

A Methodist Way of Life?

Sabbatical Thoughts and Reflections - Summer 2019

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Introduction

I have written these reflections to draw together the reading, thinking and praying that I have done during my sabbatical¹ on the idea of the Methodist Church in Great Britain (MCB) adopting a Methodist Way of Life (MWOL). The idea of a MWOL has been suggested as one aspect of the MCB 'Reaffirming *Our Calling*'. The initial ideas for a MWOL were presented in a discussion paper² to the 2018 Methodist Conference, the section on a MWOL can be found in appendix 1.

As I begin I want to acknowledge that those who presented the discussion paper noted that these were early thoughts on a MWOL to help The Methodist Conference discern whether the work should be taken further. Since the 2018 conference a group has continued to work on a MWOL. I haven't shared in or seen the group's work and I recognise that their thinking will have moved on from where it was a year ago. My comments on the early work are not intended to be overly critical or unhelpful, I hope they have something to offer to the ongoing development of a MWOL. I realise I could have waited for more information to be shared before writing these reflections, but, it was important to me to write these reflections before the end of my sabbatical.

I chose to reflect on what a MWOL might look like as part of my sabbatical as it built on an interest that I already had in monastic life, new monasticism and Christian communities. My own faith has been particularly enriched by the work of the Northumbria Community, not least through Celtic Daily Prayer³, which I use regularly in my own devotional life.

In these reflections I start by thinking about why the MCB would consider adopting a way of life. I then look at what the foundations are from our past that we could build a MWOL on, followed by what might be the distinctives of a MWOL today. Finally, I consider what a MWOL might look like in practice and what steps could be taken next to make that a reality for the MCB.

Why consider a Way of Life?

'Reaffirming *Our Calling*', came as a response to the continued decline of the MCB. The Methodist Conference has agreed that 'Reaffirming *Our Calling*' gives the church the focus it needs to be faithful to God and to enable, with God's help, the Church to grow. The discussion paper suggests a MWOL would be a way of enabling cultural change. It says: '*Only by each follower of Christ being continually transformed in the love of Christ will the Church*

¹ April to June 2019

² *Reaffirming Our Calling: the future call of the Methodist Church*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference.

³ Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: The Journey Begins* (Collins: England, 2015).

*be able to live as a faithful, joyful and committed community.*⁴ For me this has to be at the heart of why we would consider a MWOL, it cannot simply be as a way to save the MCB, or a good new idea, or a new thing for the sake of a new thing. If the MCB is to adopt a MWOL it must be to enable Christian disciples to be more faithful to God and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, **to be missional disciples**. If it is not for this purpose we risk what Elaine Heath describes happened in the early church (AD 200): *'The change in the character of Christianity brought about numerical growth, but not the healthy reproduction of disciples.'*⁵

Adopting a way, rule or rhythm of life is not new. There are lots of places around the world where over the last 20 plus years groups of people have sought to rediscover what community life bound by a rule, rhythm or way of life might look like and how this helps the church to be faithful to God. These include:

- dispersed communities such as the Methodist Diaconal Order⁶, the Iona Community⁷ and the Northumbria Community⁸.
- worshipping communities, often *fresh expressions* of Church, such as Moot⁹.
- residential communities (sometimes with non-residential members as well), such as The Community of St Anselm¹⁰ or Methodist Chapel House in Bath¹¹.

A more recent development, in the UK at least, is the idea of a local church adopting a rule or way of life to guide their life together. Two particular examples that I have looked at are The Holy Spirit Church in Crawcrook who have adopted a rule of life¹² for the whole congregation and St Nicholas Church, Durham who are in the process of forming the Community of St Cuthbert.¹³

As I have considered these different expressions of new monasticism what has struck me again and again is how much they have in common with Methodism and in particular the early practices of the Methodist Church. Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker express this in their book *Longing for Spring*:

*'While most of the new monasticism has emerged outside of the United Methodist Church, increasing numbers of United Methodists are experiencing a sense of call to love and serve in this form of community. Because virtually all the emphases of the new monasticism are consistent with the early Methodist vision and mission, we believe that like early Methodism, the new monasticism is a holiness movement.'*¹⁴

⁴ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraph 16.

⁵ Elaine A. Heath & Scott T. Kisker, *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community* (The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge UK, 2010), p. 16.

⁶ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-diaconal-order/>

⁷ <http://www.iona.org.uk>

⁸ <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org>

⁹ <http://www.moot.uk.net>

¹⁰ <http://www.stanselm.org.uk>

¹¹ <http://www.nexusbath.org.uk/chapelhousecommunity.htm>

¹² <http://tomblog.firstsolo.net/index.php/parish-rule-of-life-proposal/>

¹³ <https://www.stnics.org.uk/communityofstcuthbert/>

¹⁴ Heath & Kisker, *Longing for Spring*, p. 7.

