

THE METHODIST ETHOS

From time-to-time I am asked to comment on the term ‘the Methodist ethos’. What does it mean? In particular, what does it mean in the context of Wesley College?

In a review of Wesley College¹ in 1998 the Methodist ethos was described as:

- Expression of the Christian faith and Wesleyan insights with passion, integrity and in the setting of here and now.
- Consideration of the needs of others, especially those who are different from us.
- Support for values which respect the integrity of persons and communities.
- Use of language and images which are inclusive and which express equality.
- Opposition to cultures of violence and to systems of domination and exclusion.
- Provision of safe environments and processes for dealing with conflict, harassment, abuse and violation.
- Openness to the future and to new insights, experiences and people.
- Treasuring our heritage and working to express it relevantly.

This paper expands on some aspects of this statement, places the statement in an historical perspective and comments specifically on some Wesley College experiences / implications.

The Methodist ethos has its beginnings with John and Charles Wesley. Both men were priests of the Church of England. The Wesleyan / Methodist Church emerged out of the Methodist movement within this Church. The Methodist movement began at Oxford University when the Wesley brothers gathered an enthusiastic group of students around them. They met regularly for prayer and the study of the scriptures. They celebrated weekly communion and ordered their lives methodically. An interest in the social ills of their time was demonstrated through visiting the poor, the sick and the imprisoned.

Other students mocked members of this earnest group with the taunt ‘Methodist’. This mocking would indicate that these Methodists were different! It is this difference – the ‘Methodist ethos’ that finds its expression in the Special Character of Wesley College and the desire for this to be lived out at Wesley College.

In basic terms, the Methodist movement placed emphasis on two things: first a desire for salvation and then as evidence of this to work towards a betterment of society. These two intertwined hallmarks of the Methodist movement can found in the ‘Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies’² issued on May 1, 1743 by John and Charles Wesley.

Methodists have always been clear that no-one is beyond the reach of God’s love. Salvation is there for everyone who turns to God, and not just for the chosen few (the elect). We recognise that salvation is not earned or gained by good works: it is a measure of God’s grace!

¹ Hill J and Hawk K, Educational Research and Development Centre, Massey University College of Education: Albany, Wesley College Review, July 1998

² Laws and Regulations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Revised Edition 2006, Introductory Documents 1.

From early times Methodists combined a focus on an individual's response to God with a passionate and active concern for social justice. The huge crowds who heard and responded to Wesley's preaching were often the poor. The upper classes regarded him as a threat to the social order because he treated the lower classes as equally human. Early Methodists were active in the struggle against slavery, campaigned for prison reform and set up a range of educational initiatives to improve literacy and health. Improved literacy was seen as a means to develop understandings of the faith. Methodist Class Meetings, Leaders' Meetings, Quarterly Meetings, Synod Meetings and the Conference developed skills that Lay Leaders were able to use in a range of contexts, including local and national government.

Methodist folklore speaks of the impact of Methodism on the life of the early eighteenth century: of the rediscovery to some degree of a social message. In 1743 John Wesley wrote (in *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*): "We see, on every side, either men of no religion at all, or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We... should greatly rejoice if by any means we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained, a religion worthy of the God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love; the love of God and of all mankind, the loving God in our heart, and soul and strength, as having first loved us, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on the earth as his own soul."

In 1952 the New Zealand Conference adopted a statement 'Some Social Principles of the Methodist Church'.³ Its introduction quotes the above 1743 reasoning to underpin these principles. This statement was reaffirmed in 1967 and 1976. It continues to speak strongly to 21st century people.

In the New Zealand context, Methodist people have been active in a range of social contexts and national and local politics. Methodists have been prominent in speaking out on public issues such as the misuse of alcohol and the 'sin of sweated labour', racism and sexism, human rights abuses, unfair trading practices, unethical investment, environmental pollution and Third World Debt. Methodism has also made bold statements about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, beginning a bi-cultural journey leading to a multi-cultural Church, power sharing and the just distribution of resources within Aotearoa / New Zealand.

Methodists have traditionally held to a four-fold approach when applying the Christian faith to contemporary issues and practice. The four approaches relate to scripture, tradition, reason and experience.⁴

Methodists seek to discover the Word of God through 'searching' the scriptures. While there are different understandings about this, Methodists have always warmed to prophetic words.

