**The God We Worship and Witness**

***Equipping Methodists for Developing Proper Confidence and Making a Public Appeal***

We continue to share the nation’s concern about the unprecedented and devastating pandemic caused by an invisible virus. Losses, lockdowns and restrictions along with uncertainty about the future continue to threaten people. More than ever before the whole world feels vulnerable. At the same time, the pandemic has exposed opposite extremes in people’s attitude and behaviour. For example, on the one hand, we have witnessed those greedy and selfish panic buyers and hoarders when scarcity of provisions struck the markets. On the other hand, there are people who work sacrificially in the frontline of health and social care at great risk. The volunteering service in local areas, particularly for the elderly, is commendable. The government, like other governments across the world, encourages people, supports the needy with finance, etc., and promotes testing and vaccination.

While struggling to tackle the pandemic, the nation has had to deal with crimes such as domestic violence, racial hostility, murderous rape cases, etc. These are not new, but either their prevalence has increased or attention to them has increased. In response there has been the usual tendency to try to solve the problems by increasing budgets, financial grants, security, streetlights, cameras, and so on. These are not negligible measures and may be necessary ones, particularly when properly planned and implemented. The question is whether they are sufficient by themselves. We have begun to hear the voices of reputed scientists, natural historians, environmentalists and social thinkers saying that a new awareness, new orientation of life and new lifestyle are indispensable. The question is: where do we find the resources for re-kindling the moral consciousness of our nation which has long held values to which historical institutions of spirituality have contributed?

The pandemic and the struggle to find out its origin and tackle it have exposed the growing mistrust between the superpowers to the detriment of the poor nations. The government’s recent decision to increase the budget for defence and safety and reduce the budget for international aid is alarming. Are espionage, organised intelligence, secret agencies and biased propaganda about one another going to ensure safety and security? As has been observed by some, we have peace only when there is peace between nations, and no one is safe until everyone is safe. More than protocols, we need to strive for transparency and establish partnerships.

Internally, despite well prepared protection measures, no one seems to feel more and more safe and secure. Also, our well-cherished freedoms and privacy are challenged by different forces, especially the manipulative media, for commercial gains. We need a serene atmosphere to think and decide.

In spite of systematic and costly measures in place, the reported abuse in schools and prisons has shocked not only the leaders and officials but also the common people. Can we bring them into our celebrated positivity ring?

It is evident that mental illness, particularly among the youth, has been increasing. This is threatening for the healthy future of the nation. From experience and research, it is established that more than piles of drugs, stable and loving support systems need to be in place. It is also pointed out that a sense of hope for the future helps the victims of mental illness greatly.

It is true that the British enjoy relative affluence, yet there is no room to be proud and complacent. Some historians and action groups point out that the coverage of the history of Britain’s slave trade and colonial rule is inadequate in the school curriculum. While acknowledging the positive side effects of the trade and rule, there are renewed voices for substantial reparation. At the same time there is growing inequality in the country. Recently the food banks have been over-stretched. When Britain stands within the five world economies, do we have to have this situation, it is asked.

Do religious faiths, and the Christian faith as we Methodists have experienced and practised it in particular, have anything to contribute to this? We have no hesitation in observing that this nation has increasingly marginalised God or pushed God into oblivion. Of course, there may be good reasons for this, including the divisions, backward thinking, introversion and unintelligibility of religion that hamper the ability to realise or communicate a pure and perfect secular vision and practice. Whilst imperialistic, institutionally privileged and militantly ‘evangelistic’ strands of the Christian faith have to some extent waned in each of the Christian traditions, this has not happened uniformly. At the same time, there has been a growth of both intellectual, populist and antagonistically dogmatic atheism, as well as a swelling tide of passive-aggressive indifference.

Consequently, the churches are increasingly relegated to the position of charities who are supposed to complement and supplement the government’s welfare programmes. At the same time, they have either lost the opportunities and the ability to command an audience, or they have lost the self-confidence needed to do it. As a result, the churches mostly mention God only in preaching, singing and praying inside their buildings. There is hesitation, fear and lack of confidence in talking about God publicly, apart from in university lecture halls. We do acknowledge that over the centuries the name of God has been profaned or taken in vain. Horrible religious histories have been hallowed. We have contradicting visions of God, ranging from, for example, a dictating and destining monad to a loving, compassionate and participating parent. We recognise that sometimes in our attempts within Christian traditions and communities to be eirenic and inclusive, those of us who would wish to distance ourselves from the former have soft-pedalled on the latter and kept it to ourselves. But that is to let down our experience and understanding of God, our sense of ourselves, and ultimately our contribution to wider society. We have no interest to argue for the existence of God but humbly tell the decisive story of his revelation.

