

WORSHIP

Over 90,000 sermons must have been preached in the circuit in the last 100 years. They remain now only in their author's files, or today in computer memories. Some will have been published, perhaps in precis form in a church newsletter, but the great majority will have been forgotten by their recipients except where circumstances imprinted one or two on the memory. The pulpit was a central feature of Methodist chapels up to the turn of the century and services were conducted from it. The ambitious building schemes at Erdington, Stockland Green and Four Oaks in the 1900's featured pulpits at the side of the chancel; even a mid-century church like Sutton Coldfield had a pulpit (transferred from its victorian predecessor) at one side, but post-warII churches rarely had pulpits of the old kind, accessed by stairs, but usually a simple lectern. Gradually services would be conducted from a lectern to start with, until the time for the sermon was signalled by a solemn walk to the pulpit, usually during the last verse of the pre-sermon hymn. Eventually as some services became less formal, ministers stayed at the lectern for the whole of the service- some joined the congregation in the centre aisle for prayers or the more intimate message. The length of the sermon in the first decades varied from the exceptional hour or more to the half-hour. In the last 40 years the length decreased to 15 or 20 minutes and a sermon in two or three parts separated by hymns is now not unusual. Where facilities are available. the sermon may even be recorded on tape for use by the housebound.

The content and style of sermons over the years is beyond the scope of these pages, but the influence of radio and television must be recognised. A congregation used to the direct and carefully summarised pronouncements of news bulletins and other informative programmes may be somewhat impatient with a reasoned but perhaps elaborate presentation. The attention span of the churchgoer must also have been affected and sermons tailored to suit. The need for the reiteration and exploration of the faith and its Biblical basis remains, as does the need for explanation of the Church's attitude to current social problems.

Prayers have fluctuated from the ritual to the extempore. The latter, often somewhat rambling, are not heard so often today, but for half of the century it was the accepted mode and many practitioners became adept at it. Gradually planned prayers became the norm, sometimes calling

for congregational response. The classic forms are still largely adhered to (invocation, adoration, supplication etc.) and prayers for the sick, bereaved and needy often convey information hitherto unknown to most of the congregation.

The hymn book used in Wesleyan churches in 1899 was almost unchanged from Wesley's 1780 hymn book. In 1904 a new Methodist book was published and used in the new churches of the time. This was the first to divide hymns into sections according to festivals or subjects. Then in 1933 the first hymn book for all Methodists followed the Methodist church union, inevitably leaving out some favourites but bringing in psalms and other verses, with newer hymns, some by then living authors.

This book remained in use for 50 years, until in 1983 Hymns and Psalms was published, a sub-heading on the title page suggesting it was not only for use by Methodists but ecumenically. Once again omissions raised feelings in the circuit, and representations were made allowing the reinstatement of some well-loved hymns. The title of the new Book indicated the introduction of psalms for use in services, and the reading of psalms became a regular part of the Sunday service. The Book of Offices published in 1933 containing the standard Sunday Service and the services for the various sacraments was replaced in 1975 by the Methodist Service Book and in 1998 a radically different book of services was published of several hundred pages but separate issue of the sixteen sections allowed churches to choose which parts they would purchase for general use in the pews.

The 1980's saw the introduction at some circuit churches of alternative hymn books; Hymns and Songs of Fellowship or Mission Praise. These reflected to some degree the influence of the growth of evangelical churches at the time, and the desire to capture the spirit of younger people, who were displaying tendencies to stay away from worship in large numbers. The hymns and choruses in these books are mainly simple, short, and need repetition, although some classic hymns are included. At some churches youth groups became the main worshippers at some services of an informal nature.

Two practices also developed in the 1990's which led to some dissension among worshippers. One was the preachers invitation to "share the Blessing" at the end of services. This involved gazing round at those near you while saying the words; many steadfastly closed their eyes and ignored the invitation. The other was the use of the Peace; not merely saying the words, but with handshaking and

embracing throughout the congregation; calculated, in many worshippers opinions to disturb the even tenor of the service. This practice varied from church to church; in some it became rarely used.

In the 1960's "family services" developed to meet the needs of parents and children at a time when the family, perhaps with both parents working, had only the weekend to follow family pursuits. The pattern of family life had by this time altered considerably from the 1900's when most families had close relatives living nearby and large family units were the norm, often attending the same church.

Communion services have altered considerably in the last thirty years; the after-service invitation to remain for communion,(many of course did not) gave way to the incorporation of communion in the main service, a move which certainly ensured more communicants. It removed, however, some of the spiritual aura with which this sacrament had hitherto been clothed, and the element of choice. The practice of assistance by lay persons in the administration of the elements which developed widely in the 1960;s also contributed to a feeling by some members that the service had been somewhat debased. The larger numbers taking communion of course meant that the minister alone would take perhaps too long, but when the practice developed so much that neither of the elements were administered by the minister members began to feel that the service was not taken so seriously as it was. The blessing of children at the communion rail also raised mixed feelings, for it seemed that no part of the faith was reserved for adulthood and greater understanding.

