

THE EXTEMPORE SACRAMENT

Finding words in and for the present

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Introduction : 'As the Spirit gives utterance'

I worship daily as part of the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham in a diverse community where spontaneity and regular fixed forms are both valued and recognised as vital signs in prayer and worship. The diversity of the community is such that many traditions are present from Roman Catholicism to Pentecostalism, and globally every continent is represented in worship. Some present in worship are used to fixed and formal liturgy and others are more familiar with spontaneity, greater use of all the senses, dance and dramatic use of symbols, drumming, and collective praying out loud.¹ So it is good to affirm that there are biblical and theological bases for the validity of using such varied signs of measuring life and vitality in a worshipping people.² It is also good to be reminded that freedom and structure cannot exist without the other, and that the Spirit of God moves through spontaneity and through form and structure. Paul speaks encouragingly of the use of the spiritual gifts both for the building up of the Church and as a sign of the presence of the Risen Christ in the worshipping assembly.³ But Paul also counselled that worship should be conducted decently and in good order.⁴ In one sense, the virtues of freedom and fixed forms of prayer were exhaustively debated in the Calvinist Puritan traditions of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.⁵ Yet this debate does not go away, and there is less ease about retaining both in one tradition than we might expect.

It is tempting to interpret this tension between order and spontaneity, and freedom and form, as about personal preference and choice more than inherited tradition, about the cult of individualism in a post-modern world, but such an interpretation is simplistic and misses the point about the theological truth at the heart of this tension. We worship a God who is a covenanting God who enters into binding relationships with God's people⁶ yet we also worship God who is a sovereign, free Spirit, who is

1 See Helen Dixon Cameron, *Shaping Worship that Shapes Us*, Icthus, Autumn 2008

2 Craig Douglas Erickson, *Participating in Worship: History, Theory, and Practice*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1989, p 24

3 1 Corinthians 14.25 - 26

4 1 Corinthians 14:40

5 Erickson, *op cit*, p 27

6 Abraham, Noah, Hosea, Jeremiah.

mystery, is elusive, without bound or edge, hidden, wholly other and uncontainable.⁷ It could be said that both fixed formal structure and spontaneity are complementary modes of God's presence and engagement with God's people.

Thus the tension between structure and form and freedom and spontaneity as an experience of God's presence is not confined to the present moment but has always existed. Temple worship, with the simple short blessing of the *berakoth* and the most elaborate Temple liturgies, makes real the truth that God has been and is present to God's people in ritual, but such a presence is also discernible in the prophetic mode too. God speaks to God's people through ritual and through the individual who may be regarded as an outsider to the systems of order and decency. So God's presence is not just discernible in the predictable, comfortable, familiar, composed, habitual and corporate, but also in surprise, discomfort, unfamiliar, the improvised, the fresh and in individual creativity. Such an inclusive vision represents not a problem but a celebration and expression of the fullness of the Godhead.

In this lecture I will focus primarily on an exploration of the extempore prayer tradition in Methodism although my interest also reaches to the extempore tradition in preaching – but that must be saved for another occasion.

The questions I invite us to reflect on are :

- Why in contemporary Methodism is the extempore tradition of prayer and preaching on the wane?
- Why do so many student ministers lack confidence in and experience of the extempore tradition?
- Can the extempore tradition be taught? Should it be?

I wish to answer these questions in such a way as to demonstrate that the choice between freedom and form is unnecessary and unwise, and moreover assert my belief that extempore prayer is a sacramental act in the sense that, in finding words in and for the present there is an honouring and attentiveness and engagement with God, which is a making real what we know to be true about God in this moment, place and time and with these people assembled now. For me the extempore tradition celebrates the real presence of the incarnate Christ among us in our limited yet ostensive language. In finding words in and for the present we find Christ the Word, who is in and who is for the present, and who abides in us just as we abide in Christ.