The latter view of God has transformed lives, communities and nations around the world. We believe that it has much to contribute to the righting and renewing of the world in these fractured times, if it can be offered in genuine and open dialogue. Though the Bible is a complex book, those who read it in today’s context with passion and sustained engagement, gain profound insights into human life, community and nation. The most dominant insights that seem relevant to our current, fractured times are that God who was revealed by the enigmatic name of Yahweh (Lord) liberated a community of slaves from an empire, made a covenant with them, and commanded them to build a community of justice, equality and peace. Their moral consciousness was informed by the promise of God’s presence and the twin commandments of loving God with all our being and loving our neighbours as ourselves. It was therefore not just a matter of personal morality and spirituality, but also of the organisation and values of communities, tribes and ultimately nations. The two were intimately connected. Living in the presence of God, as some psalmists did, revealed the profound truth that nothing is hidden from God. Some prophets reminded the community of the original covenant, challenging the excess of rulers and preaching justice, love and peace.

Jesus, a devout Jew, cherished the story and values of his religious tradition. But at the same time, he was critical of deviation and distortion. He approached his scripture by applying the principles of the rejection of fundamentalist reading (the literal meaning of favourable texts); revision of dated laws and customs; selection of liberative and reforming texts; and reflection on God’s successive doing of revival in history. Also, Jesus embodied the above covenant, demonstrating authentic love by giving priority to the marginalised, alienated and most vulnerable. He blessed the poor and declared that the kingdom of God belonged to them, challenging the rich. He found the worth and meaning of human life beyond the fulfilment of comfort and consumption. The significance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection continued in the formation of a band of disciples which expanded to be a church. However, despite serious efforts, we have not become the community that Jesus intended us to be. Nevertheless, we dare to affirm that the failure of the church, or of any other religion for that matter, does not invalidate the liberating visions and experiences of God. Therefore, bringing that God to the centre of our personal lives, to society and to the nation seems to be a sensible thing to think about at the present times and at all times.

We represent the people called Methodists. John Wesley, the founder of this movement, along with his hymn writer brother Charles Wesley, initiated a reawakening in 18th century Britain. They believed that personal transformation contributing to social transformation was possible. In spite of having to ride over long, bumpy roads and meeting opposition in some areas, in all humility, their movement caused change in lives in Britain and in societies in many other parts of the world. John Wesley’s final words were, ‘Best of all is God with us.’ The fundamental Methodist experience includes a variety of particular turning points – such as hearts warming, chains-falling-off and feeling a sense of fulfilment – but also more generally the continuous experience of sanctification, growing towards perfection of love and spreading scriptural holiness through the land. Even if these phrases are not familiar for today, it is not unreasonable to speak of life-changing experiences, personal, social and national. We believe that we are still on the way to achieving greater self-understanding, closer partnership and deeper effectiveness. While doing that, it is our joy to celebrate the new community initiated by Jesus, to be open to be empowered and led by the Holy Spirit and to commend humbly the God we worship and witness. We are open to engage further with any one in a conversation on the contents of this appeal. Of course, we are aware of the Methodist calling we have signed up to, and one part of it is calling for discipleship by sharing the love of God, his unconditional acceptance in Christ and a new life in the Spirit.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the place of our spirituality and our theology in our work for social justice?
2. What are the strengths and dangers of the church’s social engagement being seen primarily as a charity to complement and supplement the government’s welfare programmes?
3. When and how is it appropriate for Christians to talk of God outside a religious context?
4. Do you agree with Israel’s understanding of God as primarily seen as the loving, compassionate and participating parent?
5. Do you believe that view can be transformative of lives, communities and nations today? If so, how?
6. How do we cope with Christians who have a conflicting understanding of God from our own?
7. As we struggle as a church in decline and the pressures of lockdown, how do we share in our life as church communities liberating visions and experiences of God?
8. Is there anything specific from our Methodist tradition that we have to offer into the public space as we come out of the pandemic?

***Background of this Statement***

*Kenneth Howcroft gave a presentation on ‘Changing Patterns of Ministry Post-Pandemic’ in the Birmingham District Presbyteral Synod on 18 March 2021. He used the analogy of reconstruction with reference to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. While the presentation by Zoom was going on there was a comment on the ‘chat’ about E&N’s exclusion of the foreign wives. Israel Selvanayagam, a minister in South Worcestershire Circuit, picked up from that point and wrote a letter to Ken appreciating his presentation and pointing out solutions within the Bible for such crisis. He also pointed out that the reconstruction was in an environment of both hostility and support, and that they never failed to affirm publicly the God of their ancestors and the covenant renewal. He expressed his concern that ‘God’ is used nowadays only in preaching, singing and praying inside the building, but not in public. Ken replied with encouraging words to explore further. Ian Howarth, the District Chair, joined the conversation by sending his comments. Using the momentum, Israel drafted this paper and sent it to both of them. Their replies helped him to be aware of difficulties of using God language today. Further, one basic question was, whom is it addressing, and in what different stages are the concerns reflected, communicated and publicised. Ken suggested that first we try to get a core group for a conversation by Zoom or email, then circulate to ministers in the district and perhaps further afield before it goes public. He also has helpfully made some tweaks for the sake of clarity. In the light of the above process, Israel has revised the paper which of course is still open for further refinement. Also, it was suggested that Israel sent this to Donald Edie and Rachel Lampard who have been engaged in similar projects. Once he heard from the four, he made slight changes and forwarded it to the District Office for necessary action on 31.3.21.*