As I have read and looked at these different expressions of new monasticism I have seen how their coming together as a community has helped those who are members to grow as disciples, to discern vocations, to develop friendships, to serve in local communities, to share faith, to reach out to those in need, to invite others to follow Jesus. **It is clear that where they are most faithful to God communities have a clear focus on both discipleship and mission.**

Common to those communities who have been most faithful to God and most long lasting is that they haven't grown as they expected. By being open to God they have grown in unexpected and new ways through their faithfulness to God in discipleship and mission. As a reader of Vincent Donovan's book *Christianity Rediscovered* puts it, they have gone to new places where they hadn't been before.

*'A young person in an American University, reflecting on the line of thought in this book, offered some advice. 'In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before' Good missionary advice, and a beautiful description of the unpredictable process of evangelization, a process leading to that new place where none of us have been before.'*¹⁵

For me, if the MCB is to adopt a MWOL in the future I believe it must be faithful to the charisms of our past, *'the traditions behind the traditions'*¹⁶ as Elaine Heath phrases it, but most crucially a MWOL must be focussed on enabling Methodist disciples to be missional disciples in every aspect of their lives. I believe a MWOL which enables people to grow as disciples and reach out in mission has the potential to be significant in the renewal of the Methodist Church and in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. It has the potential to take us to new places, with new people or as a current Methodist #hashtag puts it #newplacesfornewpeople.

Foundation for a Methodist Way of Life

In her book *'Living in the Gaze of God'*, Helen Cameron says: *'we need to honour the tradition, the rock from which we were hewn, but not be too deferential.'*¹⁷ Like Elaine Heath's phrase *'the traditions behind the tradition'*¹⁸ I think this is helpful as we think about the foundation for a MWOL.

I am fully supportive of the Methodist Conference's adoption of *'Reaffirming Our Calling'* and believe it should be the litmus test for whether we do or do not do something at all levels of the church. I do not think however, that because we are *'Reaffirming Our Calling'* we have to build everything around the four headings of Worship,

¹⁵ Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (SCM Press London UK, 2001), p. xix.

¹⁶ Elaine A Heath & Larry Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline: A Guide to starting missional micro-communities in historically mainline traditions* (Cascade Books: Oregon USA, 2014), p. 15-16.

¹⁷ Helen D Cameron, *Living in the Gaze of God: Supervision and Ministerial Flourishing* (SCM Press: London UK, 2018) p. 14.

¹⁸ Heath & Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline*, p. 15-16.

Learning and Caring, Service and Evangelism. I do not believe a MWOL needs to be structured around the 'Our Calling' headings to enable it to be part of the Methodist Church 'Reaffirming Our Calling'.

For me, the foundations of a MWOL should go back to a Methodist tradition and charism much further back. In my thinking, a MWOL should be a response to the call of the Methodist Church to be a holiness movement, a way to enable disciples within the Methodist Church to grow in holiness and to work with God to transform the world to be a more holy place, more and more like the Kingdom of God. As clause four of the Deed of Union reminds us:

*'It [The Methodist Church] ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unflinching resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.'*¹⁹

A MWOL based on a deepening of personal and social holiness within the lives of Methodist Disciples could enable:

1. the deepening discipleship of those already part of the Church.
2. the sharing of faith with those who are not yet Christians.
3. a commitment to speak out for and act in those places of the world where we do not see the holiness of God because of oppression, inequality, poverty, injustice etc.

Elaine Heath reminds us:

*'Early Methodism was a holiness movement that evangelised people both inside and outside the Church. To frame it with my definition of evangelism, Methodism was a holiness movement that initiated people into a holy life, revealed in Jesus Christ, anchored in the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, surrendered to the reign of God, for the transformation of the world. What we have in new monasticism is in fact a holiness movement, one that is larger than any denomination but that resonates deeply with the Methodist soul.'*²⁰

Placing holiness at the foundation of the MWOL would enable us to fulfil our purpose as Methodists to 'spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith'²¹ remembering the claim, hard to reference, yet attributed to John Wesley, 'that there is no holiness but social holiness'.²² It would renew us

¹⁹ The Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Methodist Publishing: London UK, 2018), Deed of Union Clause 4, p.213.

²⁰ Heath & Kisker, *Longing for Spring*, p. 41.

²¹ The Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Deed of Union Clause 4, p.213.

