

# METHODIST CHURCH IN SCOTLAND



## District Local Preachers & Worship Leaders Weekend Conference 2-3 February 2013

### FACILITATORS

**Gerald Bostock** is a retired Methodist minister and stays in Perth. He served the Methodist church for many years including 8 years as a minister and Methodist University Chaplain in Edinburgh and 8 years as the Superintendent Minister in Aberdeen. His particular interests are Origen of Alexandria and the early Church, including the Celtic Church; and he has recently developed a concern for apologetics as an essential aspect of the mission of the Church in contemporary Britain.

**John Sawkins**, who works at Heriot-Watt University, is a local preacher in the Edinburgh and Forth Circuit. Through his work as a 'Breakout' (Sunday school) leader at the City of Edinburgh Methodist Church he has developed an interest in trying to come up with answers to the tricky questions posed by the young people!

**Ian Paget** is a qualified PE Teacher and has a degree in Pastoral Ministry. He has worked as a pastor in both Canada and Scotland and is currently working with Scripture Union in an Associate Worker Scheme called Colt which involves him working in schools in the Clackmannanshire Area. Ian is a gifted worship leader who has written many worship songs and has recorded two albums.

**Valerie Paget**, Ian's wife, is a qualified radiographer working in the Beetsen West of Scotland Cancer Centre. She leads worship with Ian and especially enjoys leading kid's worship. Valerie is also gifted in creative dance in worship.

### VENUE:

**Scottish Police College, Tulliallan Castle, Kincardine, FK10 4BE**

Culzean meeting rooms: one large conference and two breakout rooms; meals in the canteen; tea/coffee in lounge. Tantallon accommodation: full board in single/twin ensuite rooms.

### District Chair

Rev Lily Twist

### District Joint Secretary

Margaret Brown

Hilary Henderson

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### Angus, Dundee & Perth

Beryl Cowling

Heather Dean

Julya Walsh (Sat only)

Jenni Whittle

### Ayrshire & Renfrewshire

Angela Dobbins

### Central

Anne Baird

Brian Baker (Sat only)

Donald Caldwell

Heather Coutts (Days only)

Margaret Law

Anne Lochhead

Charles Richmond (Sat Only)

David Rogerson

Stuart Young

### Edinburgh & Forth

Brian Curtis

Allan Henderson (WL)

Jane Peers

Lyn Smalridge

### Glasgow

Amanda Bishop (WL)

Phil Haggis

Akinola Obafemi (Sat Only)

Clare Purfit

### Lanarkshire

George Swift

John Tonkin

Sheila Tonkin

### North of Scotland

Michael Dyer

Carol Reeves

## **Introduction & Opening Devotions**

By 1.30pm on **Saturday 2 February** everyone had arrived safely with the exception of Alix Thom who had sent apologies. Hilary Henderson welcomed all 30 in attendance representing seven circuits before giving some housekeeping notices.

Hilary led all in prayer, and her son Allan, on keyboard, accompanied the singing of 'O for a thousand tongues'. Margaret Brown gave a reflection on Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). Following the singing of 'Take this moment', Allan closed with a powerful visual and musical meditative prayer.

### **Apologetics? - It's Alpha Plus! Exploring what we believe and why**

**Rev Gerald Bostock** was welcomed and introduced. Gerald offered apologies for **John Sawkins** who was unable to be present owing to the recent death of his father and Gerald asked that we hold John and his family in our prayers. Gerald then introduced the theme for the weekend.

As local preachers and worship leaders, how do we think about and talk about our faith and make the case for Christianity where we live and work. What questions do people ask? Why do we find it hard to answer them and why should we try? How do we put theory into practice and how can this equip us better for mission?

#### **Session 1 - What is being asked of us?**

##### **a) What do we mean by 'apologetics'? (Talk)**

Gerald defined 'Apologetics' as being a 'reasoned intellectual defence of the faith to an unbelieving world'. Previously faith in a god was unquestioned. In recent decades however things have changed drastically, serving to undermine the faith of many. There is a general decline in the organised church. How do we respond and adapt to the changes? Traditional methods are not working.

An emotional appeal to the heart may have worked in the past but is no longer sufficient as it does not make use of both the mind and the heart. Nor is it useful to hold to a dogmatic approach to religion as this has very limited value especially as we no longer live in village communities dominated by the Church but in cosmopolitan cultures where people think for themselves. People now live in a DIY culture where they want to experience and find out things for themselves.

Gerald thought it sad that the Methodist Church chose to drop the words 'militant' and 'triumphant' from its hymnbooks as these are very much how the Church ought to be expressing itself. Idolatry is very much a way of life with things such as money; greed; celebrities; easy sex; family breakups; individualism etc. dominating society. These false idols are changing the fabric and thinking of society. There is a need for us to attack these worldly illusions; to be militant and triumphant; joyful and confident; to stop and listen to the angels saying "Fear not". Many church people are fearful and unable to express their faith courageously.

