J But there are only 100 Chaplains; and even if Districts and Circuits do their job and implement the new policy of growing the number of Workplace Chaplains by 50% you will still be thinly spread. As we talk, I am beginning to feel that deep down perhaps you and I are not so different after all; but there is a gulf between church culture and workplace culture that is even deeper than the gulf between the so-called Middle Class and the so-called Working Class. That's a scary thought for the Conference to sleep on.

A And that means there is nothing more important than involving all the Methodist people in the challenge to bridge the gap, and draw in their ecumenical friends. We can't leave it just to Chaplains. We need to equip everyone to Let Their Light Shine, as Jesus put it, when at work (*pictures start to roll and then roll continuously*) and when thinking about the wider issues that shape what happens at work. Indeed, in the spirit of Our Calling, we have to find ways to engage with the structures that decide whether economic forces will promote or frustrate the values of the Kingdom of God.

J And can the Connexion help churches with this?

A We are going to build a network of Economic Mission Enablers, linked to the economic regions. These will help churches wrestle with the questions and point them to where they can have influence.

J As well as all that, perhaps those of us at work could help the Church too. God seems to be spending so much time at the moment trying to decide whether He wants to be an Anglican or a Methodist; perhaps I could recommend a course for Him. It's one my staff do - it's about identifying key objectives and then allocating time in ways that reflect those key objectives. So many possibilities when you start thinking about the Church engaging with economic life! Don't you think the Church should have someone whose main job is to promote these ideas?

A It does.

J Who's that then?

A It's you.

J Oh yes, so it is. I do apologise Mr President. I got distracted. As I was saying, this new booklet *Let Your Light Shine* is not just a report but also a Study Guide. I want to ask Conference members to.....

Conclusion

We encourage the use of *Let Your Light Shine* as a tool to help develop this area of mission.

This is partly because the economic world is a crucial influence on people's choices, their attitudes and the shape of their communities.

Also important in larger context, for the ideas in *Let Your Light Shine* are also about a vision of a Church which:

- goes out to where people are; not one that waits for them to come to us.
- risks letting the World choose the first item on the agenda so conversation can begin.
- is excited by the complexity of society and can't wait to get involve.
- works to achieve a careful understanding of what it wants to transform.
- is bigger than Methodism and expects to do its work ecumenically.
- sees its specialists are there to enable the whole Body.
- believes its laity are the principal agents of mission not the paying spectators.
- has the courage to Let its Light Shine and let God use that for His purposes on earth and beyond.

John Ellis

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