²² It is difficult to reference where exactly Wesley said or wrote this. In his article 'Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in contemporary context', HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge, Volume I (2015) Issue 2 (Holiness & Mission): pp. 177–198. David N Field notes:"

'The only place where Wesley uses the phrase 'social holiness' is in his Preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.²⁶ In a critique of the 'mystic divines' he refers to three fundamental issues. The first is the 'foundation' of the Christian religion; for Wesley this foundation is justification by faith on the basis of Christ's death. The second is the manner of building on the foundation; Wesley argues that holiness is to be achieved through active participation with other Christians in the life of the Christian community.

The third problem that Wesley identifies is the 'superstructure' which is being built: that is, religion itself. The religion of the 'mystic divines' is 'solitary religion', which is focused on contemplation and does not include outward works.²⁷ It is in contrast to this understanding of holiness that Wesley states: 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness.'²⁸

by being communities of missional disciples committed to holiness and evangelism in all that we do. This would be a holiness that is intentional and communal, again in the words of Elaine Heath:

“The Church is called Holy”, wrote John Wesley, “because it is holy”. This needs not be a cloistered holiness, but it is intentional and communal - a holiness in the midst of the stresses and strains of everyday life. If we can recover that, we will recover a church that is vital and effective in the twenty-first century.²³

Whilst I understand why the initial work on a MWOL shaped the possible MWOL around ‘*Our Calling*’ I believe that building a MWOL on the call to holiness gives it deeper foundation in our Methodist Heritage, focusses the MWOL in flourishing missional disciples and gives a clearer foundation to our congregations as to why we offer a MWOL. As a circuit minister I would prefer to explain a MWOL as a way of growing in holiness and evangelism rather than purely as a part of ‘Reaffirming *Our Calling*’.

Distinctives of a Methodist Way of Life

Building on the understanding that a MWOL would have at its foundation the call to holiness and be built on Methodism’s call to spread scriptural holiness in this section I suggest four distinctive characteristics that a MWOL could have.

I think it is important to recognise that if we are to adopt a MWOL as a Connexion it would be different to other communities that I have considered or read about. In most cases, it would not be a single worshipping community or a community set up to be guided by a way of life, it would be a connexional way of life which local churches/disciples embrace. In most cases it would not be a residential community or a group of houses committing to community living, each community would be formed from within a local church. It would, I believe, have commonality with a dispersed community like the Northumbria Community as it would be connexional, but with a locally gathered non-residential community it would be easier to gather together.

Wesley goes on to describe what he means by social religion or holiness as follows: ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. ‘This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;’ and that we manifest our love ‘by doing good unto all men, especially to them that are of the household of faith’. and, in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be zealous of good works. He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. My Father, will he say, worketh hitherto, and I work and, at all possible opportunities, he is, like his Master, going about doing good.²⁹

‘Hence ‘social holiness’ describes Wesley’s understanding that holiness is love; this love is manifested in the pursuit of the good of others. It thus only exists in the contexts of relationships with other people. Love, and hence holiness, cannot be manifested in solitude. To withdraw from people is to refuse to act in love and is thus a denial of holiness. It is important to note that by ‘social’ Wesley is not referring to the relationship between people and social structures; he is referring to interpersonal relationships between people. Hence ‘social holiness’ is the concrete manifestation of ‘holiness of heart’ in our relationships with other people through concrete acts which promote their good.

26. Wesley 2013, pp. 36-40.

27. Wesley 2013, pp. 37-38.

28. Wesley 2013, p. 39.

29. Wesley 2013, p. 39.

²³ Heath & Kisker, *Longing for Spring*, p. 37.

I believe the following four distinctives could shape a MWOL to have as Elaine Heath describes a *'seamless blend of personal and social holiness'*²⁴.

Distinctive 1: A holiness movement disciples are called into.

In all that I have read whilst I have been on sabbatical, this quote by Brother Victor-Antoine is one of the most significant:

*'For the sake of God, the monk leaves the world, its allures, pleasures, and all those ties that have been part of his life up until that point. This is painful and hard; after all monks and nuns have much the same feelings and sensibilities as their fellow human beings. The difference is they have heard a call in their hearts, an inviting call that tells them, 'Come. I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. Follow Me.'" The person who decides to become a monk or nun - to enter the solitude of the desert (a monastery or hermitage) - does it because he or she has heard this call, a call stronger than any other, a call to communion and fullness of life with God, a call that fulfils the deepest desires of the heart.'*²⁵

The conference discussion paper suggests that Methodist Membership and being part of a MWOL would be linked²⁶, a way of renewing what membership means in the MCB. Whilst I understand the argument for this I do not believe it would be as fruitful as offering the MWOL for members to consider and discern a call to. I believe to say one September to all Methodists *'if you want to still be a member of the Methodist Church you need to be part of the MWOL'* would lead to a number of people saying, "oh ok then" both to joining and to ceasing to be members. A membership linked approach would not form a community called by God. I believe those who choose to join a MWOL need to make a conscious choice to do so, to be called by God into a particular way of discipleship for the renewal of the Church and growth of God's Kingdom. A further question would be whether you could be part of the MWOL without being a member of the MCB.