##### **b) So what are the questions? (Groups)**

Two breakout rooms had been made available along with the main conference room and so at this point we were able to split into 3 smaller groups.

When we regrouped Gerald led asked for feedback and these were added to a flipchart.

### **c) What are the biggest questions? (Flipchart notes)**

- If God is a God of love – how do bad things happen?
- What difference does religion make?
- What will it benefit me?
- What's the point of religion?
- Why do I need Jesus in my life when I'm doing ok without him?
- People have gods of their own – not necessarily divine!
- What is God (god?) for you?
- How on earth can you believe in the virgin birth?
- Evolution does not discount God!
- Believing in God does not discount evolution and creationism!
- Why is the church so intolerant?
- If you can't agree amongst yourselves why should I?
- Why do I have to change if Jesus loves me?
- Is it possible there may not be a question?
- Are churches not just organisations of power?

### **Session 2 – Why is it hard but worth it?**

#### **a) The problem and the barriers to faith (talk)**

The apologetic task is hard work and we need to fully understand the issues before we can answer the questions. People tend to cover up with more words in order to hide their lack of understanding.

Jesus always used simple language and never avoided the profound questions and issues. The 12 year old Jesus displayed an enquiring mind and a listening spirit. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of asking, seeking and knocking and he never told others what to do without doing it himself. If our language is difficult and obscure we fail in our mission to bring the good news.

How do we remove the barriers and blockages to faith? What are they? There are theological and social barriers which we need to remove as necessary for our spiritual as our physical health. Natural regeneration is helped by our attitude and openness. Trust in God and wonder in his creation should be as natural as breathing. We have lost that natural feeling towards God. Gerald gave three reasons for blockages:

1. **The failure to recognise the problem.** Management never wants to hear about problems. Many people are confused about faith and Jesus. Even unbelievers believe in life after death. Uncertainty and confusion causes lack of confidence.
2. **The danger of inadequate, bad or poor theology.** This may be a matter of language, confusion about what we mean when we use doctrinal/theological language. Darwin has been sold by others as an atheist but he wasn't.
3. **The social & organisational.** Human nature blockages brought about by pride, fear and vanity cause division.

#### **b) The barriers we have experienced (groups)**

Back into our three groups to discuss our experiences - some bullet points from one group:

- lack of Bible study small class meetings
- failure to read the Bible regularly
- loss of that spirit which helped us to speak about our faith

- authoritative leadership which deters people in the pew from discussing their faith
- communion still a barrier to some – need a better understanding of our rituals
- Lord’s Prayer can be a stumbling block, especially to new or returning members
- invisible churches, inaccessible, lack of parking
- communication

### **c) The barriers and how to remove them (open discussion)**

Unfortunately there was not enough time for open discussion.

### **Business meeting**

After a short break and a prayer, Hilary introduced the business.

**1) Future Venue:** Tulliallan had the benefit of single ensuite rooms (many did not wish to share). Problems with the heavy fire doors and distance between meeting rooms and canteen and public travel for those without cars. Other suggestions were **Carronvale House** in Larbert costing similar to Tulliallan (£68 includes function rooms); however it was mainly shared accommodation – singles only with supplements. **Hotels** offer bed, breakfast & evening meal circa £35 including function rooms. Hilary and Margaret agreed to assess their viability and email details. In the meantime, they would make a temporary booking of Tulliallan for next year.

**2) Next years’ programmes:** Suggestions were offered for speakers – Rev Jim Jones, Rev Martyn Atkins, Rev Steve Wild, Rev Phil Meadows and Claire Benton-Evans (All Age Worship). Hilary and Margaret would approach them. There was a suggestion for an earlier start to leave more free-time, but others were happy with the present programme and felt there was plenty free time before and after meals.

**3) Any other business:** Phil Haggis gave an update on the One Circuit situation and circulated a paper. The One Circuit Group (OCG) had met with Superintendents to find out individual circuit needs. There has been a rewording to the proposal to Synod – “This circuit accepts Synod’s proposal that 8 Circuits become one.” Further reports have gone out to all circuits and church councils. If majority approves at Synod then we can move forward, otherwise will need to relook. Supers will be meeting with circuit stewards to help in the restructure.

Phil was thanked for his input and the meeting closed in time for dinner at 6pm.

### **Evening Session & Prayers**

The evening session was led by **Ian & Val Paget** who had both taken time out from their busy schedules to share their gifts and music and dance. Ian spoke about his calling to revitalise hymns with more contemporary music. A guitar player, Ian found it helpful to his personal faith and his ministry to rewrite music for well-known hymns as well as creating new ones. Val, his wife and Margaret Brown’s daughter, took a group away to learn how to express spiritual songs with movements. [Those who benefitted from this lesson were able to perform during the closing worship on Sunday.]