One other approach to applying the Christian faith is to exercise reason. Methodists affirm that we are called to love God with our minds as well as our hearts and that we are encouraged to think things through in the light of reason. This means that we seek to become aware of different points of view (for example by reading), and using our own critical thinking in order to make sense of God's world.

³ Laws and Regulations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Revised Edition 2006, Introductory Documents 1.

⁴ Called By Name, Pastoral Care and Christian Education Office of the Methodist Church (UK), 2002

Some words of scripture particularly challenge those at Wesley College. The following are examples:

- “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” [Micah 6:8]. (*Methodist people and pupils at Wesley College talk about being humble. Are showing justice and demonstrating mercy seen as parts of walking humbly with God?*)
- “Then Peter went up to him and said ‘ Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.’ “[Matthew 18: 21 – 22]
- “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.” [Luke 4: 18]
- “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.” [Matthew 7:8]
- “No, because when you weed out the darnell you might pull up the wheat with it.” The parable of the weeds - Matthew 13: 24 – 30 and 36 -43]

At times scripture challenges how conventional wisdom and practice is applied at Wesley College and how members of the Wesley community, both adults and young people, are called to relate to each other. Recognising this requires responses other than the conventional to be considered.

At Wesley College we meet every weekday for worship and again twice on Sunday. These regular meetings create an opportunity for the scriptures to be examined and their application in relation to Wesley College, Aotearoa and the World to be noted, questioned, considered and pondered upon.

These emphases, approaches and social principles have expression in the Special Character clause of the 1976 Integration Agreement that highlights:

- religious observances [a desire for salvation]

Chapel observances, the Life and Faith programme and the ‘witness’ within the community provide the opportunity for all to discover who God is for them. For some this discovery is new. For others it is a reawakening or a rediscovery as new understandings emerge and are forged.

- industrial training and instruction in the English language [skills to empower in the face of an invasive culture⁵ in a new ‘world’]

The invasive culture at this time might be seen in the negative influences that are prominent in New Zealand society - often transmitted through the media, internet, videos, music and lyrics - that promote violence, sexually explicit behaviours, gender discrimination, ethnic / cultural superiority and other life-sapping anti-social behaviours.

- providing education for Maori, Pasifika people, orphans, and disadvantaged in an atmosphere where students can learn to live and work together in harmony [living out the social principles]

⁵ Chessum, Rev. W, Wesley College 160th Reunion Sermon, Wesley College Collegian 2004.

These emphases, approaches and social principles also provide a context within which we view the challenges faced by those who live at Wesley College. It is reality that a number of the young men and women who enter Wesley College have prior experiences that mean they do not trust those in positions of leadership or authority. It is a reality that not all have the skills to manage social interactions or academic learning in a positive manner. It is a reality that not all have experienced stable, balanced interactions with others that allow them to live and work together in harmony. The Wesley College community is a microcosm of New Zealand society. The impact of a widening economic disparity, cultural / ethnic diversity and a heightened fear of the stranger and the different is marked in society beyond our gates. At times they are focussed within. Where the will exists, these are challenges that can be addressed. Wesley College recognises the risk that is inherent where these conditions exist. We also recognise that there is a greater risk in not taking that risk. In a small way the creation of a better society depends on taking it!

Within an educational (and predominantly boarding) setting the 'Methodist ethos' also speaks about how those who do not conform to the standards set by society or the institution are to be regarded. When we believe that salvation (a recognition by an individual of who God is and of the relationship that exists between 'me and my God') is available for all, then we must also hold the belief that all are human and redemption is available for all. Methodists recognise that punishment does not redeem a person. Redemption grows out of a recognition of 'doing wrong'; a wish to 'put things right'; a willingness to change; followed by making the most of an opportunity for 'a second chance'. There are many examples of students at Wesley College who have responded, begun a new journey and moved on to make a useful contribution to Wesley College and subsequently to society in the place they have chosen to live after Wesley College. The transformation of the heart, leading to a new way of living, is at the core of the gospel (the good news).

Therefore, to sum up in a very Methodist way: What is the Methodist ethos?

First, to recall the words in Jim Strathdees' hymn (1969): "I am the light of the world":

**To seek the lonely and the lost
To make the powerful care
To make music in an old man's heart
And sing to the colours of the earth**

**I am the light of the world
You people come and follow me
To follow and love is to learn the mystery
Of what you were meant to do and be.**

and then to quote the words attributed to John Wesley:

**Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.**

Ian Faulkner
PRINCIPAL