The Extempore tradition : The Gifts of God for the People of God

It is significant that the word 'extempore' is itself falling out of general useage. The derivation is from the Latin *ex tempore* and is in the ablative case, meaning 'at or of the time.' This is often reduced to meaning spontaneous or unrehearsed, which is not necessarily the same as 'at or of the time'. The fullness of the original meaning is less about form and much more about reading the present moment and responding to it. It speaks of a God who is engaged with the world in the present moment, a Creator who is still creating, a redeemer still saving, and an empowerer still breaking into places and peoples and transforming them.

⁷ The Day of Pentecost, Acts 2.1 - 11

So I would concur with Isaac Watts who saw extempore prayer as prayer that is 'conceived prayer'⁸ and with Marshall Talling, for whom extempore prayer is that which has received suitable pre-meditation as to its purposes, its substance and its form.⁹

Talling, in 1902, was of the opinion that the theological colleges ignored the teaching of the skill of extempore public prayer in preparation of the men [sic] who were to lead the people in one of the most solemn and sacred acts of life. For Talling it was vital that public prayer should be the free expression of a suitably disciplined advocate. Jeremy Taylor famously advocated such self-restraint in his *Discourse concerning Prayer Extempore or By pretence of the Spirit – in justification of authorized and set forms of liturgy*, where he argues against the use of extempore prayer by quoting, among other scriptures, Ecclesiastes 5.2:

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God, for God is in heaven and thou upon earth, therefore let thy words be few.¹⁰

I almost entitled this lecture 'Let thy words be few,' but the irony of such a gesture did eventually hit me! I would suggest that, at this point certainly, Taylor has not posited an argument regarding extempore prayer, merely pleaded for restraint and awe in the presence of the holy mystery of the Godhead with which I heartily concur. His remarks encourage silence rather than condemn extempore prayer. The wordiness of some formal liturgy would do well to be revised in the light of Taylor's injunction. Edwin Muir the poet calls for the same restraint when he speaks scathingly of the work of the Church as 'The Word made flesh here is made Word again.'¹¹ There are many occasions when we have all prayed the prayer, 'Let thy words be few,' only to be disappointed.

Isaac Watts is clear that extempore prayer needs preparation and learning. He urges us to 'endeavour in general to learn the holy skill of praying, and to prepare also by meditation, or reading, or holy conversation for the particular exercise of this gift, and the performance of this duty.'¹² So for Watts the extempore tradition demands preparation and learning.

In Romans 8.26 we read that the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray just as the Holy Spirit is the source of all true worship and all true creativity. There is a constant New Testament theme that extempore prayer is a gift of God.¹³ But is this gift one that we can all receive or is it only given to some; is it given to all but only used by some?

I note in 2009 that many pre-ordination students are neither confident nor experienced in extempore prayer and yet on Circuit placement still encounter an expectation in Methodist churches that, as student deacons and presbyters, they should be competent to do so. Many students express a lack of confidence in public prayer that is not resourced by the Methodist Worship Book or other written liturgies,

8 Isaac Watts, *A Guide to Prayer* edited by Harry Escott, Epworth Press, London, 1948

9 Marsall Talling, *Extempore Prayer*, James Robinson, Manchester, 1902

10 Jeremy Taylor 1646

11 Edwin Muir, 'The Incarnate One,' *Collected Poems 1921-1951*, Faber & Faber 1953

12 Isaac Watts, *op cit*

13 1 Corinthians 14

and I wonder if we are entering an era where those who carry the memory of liturgy in their heads and hearts are rare. It may be that the profusion of written liturgies is preventing students from either learning one form well 'by heart' or producing dependency on written form that is then subsequently inducing a loss of confidence in the extempore tradition. When I left theological college I knew the 1936 and the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* Order for Holy Communion by heart, as well as those of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Alternative Service Book 1980* of the Church of England, but such heart knowledge is less common than it was.