I am aware that this might seem like a suggestion that creates two categories of membership within a local church but I do not think this would be the case. In most Methodist Churches there are those who are part of house-groups and those who are not, those who are part of the morning congregation or the evening congregation - they are all still part of the local church expressing their discipleship in different ways. Those who choose to be part of a MWOL would be following a call to be part of the church community in a particular way as others choose to be involved in different ways. I think what holds these different ways of engaging with the church together is membership, of the Methodist Church and the church in this place, which should rightly continue to be shaped around *'Our Calling'*.

I believe by understanding the MWOL as something disciples are called into for the renewed holiness of the church and the world within the life of the Methodist Church through the cultural change a renewal movement

²⁴ Elaine Heath, *Five Means of Grace: Experience God's Love the Wesleyan Way* (Abingdon Press: Nashville USA, 2017), p. 55.

²⁵ Brother Victor-Antoine D'Avila-Latourrette, *A Rhythm of Life: The Monastic Way* (Liguori Publications: Missouri USA, 2012), p. 2.

²⁶ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraph 16.

would be formed. Whilst not suggesting in any way that this in time would form a new church, it does have echoes of our Methodist history.

Finally, a choice to be part of the MWOL would recognise what Elaine Heath says in *'Missional. Monastic. Mainline'*:

*'We believe that new monasticism is one good answer to the question of how to live a Christian life. Not the only good answer, not the only true way, but one wonderful path that many follow to grow closer to God.'*²⁷

Distinctive 2: A place to grow in holiness

For me, distinctives two and three that I suggest go hand in hand, enabled by the first and supported by the last. They are the heartbeat of the Christian faith, growing in holiness as disciples and sharing the Good News of a holy life with Jesus through mission and evangelism.

A MWOL must have at its core encouraging, challenging and developing the spiritual disciplines of those who are called to the way of life so that they can grow in their own personal faith. It is this which will enable them to be missional disciples. As Methodists the means of grace are central to our spiritual disciplines and growing in holiness. To quote the conference discussion paper:

*'For John Wesley the 'means of grace' were channels whereby grace is conveyed. 'The chief of these are prayer whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him.'*²⁸

I was a little surprised in light of this quote that reading the scriptures was not explicitly mentioned in the possible MWOL, although it is present in the possible questions for small groups.

Elaine Heath suggests that there are five means of grace: scripture, prayer, fasting, Holy Communion and Christian conferring or conference.²⁹ Her comments on two of these show how important they are to missional discipleship.

*'Scripture was the water in which he [John Wesley] swam. It permeated his thoughts, words and actions.'*³⁰

*In Holy Communion we share, celebrate and are sent to be missional people for God.'*³¹

Making this distinctive a reality will mean helping each person involved with the MWOL to form patterns of engaging with the means of grace in order to learn more about God and grow deeper with God. This in itself is

²⁷ Heath & Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraph 19.

²⁹ Heath, *Five Means of Grace*, p. 55.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 18.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

a holy task, it is discipleship that enables a disciple to flourish in faith. As Helen Cameron puts it: *'To learn, therefore, and to be fully attentive to God, is to take up one's cross and die to the old self and old ways.'*³²

Distinctive 3: A way to share holiness

In ten years of Circuit ministry I have all too often heard the cry that we should sort out our discipleship programmes before we do mission. I am often told that *"if we cannot talk about God to each other inside the Church we will never be able to talk to those outside the Church."* In my opinion and experience this view, that we need to sort ourselves out before we can do mission, comes from an understanding that as disciples there will be a time when we 'get there'. That when we have 'got there' we can do mission. It does not reflect an understanding of ever-changing life-long discipleship. Getting the Church sorted first can also be a good reason to never getting around to doing mission. As Helen Cameron says, our learning is there to empower our witness or as she puts it *'experiments in witness'*³³:

*'Learning empowers our experiments in witness, our faithful improvisations. And the learning that we need to empower our witness will be particular and situated learning, communal learning, the learning of discipleship, learning the way of the cross and the provocative, reckless way of love.'*³⁴

A MWOL must hold hand-in-hand growing in discipleship and sharing holiness. In the reading I have done, most of the communities, by reaching out into the local community, in service, in sharing, in speaking out have observed three things:

1. growth in holiness of those involved.
2. everyone involved, serving and being served, has glimpsed God and seen the Kingdom grow in that place.
3. more people have become disciples of Jesus.