Following this very interesting and informative session all gathered in the lounge for chat and shared refreshments brought for the occasion.

## Sunday 3 February

**Holy Communion** - It has become a welcome custom that the Sunday of our weekends begins with a service of communion and an act of rededication. The **Revd Lily Twist**, Chair of the Methodist Synod in Scotland, arrived before 8am to preside over our devotions. She breakfasted with us before going on to lead worship at Tranent Methodist Church. After breakfast, Gerald engaged us once again in a further two sessions.

### Session 3 – Real life conversations

#### a) Questions in the pub (role play)

A drama presentation with Brenda (Margaret Law), Steve (Donnie Caldwell), and Andy (Brian Curtis) set us thinking about how people feel about religion. With Brenda keeping the glasses topped up, Steve sad and depressed at the death of his dear wife and Andy blowing his top at the slightest excuse, the conversation flowed. The trio expressed their opinions on spiritualism and the growth of spiritualist churches; the idea of group delusion; and how people seemed to see religion as a basic need. They spoke of ‘holy Christians’ who gave confusing signs to non-Christians, going into disapproving huddles and ‘nagging at you’. They voiced the opinions that religion merely confused things and life was perfectly fine without it; that some people were religious nutters and others were gullible and anyway religion is surely ‘past its sell by date’. Positively they did agree to that feeling of godly peace found in hill top experiences.

#### b) Answers from the Church? (more role play)

David Rogerson, Lyn Smalridge & Mike Dyer characterised a Humanist, a Spiritualist and a Christian respectively. In character, they outlined the basis of their belief and their view of life after death. Jenni Whittle, Heather Dean and Angela Dobbins were invited to put questions to them.

- According to David’s character, the Humanist stance is that they do not believe in life after death. For them this life is it, all there is and they don’t think about it at all. The Christian Church has made people fearful. For them life is a continual renewing process and to be lived to the full. He was not sure about hell.
- According to Lyn’s character, Spiritualism is a science. There is no such thing as death - just a moving on to a higher plane. They believe in God and see nature as an expression of God. He affirmed that individuals continue and that communication with the dead happens. Spiritualists hold to the Golden Rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Matt.7:12; Luke 6:31) The spiritual and physical laws of nature were affirmed and the belief that everyone is a medium and can all communicate, however some are born with a special gift of insight. When asked if he believed that it is all the work of the individual to reach salvation, that it is by works alone, Lyn agreed that there are different stages.
- According to Mike’s character, the central fact of Christian belief, though confusing to many people, is the experience of the resurrection. It was this which changed the ideas of the first disciples and caused people to think more deeply about Jesus. Jesus promised paradise to his followers and Christians believe in the resurrection of each individual. There are however many different views on the afterlife. Michael spoke of Thomas having to see and touch Jesus to believe. Jesus spoke of the need to not touch Him as he still had to move on. Jesus could pass through doors and walls. Paul saw Jesus in a beam of light and also explained his understanding of how resurrection changes us. Some people believe our bodies stay in the ground and we get a new body. There are many different Christian viewpoints. Hell may be not being resurrected. Christians are called to be fit for heaven, where they will receive their reward for the life they have lived.

**Questions:** As Jenni, Heather and Angela posed questions and the following remarks were noted:

- Suggestion there was a spooky connection in Jesus coming through doors
- Spiritualist view is that people who are dead can be spoken to
- Christians get their assurance from Jesus and the Bible
- As do Spiritualists
- Spiritualists offer people comfort, helping them to move forward in their lives knowing about where and how their loved ones are; Humanists and Christians do not offer this kind of comfort
- Experience has convinced people that Christianity helps them knowing Jesus died for them
- Spiritualists do not feel the need for Jesus to die for their sins
- To a certain sense Christianity has common ground with Spiritualism, just what our basis is for believing in life after death may differ
- Christians believe different things about judgment. Origen believed that one should seek judgment and not avoid it. So the healing process begins. Some Christians believe otherwise.
- Humanists would answer that all this is speculation - we need to look to science. All life ends when we die.
- The Golden Rule is also the Humanists' position.
- Humans are the highest level of evolution.
- Spiritualists believe people evolve as they move into a higher plane.
- Is there a lower plane? Do we all just go higher?
- Eternity cannot be defined in our limits of time (human time). Time is simply a function of our limitation.