I am reminded by my colleague Gary Hall, in his essay entitled, '*I dreamed about Ray Charles last night*,'¹⁴ of 'Gutenberg's transforming technologies during a previous pivotal era' bringing to birth all the advantages of a printed Bible but also creating a new era of forgetfulness. As Hall expresses it, 'it's written down; why bother to remember it.'¹⁵ I am aware that extempore prayer is far from prayer that is remembered by rote and re-called, but there is something important in what Hall is suggesting about liturgy and learning and prayer that is extempore. Liturgy is learned, and actors improvise better when they know their scripts perfectly; the security of the knowledge of the form is what helps them to playfully push the boundaries through improvisation.

I would like to suggest that extempore prayer is prayer conceived in the present moment that is not *written down in full*; it is freshly created and therefore *largely but not* entirely unrepeatable, but that it flows from our memories of what we have learned and what we know to be true. Irenaeus suggests that such prayer is a priestly task and competency, and may be prayer that is planned and rehearsed and partly committed to memory. So in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, X : 'Let each one pray according to his own ability.' There is an assumption of such gift and skill residing in the presbyter.¹⁶

Certainly extempore prayer demands much of the leader of such prayer in planning and preparation. Ruth Duck notes that services with extempore prayer in them involve preparation of persons more than of words:

A daily life of prayer and commitment is the best preparation for spontaneous participation in Christian corporate worship.¹⁷

Many Methodists mourning the passing of competencies in extempore prayer would be surprised to discover that it is in the study of eucharistic theology and practice that we see the establishing of the extempore tradition within the Church's life of prayer.

Gregory Dix is clear that every local Church received the rite of the Eucharist and the way of performing it with its first evangelisation.¹⁸ Thus before the fourth century eucharistic practice and theology was very much a local theology and practice. The

14 Gary Hall, 'I dreamed about Ray Charles last night' in S Burns, N Slee and M Jagessar, *The Edge of God*, Epworth, Norwich, 2008, p 295

15 Hall, *op cit*, p 295

16 A Raymond George, 'Extempore Prayer' in J G Davies ed, *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, SCM Press, London, 1985, p 237

17 Ruth Duck, *Finding Words for Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995, p 10

18 Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, A&C Black, London, 1982, p 6

Eucharistic prayer could not be an entirely static thing because ‘the prayer was not yet a fixed formula.’¹⁹ Justin Martyr and Hippolytus both record that, within a customary frame-work, the celebrant-bishop was to a considerable extent free to phrase the prayer as seemed best to him. This meant that, as the liturgy as a whole became more fixed, the Eucharistic prayer remained the most mutable thing in the rite. There was thus an expectation that the bishop-celebrant had the skills and competencies to pray in his own words – and find words in and for the present. This confirms for me that finding words in and for the present is part of the presbyteral task and display of competencies we should expect to see.

Liturgies that remain constant fixed points in time – still centres of memory – nurture our Christian memory and identity; and yet spontaneity can break in and support vital and engaging worship. This point seems to re-inforce the view that order and spontaneity need each other, but also suggests that the presbyters who can pray extemporaneously also need to be rooted in the fixed and formal prayers of their tradition.

It is of interest that Raymond George notes that the rubrics for the presiding Minister of the 1882 *Public Prayers and Services*, repeated largely in the 1936 *Book of Offices*, stated that the minister, in conducting the service according to the following form, shall have freedom to use hymns and extempore prayer. George adds that a custom arose in some places of the presiding minister praying extempore almost at the end of the prayer of thanksgiving, just after ‘Glory be to God on high.’²⁰

Thus George reminds us that fixed forms and extempore tradition have been held together in Methodist worship in a way that is rarer now. Methodists are often asked to choose between fixed forms and free forms and this choice may not be representative of our tradition and identity, and may be diminishing us as a denomination. This is in contrast to an examination of the early Methodist tradition in Britain and the United States of America, which reveals a greater fluidity than one might expect.