Those who are part of a MWOL must be involved in evangelism. This can be defined in so many ways, but is defined by Elaine Heath, as:

*'the holistic process of initiation of persons into the reign of God revealed in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and anchored in the church for the transformation and healing of the world.'*³⁵

I would suggest that each disciple involved with the MWOL should be both in missional service and evangelism. Missional service being for example helping in the food bank or being ready to speak out for injustice or contacting their MP. Being actively involved with evangelism might be talking to others about Jesus' love for them, taking part in a season of invitation, sharing with a friend or colleague in Alpha.

³² Cameron, *Living in the Gaze of God*, p. 62.

³³ Ibid, p. 66.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Heath & Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline*, p. 25.

How each community and how each disciple lives out their mission and evangelism will be different but individuals must be involved so that we fulfil our call to spread scriptural and social holiness.

Distinctive 4: A holiness community in which to be held accountable

The final distinctive that I propose for the MWOL is that those involved must be part of a small group which holds them accountable to the MWOL and supports and encourages them in living it out. This was central to the suggestions in the conference discussion paper.³⁶ Given the Methodist history of band, class, covenant discipleship, and other small group meetings I cannot see any way a MWOL can exist without a small group being one of its distinctives. Elaine Heath and Scott Duggins say of the small group:

*'The use of a covenant group for disciple formation is basic to Wesleyan Spirituality as well as most other Christian traditions, at least early in their history.'*³⁷

I think what is key to the small groups within a MWOL is that they are focussed on the living out of the MWOL. They need to be a place where trust is built up so that challenging questions can be asked and answered honestly. So many of our current small groups are focussed on learning, knowledge and/or prayer; all of which are good but the distinctive of a MWOL small group must be the accountability of and support to live faithfully to the way of life. They need to be places where we 'watch over' one another, as Ralph Waller notes, from as far back as Wesley's time, that task includes caring and discipline as well as Christian fellowship.³⁸

Whilst some or all of the elements of these four distinctives are present in other communities which follow a rule, rhythm or way of life I believe together they would offer a distinctive MWOL for the MCB.

How might a Methodist Way of Life work in practice?

In light of my suggestion that a MWOL is built on a foundation of holiness and has the four distinctives outlined above I now make some suggestions of how a MWOL could work in practice.

As mentioned earlier, whilst I am supportive of 'Reaffirming of *Our Calling*' I do not believe every aspect of connexional life needs to be built around the four headings. I feel a MWOL is one of the areas that should reflect '*Our Calling*' but not be based around the four headings. My reasons for this are:

1. the four headings break up aspects of growing in holiness across the four headings.
2. they do not recognise that some of our growth in holiness comes on our own and some in fellowship with others .
3. they separate the growing in holiness and sharing holiness rather than seeking to hold them together.

³⁶ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraphs 18-21.

³⁷ Heath & Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline*, p. 68.

³⁸ Ralph Waller, *John Wesley: A Personal Portrait* (SPCK: London UK, 2003), p. 53.

Whilst acknowledging that what was offered in the conference discussion paper³⁹ was an early suggestion, my overall feeling is that it is overly prescriptive. I note that since writing the first draft of this reflection, I have had a very helpful conversation with The Revd Roger Walton, who had written the suggestions about a MWOL which were included in the conference paper. Roger noted that he saw the suggestion in the paper as a ‘starter for ten’ which groups could use as they begin a journey together and then over time develop their own way of life. My concern with every group having their own way of life is that we would lose any sense of commonality between groups which would not reflect our connexional nature as a church.

Many of the ways of life that define patterns of prayer, worship and mission, come from small communities or collections of small communities that people have been called to be part of for a period of time - sometimes long, sometimes short. What we seek to find in a MWOL is something which can be used by the whole Connexion, something which both a lifelong Christian can share in and a new Christian can be nurtured in. **I believe therefore a MWOL needs to have both *commonality and flexibility*, not least so that the MWOL can be about both growing in holiness (discipleship) and sharing holiness (mission and evangelism). Commonality and flexibility will also ensure the MWOL is open to those new to faith or exploring faith as well as those who have been disciples for a number of years.** Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker remind us that the bands and classes of early Methodism were not just about discipleship:

‘While people often first encountered Methodism through a preaching service, they were evangelised in the class and band meetings, in relationship with members of the community.’⁴⁰

‘These small groups [bands and classes] were so important to the revival that John [Wesley] committed never to preach where he could not immediately enfold someone who responded into a class. ‘I am more convinced’ he wrote early in his ministry, ‘that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place shall be half awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow’. The classes and bands were the instruments through which God worked to turn sinners into saints, and by which a communal witness to God’s intention for humanity (God’s will and kingdom) was manifested.’⁴¹

