



As my active ministry draws rapidly to a close I have recently been reflecting on the various changes which have taken place over the past 38 years of my ministry and which have been part of my experience as a Methodist minister. Changes within the Methodist Church and within the wider Church of Christ. You may recall some of them yourself.

I was still a student when, in 1969, the Anglican/Methodist scheme for Unity was voted on at the Methodist Conference and the General Synod of the Church of England. Hopes were high, particularly among the young, that we would have a United Church to build the future upon. It was not to be. And in retrospect I think the Holy Spirit got it right. What saddens me though is that we are not really so much further on now in terms of a unity which recognises ministry and members, as we were then.

When we arrived in Lincolnshire in 1972 after serving in Belize, Central America, we moved into, like all other Methodist ministers at that time, an already furnished manse. A year later things changed dramatically and ministers and their families became responsibly for all manse furniture. This was a welcome change. For some ministers manse furniture left a lot to be desired but with the change came the element of choice and the chance to put together a home of one's own choosing.

I remember being at the Methodist Conference in 1975 when women were first accepted as presbyters. What a momentous occasion. Why had it taken so long? Their presence within the ranks of ordained ministers has brought a whole new dimension to ministry within the Methodist Church. Without them the ministry of the church was, and would still be, incomplete and the poorer.

That same year the Methodist Church 'restructured.' Instead of Departments we now had Divisions, instead of Quarterly Meetings we now had Circuit Meetings, instead of Leaders and Trustees Meetings we now had Church Councils, and instead of Societies we now had local Churches. There was, of course, more to the changes than the change of names, but at the time the Church was at least keeping in line with Local Authorities and Health Authorities.

Various changes have taken place over the past 38 years in the area of worship. And rightly so, worship always needs to be on the move. In 1975 the Book of Offices was superseded by the Methodist Service Book, which itself was superseded in 1999 by the present Methodist Worship Book. In between, in 1983, we had what was then a new hymn book – Hymns and Psalms. I believe each change as been for the better as the church has sought to make its liturgy and worship expressive of the times in which we live, and a living vehicle of God's grace today.

There have been other changes, as there always will be, which have taken place during the time of my ministry, not least the different places where we have lived and worked. Tropical Belize – Rural Caistor, Lincolnshire – Inner city of Leeds – Suburban Coulsdon – Town Centre Bromley. And what a privilege it has been to work in such contrasting situations.

While so much has changed during the time of my ministry the one absolute constant has always been the love of God and my experience of that love through his loving and lovely people. And so I shall, 'thank him for all that is past, and trust him for all that's to come.'

The Lord be with you.

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COMMON GROUND

In this edition John Bown writes our leading article. It also appears in the magazines of Bromley Methodist Church & Bromley URC