The Extempore tradition in Early Methodism in Britain and the United States of America

It is apparent that Methodist worship as conceived by Wesley had been a creative combination of the formal Table [eucharist-centred] and the joyfully informal Word [preaching-centred] but it was the latter which was transplanted more effectively into American soil. In 1786 Wesley published an edition of the *Sunday Service of the Methodists* for use by those Methodists of the Diaspora ‘in His Majesty’s dominions.’²¹ Differences in settlement patterns must have resulted in varying degrees of warmth in its reception, and in England *the Book of Common Prayer* was

19 Dix, *op cit*, p 6

20 A Raymond George, ‘From *The Sunday Service* to “The Sunday Service”’: Sunday morning Worship in British Methodism’ in Karen B Westerfield Tucker *The Sunday Service of the Methodists : Twentieth century worship in world-wide Methodism*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1996, p 115

21 Kenneth Cracknell and Susan White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, CUP, Cambridge, 2005, p177

used more often than the *Sunday Service*.

Designed as a service book for Methodist corporate worship, the *Sunday Service* included for Lord's Day use a lectionary, proper collects, services for Morning and Evening prayer, an edited and abbreviated Psalter, an order for Holy Communion, and orders for Baptism. Much less provision was made for daily prayer: there was a thirty day cycle of psalms for morning and evening devotion, and a Litany for Wednesday and Friday recitation.²² Karen Tucker notes that, in his 'cover letter,' Wesley stipulated that all other prayer was to be extempore. Clearly Wesley wanted the Methodist people to have an established form for their worship and he naturally chose the *Book of Common Prayer*, with the intention of keeping Methodists within the Anglican fold. But he also peppered the text of the *Sunday Service* with provision for extempore prayer thus encouraging both freedom and flexibility from the very beginning. But for Wesley freedom was never absolute freedom – it was always to be freedom bounded by theological and liturgical and cultural parameters. According to Ernest Rattenbury, in Wesley's revising of the *Book of Common Prayer* for Methodist use rather than discarding or destroying it, Wesley kept the Methodists from heterodoxy and Dissent.²³

Yet the desire for freedom allowed Wesley to write in 1786 in a letter to Freeborn Garrettson:

I do not confine myself: I constantly add Extemporary Prayer, both to the Morning and Evening Service.²⁴

Wesley clearly saw a theological imperative for a synthesis of form and freedom with which we seem to have lost touch – we largely force people to choose between the two.

As Methodism settled there was a growing desire for a more sophisticated presentation of the Methodist tradition from upwardly mobile Methodists who demanded stylish and elegant buildings, worship and choral music, and erudition in their preaching.²⁵ The desire to express transcendence materialised in the choice of hymnody, architecture, choral music, vestments, furnishings and orders of worship, which characterised the so-called 'mahogany Methodists'. Such a move of gentrification was at odds with the other plain and unadorned style of Methodism which revivalism was spreading to more impoverished communities and people. Throughout the nineteenth century, as Methodism took root around the globe, both mahogany Methodism and revivalist Methodism were often transplanted to the mission fields, where disputes over form and freedom made little sense and hindered the sharing of God's word.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that the extempore tradition took root more securely in environments where informal leadership was being increasingly exercised. So Lester Ruth notes that, beyond the official categories of itinerant preachers, local

22 Karen B Westerfield Tucker, 'Form and Freedom : John Wesley's Legacy for Methodist Worship' in Tucker, *op cit*, p 25

23 J.E Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys*, Epworth Press, London, 1938, p 216

24 See Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality – A Reader*, Abingdon, Nashville, 2005

25 Cracknell and White, *op cit*, p 194

preachers and exhorters, there were a variety of types of informal leadership within early American Methodism, and this was where many women and children, black and white found opportunity to develop as public prayers and exhorters.²⁶ As worship at the camp Quarterly meeting became increasingly intense it was common for anyone and everyone who had felt the power of God to begin to exhort their neighbours. This inclusivity is in marked contrast to my own experience of extempore prayer, where often one male voice with a particularly partial view of the nature of God and God's dealings with humanity has dominated worship, and excluded the voices of women and children, the oppressed and the marginalised. In my desire for Methodism to re-discover the extempore tradition it would be essential that, in doing so, we capture that more inclusive vision of whose voices should be heard in worship, and the necessary enlarging of language to express the nature of God and God's dealings with humanity. It is vital that such extempore voices should express a great and less partial vision.