**c) Our response (open discussion)** David, Lyn and Mike came out of character and the following general remarks were noted:

- I would go to a Spiritualist as I can understand better what Lyn said than Mike. We need simple language to help us to relate better.
- During difficult times one person found comfort from a Spiritualist.
- A personal relationship with Jesus makes life real.
- Spiritualists offer practical help. TV/radio psychic mediums are mostly bogus.
- Other cultures have no problem believing in life after death and take it in their stride.
- We are not concerned enough in spiritual things. We don't think about or delve into our spiritual dimension, because we don't understand enough. It's just something that's 'over there'.
- Christianity holds a middle place between Spiritualist and Humanist and has something to offer both.
- Having attended a Humanist funeral of a child, I found that the family was offered no hope. Celebration of the life but nothing more. The family is still struggling to come to terms with their loss.
- Christ offers hope.
- Life after death is a new body and a continued relationship with God.
- I have attended several Humanist funerals and some seemed okay but with others confusion reigned.
- It can be hard to engage with Humanism – where does the dialogue come from?
- I have not been to a Humanist funeral but have had feedback which said it related better to those there than a church funeral.
- Here funerals are over very quickly whereas in Ghana funerals are taken more seriously.
- Yes I know of services being held all week in people's homes as a memorial before the funeral service.
- What do we understand by death? Why did this person die – medical reasons but not purely – family divisions also felt to be part of the reasons.

- There is an artificial culture which relegates death to a quick dispatch, invisible and held away from people's sight, swept under the carpet in our cultures. Whole experience of holding different views means we need to continue the discussions and find what in fact we do believe.

**The Edinburgh Course** : Gerald gave information on the Edinburgh Course, '**A course to explore what we believe and why**' which looks at God & Humanity; Jesus; Spirituality; The Church; and The Future asking 14 crucial questions and giving the possible answers. Anyone wishing to see the course material can obtain copies from Gerald.

## **Session 4 – The way forward**

### **a) Where stands Methodism (talk)**

Gerald asked 'Where are we coming from?' What are our assumptions and prejudices? As Methodists amongst others we need to 'consider the quarry from which we are hewn' (Isa 51:1) ie. John Wesley. We don't think a lot about John Wesley, socially or academically. He visited prisoners, miners of Bristol, faced down the mobs in England, and was capable of relating to all walks of life. He maintained high standards; wrote numerous tracts to educate the poor who couldn't afford books; and wrote essays to the educated. He displayed a combination of qualities which helped him to relate to all people.

Wesley had a strong emphasis on education believing that education was for all. He held the view that some theology was more trouble than it was worth. He was autonomous in character, holding to his core beliefs and a clear-sighted toleration towards views alien to his own. He held to the maxims 'think and let think'; 'agree to disagree'; and care not for 'all that does not point to Christ'. He had the assurance of being a child of God. The warmed heart and cool mind were seen by him as both important.

People want to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' and we need to help people to find out for themselves, guide them to the truth in Christ. While University Chaplain, Gerald witnessed the Christian Union in action, with good and bad results. Students often failed to continue after the first year because they were unable (not allowed) the freedom to question, discuss or debate. Fundamentalism or nothing was their given choice. Many chose nothing. It is no good when people are only offered one view.

Jesus died for us, that is a given, but we must ask the critical question 'why?'. There is always a need to be open to discussion. A Youth leader was asked in all sincerity by a young person 'why did Jesus die? Here was the opportunity to witness to this person but the leader didn't know how to respond as she had not formulated her own understanding. Scripture encourages us to 'always be prepared to give an answer for our Christian hope' (1 Pet 3:15).

### **b) How to achieve dialogue as well as dogma (groups)**

In groups of 2 and 3 we looked at the following

1. What are the essential questions? (cf. the 14 questions considered in The Edinburgh Course)
2. How do we change the perception that the pulpit is beyond debate? (query: are we sometimes imprisoned by the lectionary?)
3. Do small groups help us to draw out people's doubts and fears?
4. How can the Church 'go forth' and offer dialogue to unbelievers?
5. What material or training and consultation do we need?

### **c) Any ways forward? (open discussion)**

The session closed for lunch.

### **Closing worship**

Gerald led us in an act of closing worship before we all departed for home.

### **Further information**

- ❖ The contribution from each attendee was £30 for the whole weekend (including bed) or £5 per day. A subsidy equating to approx 50% of the actual cost is allocated from Scottish Methodist District Advance Fund.
- ❖ Tulliallan Castle is administered by the Scottish Police Services Authority, Elphinstone House, 65 West Regent Street, Glasgow, G2 2AF.

We hope that the above notes will help to refresh the minds of those who were at the weekend and go some way to informing all those who were not able to attend. May we take this opportunity to once again thank Gerald, Ian and Valerie for the contribution they made to this event and may God continue to bless us with such faithful witnesses.

Hilary Henderson & Margaret Brown

**District Joint LP/WL Secretary**