

## STAINED GLASS IN METHODIST CHURCHES

I was recently asked to write an article for the *Methodist Recorder* on this subject which prompted the beginnings of some research. The following is an initial summary note. I should love to hear from any members with experience of working in Methodist churches, with some details of what they have done, or indeed anyone with any other comments.



Joseph Nuttgens FMGP writes: These two windows in St Mark's, Bedford are almost the first windows, commissioned in 1983, to be made after I had started to work seriously as a stained glass artist in my Piggott's Hill studio. The theme was taken from St Mark's gospel - "The Seed is The Word". The seed forms a crescent shape which I used as a linking form between the two windows, the one being growth and the other dissemination. In fact, the main window faces south and, being mostly of transparent glass, is definitely a 'sun' window rather than a theme window. This is surely a good thing. I have since designed two more and am actually in the process of designing a fifth at the moment.

One would not regard the Methodist Church, the largest of the Nonconformist denominations in this country, as the repository of stained glass of excellence. In considering the truth of this issue, one could look at the wider sweep and take as one's sermon text the bitter statement by Reyntiens (Clarke, 1979) that 'it is not certain that the Nonconformist Churches in England understand visual art at all! There is a fascinating debate here which no doubt someone will explore. I am concerned, for the moment, just to consider one factor in this, which is why Methodist buildings are a blind spot in standard reference works on stained glass in this country, and whether there is anything of value in them.

Methodism of course has a relatively short history, starting in simple building in the late 18th century. The early Wesleyan aesthetic avoided decoration and promoted a worship emphasis on the Word and music. The typical focus in worship in the nineteenth century was the high pulpit with backdrop of an organ, sometimes with choir. More recent chapels frequently employ a blank wall with cross, lectern and communion table with decorative detail supplied by a wall hanging, banner or pulpit fall. Large stained glass windows as a focus at the 'east end' are relatively rare. Glass in chapels remains relatively restrained, often clear or tinted leaded grids with minimal design elements. The simplicity of these arrangements in small chapels has an attractiveness in itself. Despite the case to be made in this note that attitudes to stained glass are changing, it remains the case that where stained glass is introduced even today, it rarely dominates the architecture.

But there is stained glass in Methodist churches, indeed lots of it. In the halcyon days of the late nineteenth century when congregations multiplied and city missions reaped great harvests, chapels were having to be rebuilt. For many there was a desire to build on a grander, more confident scale than the earlier barn-like buildings, more in line with Anglican counterparts. Thus much stained glass was introduced between 1870 and 1910. At Newquay for example the new church has transepts with decorative art nouveau-inspired glass, and stained glass at east and west ends.

Much of the oldest glass in Methodist chapels is very poorly documented, though it seems to have been common practice to use

local firms more often than the major national operators. Morris glass dating from prior to the deaths of Morris and Burne-Jones is absent with one exception, probably partly for cost reasons. This is not to say that there are no victorian windows of acknowledged quality: there are for example Henry Holiday windows at Edgeworth Methodist Church, Bolton, and at Wesley's Chapel in the City of London.

The First World War provided further impetus through memorial windows. In the inter-war period Methodism did pick up on the Arts and Crafts movement. Graingers Lane Chapel, Cradley Heath has notable late Henry Payne windows of 1921-30 and at Byfleet there are good windows by the Smethwick firm of Camm, from 1939. Nora Yoxall and Elsie Whitford designed windows for Muswell Hill, which are now rearranged into a cruciform shape for the rebuilt church and are notable for containing a portrait of Donald (later Lord) Soper preaching in the open air. Yoxall and Whitford also designed an unusual Crucifixion panel for Holly Park, North London, in 1965.



The Second World War generated an increase in memorial windows. The firm of Abbot and Co of Lancaster made glass for at least 54 Methodist churches, of which 40 were produced between 1945-1960. In recent years Methodism has had positive encouragement in the use of the visual arts from what is now the Connexional Property Committee, and examples of excellent modern glass include windows by Gillian Rees Thomas at Trinity at Bowes, North London, Joseph Nuttgens at two churches in the North Bedford Church Partnership (Methodist/Anglican), Gerald Rickards at Queens Hall, Wigan, Adam Goodyear at Dalton St Paul, Huddersfield and Brian Clarke at Park St., Lytham St Annes.

Stained glass in Methodist churches is rarely dominant or triumphalist. Crucifixion and *Te Deum* subjects are untypical. Typically the medium fills a supplementary role, providing a restrained element of colour and content. Traditional subject matter centred on the life of Christ, parables and symbolic images. Favourite post First World War subjects were the *Light of the World* and *The Good Shepherd*, but when populist taste had receded symbolism seemed more adapted to the modern world, more original work started to appear and stained glass was often integrated into the architecture when churches were rebuilt.

One final word - the Methodist system of approval/consent is less prescriptive than the Anglican, and this has its pros and cons. There are interesting possibilities for new (and, it must be said, sometimes quirky) designers, but perhaps less expert advice on quality. All in all, the Methodist church is now much less deserving of the neglect it has suffered in stained glass circles.

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