Lester Ruth, in his account of worship at the early Methodist Quarterly meetings in the United States of America, describes the frequency of and growing expectation for the 'work of God' to break out following the exhortation by the preacher. Such an expression of extemporaneous and often shouted prayer might result from the leader of worship calling on individuals to pray, while other regions relied on greater direct inspiration. Men, women and children might all be led to pray and 'Some prayer meetings in mixed gender congregations even centred on women's praying.'²⁷

William Keith, a New England Methodist, saw children's giftedness in praying as a sign of the 'work of God' among them. He describes one eight year old praying in a manner 'beyond my abilities to express,' and another thirteen year old girl praying so movingly at a prayer meeting that Keith decided 'her language seemed more like that of some celestial being than any other human creature.'²⁸

Lester notes that, in the late eighteenth century, American Methodism had embraced the extempore tradition to such an extent that the balance between freedom and form has tipped towards freedom, and the celebration of both Holy Communion and Baptism have become both 'short and extempore,' and this sort of extemporaneity was surely what led to grumbling about a lack of uniform practice beginning around the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.²⁹ A Committee at the 1824 General Conference in the United States complained in its report that printed texts for the rites were 'Used by some, mutilated by others and wholly neglected by still another group.'³⁰

The urging of individual leaders for preachers to use the set texts would imply that this was necessary only because doing so was novel. Freeborn Garrettson in 1826 noted disparagingly that some preachers conducted the Lord's Supper, Baptisms and

26 Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below : Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings*, Abingdon, Nashville, 2000

27 Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below*, p 85

28 William Keith, *The Experience of William Keith together with some observations conclusive of Divine Influence on the Mind of Man*, Asagel Seward (Utica), 1806, p 15

29 Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below*, p 134

30 *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1796 – 1856*, 3 vols, Mason and Lane, New York, 1856

weddings extemporaneously.³¹ It is possible that such comments reflect less about the change to extemporaneous practice in sacramental administration and may reflect more about the change of perceptions around the extempore tradition. The greater social acceptance of Methodism had ensured that increased levels of ministerial education and a greater self-recognition of being a Church rather than a collection of societies produced in some Methodists, at least, a clear concern about prescribed textual forms, and the perennial issue for Methodists about 'good order'. Thus 'mahogany' Methodism gradually asserted itself over revivalist Methodism in at least some section of American society.

Early Methodism has sometimes been described as Anglicanism felt and it is this pietistic element of Methodism which is expressed in the insistence on the need for form and freedom which allowed for extemporaneous prayer, a deep concern for having the heart moved in worship, and a continued emphasis on the importance of discerning inwardly the presence of God in worship. Beneath the surface of the question of whether we view the worship we experience as orderly or disorderly, quiet or loud, extemporaneous or liturgical is the question of *how* God's presence is conveyed to worshippers. So the question is often framed as, 'Does the Holy Spirit impress a sense of God's reality and love on us directly or is the transforming influence of God at work in our lives mediated through standard practices, rituals and forms?'³² It seems a reductionist view to limit the work of the Holy Spirit in such a prescribed way, but that is exactly what some sections of the Church have done. I would want to assert that formal liturgy can convey as fully as free forms of prayer the indwelling and inspiring spirit of God, who infuses all our thoughts, words and prayers, whatever the form or nature of them. All of our words, all of our forms of prayer are a striving and yearning for that which is beyond us, greater than us, 'God's breath in man returning to its birth.'³³

The Extempore tradition as sacrament

The resources for extempore prayer come from deep within us and sometimes can be buried deep and require work and attentiveness to release them. Etty Hillesum who wrote of her experiences in the Netherlands from 1941 to 1943, particularly of the Westerbork transit camp for Jews who left there for Auschwitz and other camps in Poland, spoke of prayer in this way:

... there is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then God must be dug out again.³⁴

Etty's diary was thrown from the train on which she exited Westerbork – one of the last trains to leave. Her last recorded words were: 'We left the camp singing.'