I have noticed that those communities or congregations that have a ‘rule of life’ seem to have something short that inspires its members in forming their Christian life but does not direct the specifics, for example the Northumbria Community’s ‘*availability and vulnerability*’⁴². Those communities that have a way or rhythm of life tend to offer something more specific and quantifiable often for a smaller number of people or where there is a specific gathering point or mother house for the whole community, for example, the New Day community that Elaine Heath is part of.⁴³ In my reading and research, I was particularly struck by the way that an individual’s

³⁹ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraphs 17-20.

⁴⁰ Heath & Kisker, *Longing for Spring*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 34.

⁴² <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/our-rule-of-life/>

⁴³ Heath & Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline*, p. 69.

rule of life for those who are part of the Franciscan Third Order is drawn up by each individual member with their spiritual director under nine common headings.⁴⁴

I would therefore suggest that the MWOL could be made up of a common Methodist Rule of Life (MROL) which is then lived out through individually and locally discerned MWOL which all have a common framework. This would enable the MWOL to be both connexional and contextual to place and people.

The MROL would be short and reflect the foundations of holiness identified above. For example but by no means the finished article:

Methodists commit together to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ by seeking to grow in holiness, to spreading scriptural and social holiness throughout the world, to inviting others to share in discovering God's love.

The MWOL would then be a common framework under three headings which individuals would shape for themselves with their small group and possibly alongside a Spiritual Director. These would be reviewed and recommitted to annually, maybe on a small group retreat day. The common framework would have a series of questions under each heading which would help people to shape their own MWOL. One of the constraints of the initial suggestion, in the conference paper,⁴⁵ is that in order to be short and concise it is not able to be broad. By working within a framework, the framework can have a greater number of questions which each individual can choose a number from, maybe 3-5 under each heading, to include in their current personal MWOL. Commonality with those other members of an individual's small group and or local church would be achieved by the group and/or local church agreeing which questions from the framework will make up an individual's personal MWOL this year/season. Within the context of the annual covenant service those who have been called to the MWOL and renewed their personal MWOL could commit afresh to it.

This framework approach would allow commonality under the MROL, similarity with the local small group and flexibility for each individual. Most importantly it would allow for each MWOL to be tailored to the point at which an individual is on their journey with God. For example, the current suggestion of '*We will pray daily*'⁴⁶ may be helpful for someone who has been a Christian a long time and seeking to deepen their faith, for a new explorer or someone who has always struggled with prayer it may seem simply unachievable and off-putting. However, the question '*How will you commit to praying regularly?*' would allow different members of the group to commit in a way that will help them to grow in holiness.

⁴⁴ <https://tssf.org.uk/about-the-third-order/the-rule-of-the-third-order/>.

⁴⁵ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraph 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

The framework and some suggested questions might look like this:

Methodist Way of Life Framework	
Headings	Suggested Questions. This year/season:
Growing in holiness as a disciple of Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you pray regularly, what pattern will your prayer life take? • How will you read and meditate on the Scriptures? • What books/parts of the Bible is God calling you to at the moment? • How will you look and listen for God? • Will you fast? If yes, what, when and how often? • Will you take a personal retreat? • Would meeting with a Spiritual Director help your walk with God in this? If yes, who, when and how often will you meet? • Is there any personal study you are called to do to learn more of God and faith? • How can you live more faithfully as a Christian disciple with your family and friends? • How are you called to give/use your time, money and resources to God?
Growing in holiness with other disciples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which church congregation will you commit to being your base congregation? • How often will you commit to be present in corporate worship? • How often will you commit to be present in corporate worship in your base congregation? • How regularly will you commit to receive Holy Communion? • How can your church and small group help you to use/discern/grow in your spiritual gifts? • Which small group(s) will you be part of? • What time will you make to pray with others? • How will you work with others to care for God's creation? • Who are you called to care for? How will you do that? • How might you practice hospitality and generosity? • How will you hold a good balance between God, church, work, family, recreation?
Growing in holiness through mission and evangelism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you called to share the Good News of Jesus? • How will you witness to the Good News of Jesus? • How can you share your faith at work/school/socially/with your neighbour? • Who might you be called to serve in your local community this? • What ministries are you called to serve in? • Are there particular people God is calling you to pray for and/or to talk about your faith with and invite to follow Jesus at the moment? • Are there particular people God is calling you to invite to a Christian activity in the coming months? • What evangelism activities can you be part of with your small group or church? • Is there a mission trip/event/activity taking place that you can be involved with? • What injustice, if any, has God put on your heart? How are you called to respond to this? • Is God calling you to start a new venture?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What service activity might you share in with your small group?
What support do you need from your small group or local church to enable you to live out your way of life?	
Which areas of your way of life do you most need to be held accountable for in your small group?	