Early morning communion services also began to be eliminated in the 1980's; for a few the discipline of an eight a.m. communion was (and still is) a part of their spiritual life. The institution of a later service prior to the main morning service did not altogether satisfy some, but of course others liked the 9a.m. or 9.30 time. A very few churches still have the 8 a.m. service.

Times of sunday services have varied over the century. The Sutton church altered its evening service in 1904 from 6p.m. to 6.30 because the bells from the Parish Church where the service started at 6,30 interfered with their devotions. Morning services, for decades starting at 11 a.m.. began to be brought forward to 10,30 in the seventies so that a time of fellowship after the service

40

could be enjoyed over a cup of coffee. At the smaller churches Sunday afternoon worship is sometimes preferred.

The great festivals of the church have been celebrated throughout the century. The Sundays of Advent began in the fifties to be heralded by the progressive lighting of large candles in some churches, and sometimes included a Christingle service, at which children would be given an orange surmounted by a small candle, symbolising the Light of the World. At Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve midnight communion services were usual at most churches; the first continues to be a regular feature but the "watchnight" service on New Year's Eve has not been so popular in the last fifty years, but is still held in a few places. Carol services on the Sunday prior to Christmas probably attract the largest congregations of any church service, and are subject to attempts at innovation but usually return to the classic form of carols and lessons, popularised by the television broadcasts of the service from Kings College Cambridge. The nostalgic fashion for candlelit carol services burgeoned in the eighties but is diminishing. The attempts to re-create the atmosphere of pre-Victorian charm was sometimes carried to such lengths that those with poorer eyesight could not see the words of the congregational hymns, to say nothing of the fire risk. The choice of the Lessons to be read varied from minister to minister; it is difficult to encompass the Christmas story in nine short readings, especially if you start with the origins in the Old Testament.

The Christmas morning service, though still popular, has in places seen smaller congregations as the scattered families of the last decades tend to unite for Christmas in other places.

The ecumenical movement of the past 40 years has brought a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity annually in the early part of the year. Exchange of pulpits with other denominations has been a feature of these Weeks and visits by Methodists to other Churches have brought greater understanding, notably of the Roman Catholic Church, which hitherto had been often a mystery to the average member.

Holy Week was marked in many different ways in the circuit. In the early years a week of solemn services each night would culminate in a long service on Good Friday. In post-war years these began to give way to fewer services, some churches joining with other denominations for Communion services where appropriate. On Palm Sunday every

60th Birthday Celebrations

Saturday, 31st January, 4.30 to 6.30 p.m.—

**BIRTHDAY TEA and
TABLE-TALK**

with REV. EDWARD ROGERS

Sunday, 1st February—

11 a.m., FAMILY SERVICE

Preacher: REV. EDWARD ROGERS

6.30 p.m., DIVINE WORSHIP

Preacher: REV. EDWARD ROGERS

Followed by Refreshments in the Church Hall

(The Parish Church will join us for the Evening Service)

The Rev. Edward Rogers was Minister of this Church during the Second World War. He is a former President of the Methodist Conference and is now General Secretary of the Church's Christian Citizenship Department

Monday, 2nd February, 7.30 p.m.—

**BIRTHDAY CONCERT
in the High School**

Each Organisation in the Village will be contributing an item

Admission 3/-. Children (with adult) 2/-

41

church with a sizeable choir would present one of the great cantata. "Olivet to Calvary" was a popular choice, its simple but dramatic music appealing to many congregations.

Up to the 1940's Good Friday was a quiet day even for the general public; but the increasing secular pressures led gradually to the day becoming a normal day, especially in the Midlands where factories and offices worked as usual, in contrast to other areas of the country where the day was not a holiday.

The joy of Easter Sunday has not however changed over the century. Communion services at 8 a.m. and at other services are well attended still. In the 90's some circuit members attend a service at 6 a.m. at a local farm. Up to 1940 it was common practice to save new clothes just to wear on this day, adding to the general rejoicing.

The next festival in the church calendar, Whit Sunday was not often marked by special services, a situation remarked upon by members moving from northern England where processions and other celebrations were held. The meaning and importance of the day were the subject of sermons of course, but by the 1980's members had to be reminded of this and the general public had forgotten its existence. Ascension Day was another occasion which Methodists failed to observe to any extent, although there have been circuit services in recent years.

Harvest festivals occupied perhaps the premier place in annual church celebrations because at no other time were so many people involved in the preparation of the event. The customary Harvest supper on the day before drew people of all ages to the premises and often produced entertainment of a high order. The festival involves the decoration of the church, and it is here that the greatest change has occurred since 1899. A photograph of the decorations at one church in the 1900's shows a mass of flowers in every possible place with a store of vegetables equalling any large greengrocers display. Distribution of the flowers and vegetables to the needy both in the church and the neighbourhood was a mammoth task and the church stewards annual nightmare.