The concept of digging God out of our deep places in order that God's voice can be heard is very powerful, and certainly suggests that there is a need in prayer for us to

31 Freeborn Garrettson in Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below* p 134

32 Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below*, p 191

33 George Herbert, 'Prayer'

34 Etty Hillesum, *A Life Interrupted: The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43*, translated by Arno Pomerans, Jonathan Cape, London, 1981, p 36

pay attention to ourselves, our humanity before God and our relationships with others. Etty's metaphor of digging suggests that finding God and words about God of and for the present is not the work of a moment, but a sustained effort that demands energy, commitment and skill. Perhaps we sometimes take refuge in the digging of others when perhaps we need to make some effort of our own. Yet the need for fresh digging in every generation suggests we need to be attentive to that which is new and spontaneous.

Spontaneity in worship is central to some Christian traditions in the British context – principally but not entirely the African American traditions, black majority congregations and other evangelical traditions including Methodism. In such traditions everyone would be given opportunities to pray out loud and in an unscripted way – including children – which can occasionally be excruciating but often moving as those concerned 'find the right words.'³⁵ Thus the Word is conveyed in and through the human frame of black and white, male and female, old and young, and the Word is made flesh anew and offered as a source of wisdom and gospel for the church and the world.

Duck suggests that traditions that don't value spontaneity can learn from those that do. There is an issue of how participatory extempore prayer is when compared with fixed and formal liturgy with prescribed responses from the people incorporated into the prayers. Yet it is also worth remembering that extempore prayer can allow some voices silenced by traditional liturgy to be heard. How many women have been involved in the authorized forms of our written liturgies, how many other marginal voices given a hearing? I have begun a tentative conversation with one theologian about liturgy that encapsulates the voices of those who have been abused and survived. So much of our language, metaphor and form can be over-bearing for those who know only too well the experience of being forced or co-erced into doing or being that which is against their natural inclination. There are some voices, whether in fixed liturgy or extemporaneous cry, that we need to hear and to which we need to attend.

Worship must be something which takes us up into something bigger than ourselves and our limitations which is echoed in Augustine of Hippo's words: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.'³⁶

I am interested in Frances Young's exploration of participation in worship in *The Edge of God*, where she suggests that Augustine's words imply that participation in worship may have more to do with receptivity than with the worshippers contributing verbally through praying aloud themselves.³⁷ She suggests that participation in a theatre or concert does not mean getting up on the stage ourselves, but rather responding to what is offered in such a way that we are taken beyond ourselves and our reality in a way that leads to self-forgetfulness. Certainly in the theatre or when reading a novel it is possible to inhabit, for a time, an imaginative and alternative world with a different perspective, which enlarges the possibilities of finding meaning and transformation which can transfer to our daily reality. For Young this is the

35 Ruth Duck, *op cit*, p 15

36 Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, OUP, Oxford, 1992, p 3

37 Frances Young in *The Edge of God*, p 97

mediation of grace.³⁸

Young adds that in worship ‘what happens to any of us remains elusive – too often we invest too much in what we are conscious of – in “feelings” of response. Arthur [Young’s severely disabled son] reminds us that often we may well receive grace without being fully aware of the fact and there is much more to receive than we can know.’³⁹

Where does this leave Methodism, which has a complicated history of holding form and freedom in some tension, and has an emphasis on feeling and knowing?

Perhaps there is a need for us to re-discover a creative tension between freedom and form and refuse to be co-erced into a choice between one and the other. Does this not demand of us a need to integrate thought, feeling, reason and experience in what we offer to God in worship in a more holistic way?

Can the extempore tradition be taught?