NB: When looking at the Methodist Chapel House, Bath website⁴⁷ I noticed they have added their rule of life to the page. Their rule of life has three headings, Open to God, Open to others, Open to the world. These are essentially the same headings as I have offered here. I note this to recognise another Methodist community has been led by God to the same place I have when considering a rule of life for a Methodist context.

The MWOL framework and in particular the last two questions will help to form the structure of the small groups that hold individuals accountable and support them to grow as missional disciples. Being part of these groups is essential to sharing in the MROL and MWOL, as the conference report notes:

‘Living a Methodist Way of Life is clearly not something that is to be done in isolation. As we offer all the opportunity to increase their accountable living as disciples of Christ we want to be able to offer each other the opportunity to be a people who seek to be nurtured and supported as we go deeper.’⁴⁸

Groups that support those living under a way/rule of life are given different names in different places. I am not sure what they are called is important although I think ‘Covenant Groups’ or ‘Methodist Way of Life Groups’ are different names to those commonly used in the MCB and reflect the covenant nature of a way/rule of life. More important is the structure and leadership of the groups. Crucially important is that those who lead groups are supported in creating and leading a format which will enable members to share, grow and be held accountable to God for their missional discipleship. Elaine Heath suggests:

‘There are three essential elements of small groups that foster genuine discipleship, or, in Wesley’s language, that proactive Christian conferring. These are the following:

- 1. The group is gathered in the name of Jesus, as described above with regard to Matthew 18:20.*
- 2. The practices of the group foster deep spiritual friendships that lead to growth in personal and corporate holiness and genuine community.*
- 3. The group is engaged in missional ministry beyond itself, thus it is kenotic (a Greek word that means ‘self giving’).’⁴⁹*

⁴⁷ <https://www.nexusbath.org.uk/chapelhousecommunity.htm>

⁴⁸ *Reaffirming Our Calling*, a discussion paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference, paragraph 18.

⁴⁹ Heath, *Five Means of Grace*, p.56.

I agree with Elaine Heath that it is important that the groups are involved together in discipleship, mission and evangelism so that the accountability for the MWOL is not separated from the action that an individual commits to.

It may be that different meetings of the group need different formats, for example, over a number of gatherings a small group could plan to share in a series of questions about how people are living out their MWOL, study a common area where people seek to grow and develop, prayer walk their local area together, study Scripture together, share in an Alpha or Compass Course, support a local community centre. It could be appropriate to do some of these more often than others or for a number of weeks in a particular season. If the questions which are going to be answered for a particular year in an individual's MWOL are agreed together as a small group this should make the pattern of group meetings easier to identify.

The size of a group needs to be thought about carefully, I think some people (myself included) might lean towards a small group of 2 or 3 to hold them accountable, however, I am not sure that such a small group has the best capacity to be missional together. A very small group also has the potential to be very close in terms of accountability but difficult for a new believer or explorer who has been touched by the group's mission and evangelism to join. On reflection I think groups of 6-10 would work well.

Like the framework each group needs to have commonality and flexibility to best enable those in the group to grow in holiness, develop as missional disciples and share the Good News.

Local churches who wish to embrace the MWOL will need to ensure that encouraging people into the MWOL, providing small groups and training people is at the heart of their growth (mission) plan. It will need to be one of the ways or the key way that church members, community role members and those who are new to church are disciplined.

A suggested way to embed the MWOL would be for one small group to model it for 6 to 12 months to see how it works in that particular context. Within each context there would need to be an openness to review the implementation of the MWOL. Many new monastic communities have a novitiate process and I think this is something to be reflected on further as the MWOL develops. As a way to be missional disciples the MWOL will need to be spoken of often with regular invitations to participate. By modelling how to be part of the MWOL and regularly inviting people to participate any suggestions that those who follow the MWOL are the '*holy club*' should hopefully be avoided.

I believe that the approach of having a connexional MROL which feeds into a local and individually shaped MWOL has much greater possibility for growing in holiness for local congregations than a 'one shape fits all' which is agreed by The Methodist Conference.

What next? What might God do with a MWOL?

Having now written these reflections I have realised just how many thoughts I have had from the reading and thinking I have done during sabbatical.