In the second half of the century the displays declined markedly; by the 1970's tins of food replaced vegetables. The grand flower display gradually diminished to more elegant arrangements, and, for instance, a vase of flowers would replace a crowded window sill. With the much higher standard of living which congregations began to enjoy, the majority of the harvest gifts went to organisations caring for the less fortunate in society

The location of the circuit in the heart of the manufacturing area of the country meant that many of the members of the circuit were involved in such activity, rather than the agricultural industry whose harvest was celebrated. Some churches attempted to introduce industrial themes to the harvest sunday, but these were not so popular as the old and much loved traditional view of a rural harvest now so remote from many city dwellers experience

The three great ceremonies of Baptism, Marriage and the Funeral Service were in the early days of the century conducted without question in a church, even though civil marriage ceremonies were possible. The number of baptisms gradually fell after the second world war, until some ministers after sincere consideration of the circumstances of the parents and their real intentions might refuse to perform the ceremony. Other ministers held the view that all who sought baptism for their children should be given the opportunity; but many parents from the fifties onwards, unless they were churchgoers, did not bother with this hitherto normal act in the Christian child's upbringing. Baptism services were formerly held separately, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon, but it became the custom to hold the ceremony in a morning service, ensuring a congregational welcome and response. One minister would parade round the church with the baby in his arms to show everyone the newly-baptised child, whose name would be put on a Cradle Roll to ensure that there was some future contact with the family.

The 1936 Book of Offices of the Methodist Church contains an order for the "solemnization of matrimony" and has the words in the service "love, comfort, honour and keep (him or her)". By 1975 the Methodist Service Book called the ceremony The Marriage Service and omitted the word "comfort". The words were altered in several places- "have pledged their troth either to other" became "have made their vows to each other and shown their consent". Marriage ceremonies since then have varied; the basic service may be modified (except in its legal essentials) by the addition of songs, music, poems and readings unheard of fifty years ago. There are even occasions when the bride and bridegroom may be greeted with applause as they walk down the aisle. The popularity of different churches in the circuit for couples getting married is remarkable. In a typical year in the nineties the minister at Four Oaks conducted 53 weddings, while at another large church the minister conducted only six. Much

of this has to do with the "catchment area" of the church, the age of the membership, and the willingness of the minister to marry divorced persons. "Under no circumstances" it is written in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, "does the Conference require a minister to officiate at the marriage of a divorced person should it be contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience to do so".

Perhaps the biggest change in marriages since the circuit began is in the age of the participants; in the 1920's most weddings were between people aged between 19 and 24; today's couples are more likely to be in the 25 to 30 age range. The other big change is in the elaboration of the marriage; the trappings which surround many church weddings today may obscure the significance of the ceremony to some degree to say nothing of the cost, which many a bride's father has found to be daunting.

The major change in funerals this century has been the development of cremation instead of burial. The 1936 Book of Offices service was headed "Order of Service for the Burial of the Dead"; the coffin was brought into the church for the service followed by a further ceremony at the graveside. Cremation was mentioned only in a footnote- "commit his body to the elements- ashes to ashes, dust to dust" in place of "commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust". By 1975 the service had become "The Burial or Cremation of the Dead" and the alternative words of committal are given in the text. In the latter half of the century cremation has gradually become the preferred option and now burial is rarely required. The church service has become one of thanksgiving for the deceased's life and often only the family attend the cremation ceremony.

The nodding plumes on the horses' heads which in the 1900's led the typical funeral procession gave way in the twenties to the motor hearse and cars. Up to the second world war a funeral procession would be marked with respect by passers-by and workmen. Hats would be removed, work stopped and silence prevail as the funeral passed at a walking pace. To-day the hearse and cars may move slowly away from the house but will soon increase to a moderate speed on the way to church or crematorium, perhaps receiving some consideration from other traffic but to a minimal degree. The general public will ignore the funeral or give it a passing glance.

The wearing of black clothes, once mandatory at any funeral, has now changed considerably so that almost any

colours may be worn; older people still tend, however to dress soberly in keeping with their perception of the occasion. The masses of flowers and wreaths which formerly almost hid the coffin have in most cases also gone, one or two wreaths only taking their place. Donations to charities are now often invited instead of flowers; the rationale behind this is not clear and presence at the church or a letter of sympathy may be the most fitting way to remember a friend or loved one.

All these developments have not altered the fact that people grieve; a ministers task is to provide a ready counsel for the mourners. Even those on the fringes of the church welcome his or her visits and comforting words and advice in the event of a family death. The thanksgiving service usually held today with its review of the deceased's life and favourite hymns is a time when the church family can show its support for the bereaved, who are grateful that they can share with so many the stressful time they are experiencing.

The Covenant Service has been an annual tradition in all forms of Methodism since John Wesley urged Methodists to renew their covenant with God in 1747. In 1936 a single form of service was authorized, revised in 1975, and is used in all the circuit churches. Formerly held as a separate service on a Sunday afternoon, it has been the practice in the last thirty years in some churches to incorporate it in a Sunday morning or evening service. Attendance has varied; not all members renew their covenant, perhaps because their understanding is not sufficient. As in many aspects of their faith, some members have much to learn, but are content with what they have.