Christian liturgy, the work of the people, is powerful for us because it can evoke and align, order and integrate our collective experience as God’s people. We learn it and it transforms us and allows us to explore the people we are and the people we wish we could become. I want to suggest the same is true of the extempore tradition of prayer, the wisdom and the vastness of God’s love and reality conveyed to us in the voice and body of one particular human frame in one particular human context, in one particular time and space. Extempore prayer is fundamentally incarnational. It speaks to us of the vastness of God’s glory conveyed to us through human limitedness. Just as written liturgy demands work and effort of us so does extempore prayer. The digging out of the wells of our being and our realities, which Etty Hillesum speaks of in connection with prayer, suggests a demanding process of paying attention to ourselves before God and a rigour about our mode of engagement with God, which fixed forms of liturgy *may* excuse us from but which extempore prayer certainly does not. The seeking of the right words for this time, in this time, for these people, for this space suggests a dependence on God’s providing which is about a relationship of active trust based on knowledge and an active engagement.

The extempore tradition can be learned by all who are willing to work without the safety harness of the tradition or someone else’s words, and accept the limitedness of human accounts of words in a particular place and time, and those prepared to live with incompleteness and partiality. Which, of course, all words contained within fixed and formal texts also exhibit. The authority given to written texts sometimes masks their partiality and incompleteness. One technique of training in extempore prayer is to teach a classic prayer and invite students to re-phrase it in their own words, and this technique works well if students can acquire a familiarity with the rhythm, progression, shape and phrasing of an older prayer. The technique requires a no-paper rule!

38 Frances Young in *The Edge of God*, p 97

39 Frances Young in *The Edge of God*, p 98

Conclusion

There is a real need for contemporary Methodists to understand their own past, their theological inheritance and their own place within the Catholic Church which is the body of Christ if we are to meet the challenges of the present and the future. Jonathan Dean has commented on the marked discomfort we express about the usefulness of Methodism's doctrines and practices, even with the Church itself, since Methodist Union in 1932.⁴⁰ The *Methodist Worship Book* is one shining example of a self-conscious articulation of Wesleyan beliefs through worship, not least in the way that the doctrine of prevenient grace is modelled in the Liturgy of Baptism through the promises following the act of Baptism itself.⁴¹

The experience of the Methodist Church has been that God has worked through tradition and spontaneity, yet we have seemingly lost some confidence in some of the forms of spontaneity, such that many student deacons and presbyters have low confidence in their ability to pray extemporaneously, or to give an account of their experience of God at work in their lives through testimony, or be clear about how they might draw on the extemporary tradition in prayer and preaching.

I would suggest that there needs to be a renewed confidence in the Methodist narrative which forms and shapes our identity which offers us a vision of tradition renewed and informed by spontaneity which leads, not to an abandonment of that tradition, but to its reviving and renewing. The Methodist narrative should encourage us to be bold as Wesley was bold. Foundational to all reformations is the awareness of the need to rediscover the historical resources, and all renewing flows from an acceptance of the willingness to let tradition correct and convict.⁴² The Methodist tradition is one of freedom of worship within theological, historical and liturgical boundaries and we need to be reminded of the words of Bishop John Jewel who, when defending the Protestant Church of England under Elizabeth 1 in 1562, described its guiding motto as 'hold still the old customs.' So Anglican and Methodist students of the Queens' Foundation are invited to know and love *Common Worship* and the *Methodist Worship Book*, explore the Covenant Service, Love Feasts and the *Book of Common Prayer*, and value and practise the art of extempore prayer and preaching. In seeking fresh expressions of Church we may be taking refuge in the desire to 'do something new' because of our anxieties about the value of the old, without realising that our Methodist narrative already contains that which we need for renewal and revival. We need to value it enough to teach it and pass it on. Holding still to the values of freedom and form, of spontaneity and tradition is an old custom which should and could make Methodism bold once more.

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The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham
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40 Jonathan Dean in Clive Marsh ed, *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Continuum, London, 2005, p 221

41 *Methodist Worship Book*, TMCP, London, 1999 p 88

42 J E Booty ed, *An Apology of the Church of England by John Jewel*, Virginia University Press, Charlottesville, 1963, p 122