On consideration of these sabbatical thoughts and reflections I continue to believe that the development of the MROL and MWOL framework is a key step forward for the Methodist Church as it is 'Reaffirming *Our Calling*', as it seeks to help existing members to be faithful disciples of Christ and to share the Good News of Jesus with all the world. I believe that to shape the MWOL in the call to holiness roots it in the Methodist tradition but more importantly ensures it is about both discipleship and evangelism, growing missional disciples 'for just such a time as this.'⁵⁰

Local congregations who offer this model of discipleship will, I believe, open themselves up afresh to God's will and God's direction by enabling missional disciples to be shaped, focussed and led into mission and evangelism in a new way. In doing so these congregations will experience the cultural change that is needed within the MCB. This refocussing and openness to God's Spirit will enable the church to follow God's leading to new places where the Good News of Jesus Christ can be shared and the holiness of God's kingdom can grow and flourish.

I hope in sharing these reflections on my sabbatical blog, with colleagues and those working on the MWOL, I offer something helpful to the conversation on developing a MWOL. I look forward to receiving comments or suggestions of similar or other perspectives to read and reflect on. As I return from sabbatical to circuit life I remain open to God as to where locally I may be able to encourage and explore a MWOL and where I might be able to trial these ideas with others who want to grow with God to be more faithful missional disciples of Jesus Christ.

⁵⁰ Esther 4:14

Appendix 1

Extract from Reaffirming *Our Calling*: the future call of the Methodist Church Discussion Paper to the 2018 Methodist Conference

OUR CALLING: A METHODIST WAY OF LIFE

16. As this work has developed a constant question has been how any 'culture change' in the Connexion will be accomplished; the view is that this will not be achieved solely through a Connexional focus on reaffirming Our Calling. There is a concern that no amount of Connexional reflection will enable local churches and the Methodist people to take bold and sometime hard decisions about their future. A constant refrain is about the 'tiredness' of the Methodist people and the challenge of engaging with new ideas or responding to the gospel in a new way. With this in mind work, begun in a number of places, has come together to develop a Methodist Way of Life which is focused around *Our Calling*. Only by each follower of Christ being continually transformed in the love of Christ will the Church be able to live as a faithful, joyful and committed community. For the early Methodists a set of rules were in place not to be restrictive, but to be life giving. Not to distract from joyful living, but to enable faithful attention to the activity of God in the heart and in the world. By linking membership with a Methodist Way of life we offer the opportunity for membership to be understood again as part of a deeper commitment to Christ and an expression of our desire to live in a connexional way with one another. It moves membership away from being solely about property upkeep or financial giving and stresses the importance and the joy of mutual accountability and journeying together.

17. The main areas of a Methodist Way of Life could include the following:

As far as we are able:

WORSHIP

- We will pray daily
- We will worship regularly
- We will look and listen for God each day

LEARNING AND CARING

- We will seek to learn more of God and God's world
- We will practise friendship and care for others and for ourselves
- We will honour creation and tend the environment
- We will practise hospitality and generosity

SERVICE

- We will be good neighbours to those in need
- We will challenge injustice
- We will seek the common good

EVANGELISM

- We will witness to the love of God in Jesus
- We will speak of the faith to others
- We will help each other be better disciples

18. Living a Methodist Way of Life is clearly not something that is to be done in isolation. As we offer all the opportunity to increase their accountable living as disciples of Christ we want to be able to offer each other the opportunity to be a people who seek to be nurtured and supported as we go deeper. In our history we know that the role of the class meeting was a key attractational feature for early Methodists. Church growth in our time remains connected to the presence of accountable small groups in the life of larger worshipping communities, and more often than not this is not offered as a choice but as the expectation of fruitful living. Living a Methodist Way of Life needs to offer that challenge and support to each and every one of us as we seek to fulfil our calling as Methodists in our current contexts.
19. For John Wesley the 'means of grace' were channels whereby grace is conveyed. 'The chief of these are prayer whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him.'
20. Some outline questions for small groups may look like this:

WORSHIP

- What is the pattern of your prayer life?
- How easy or hard do you find it?
- What has recently spoken to you in worship or Bible study?
- When has God been close to you? Has God felt distant?

LEARNING AND CARING

- How and what are you learning at the moment?
- Who or what has God given you to care for?
- How have you practiced generosity and hospitality since we last met?

SERVICE

- How are you serving your neighbours?
- What issues of justice are you involved in? Are there any you need to take up?
- How can we support you in your commitments?

EVANGELISM

- How have you witnessed to God's love?
- What opportunities have there been to share your faith since we last met?
- Are there any particular people you should pray for or invite to consider Christian Faith?

21. In the way that many recall the production of resources to help Circuits and churches to think through *Our Calling* at its launch, work would be carried out to offer a suite of resources to help Methodists commit to this Way of Life.

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All Biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.