

“In what ways can the present-day Methodist Church in Britain be described as ‘prophetic’ in the sense that John Hull uses the term?”

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Abstract

Is the present-day Methodist Church as prophetic as it could be or as it perceives itself to be? This paper finds that while there are traces of the prophetic church, more attention to the prophetic calling of the church is needed. In particular, greater attention to the inter-subjective witness to injustice, broader engagement with the complexities of truth and power, challenging injustice rather than focussing on relieving its effects and becoming less self-interested for the sake of justice. These conclusions are drawn out of a comparison between certain work being done by the Church compared with a developed ecclesial prophetic methodology. The methodology arises out of John Hull’s seminal work: *Towards a Prophetic Church*, and further draws on the experience of liberation “see-judge-act” reflection models, the Methodist Quadrilateral and John Paul Lederach’s work on Moral Imagination. The developed methodology locates prophetic action within the matrix of inter-subjective relationships in dialogue with scripture, reason and tradition while being curious of complex paradox, creative and risk taking.

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Introduction

Throughout his life, John Hull grew concerned about the impact of Modernity and a history of Western imperialism on the way the church understands and engages in mission. His concern culminated in his seminal work *Towards the Prophetic Church*¹ published a year before his death. The book poses a significant challenge for the church to repeal layers of modern and imperial thinking to be reinvigorated by the prophetic spirit found in the Hebrew scriptures and in the gospel accounts of Jesus. This approach enables the church to return from a more privatised realm to be able to point towards the Kingdom of God that is already within us, to rediscover God's paradise,² in the public square.

On the surface there is an expected synergy between Hull's thesis and the charisms of the Methodist Church in Britain (defined as the institution rooted geographically in Great Britain formed through the 1932 Deed of Union³ and governed by the Methodist Conference⁴). The Church self-identifies as a participant in the struggle for justice.⁵ Within the specific examples researched, comprising of Conference reports on poverty, climate change and the 2020 'Church at the Margins' strategy and the Network of Methodist Activists' *Open letter to the Methodist Church*, this paper concludes that there are traces of the prophetic church as Hull uses the term.

These specific examples could have a greater degree of congruence with Hull's development of the prophetic church if the following areas had been addressed: a greater use of the experience of people and communities living with injustice, broader acknowledgement of the complexity of what is truth and power, a move from being the reliever of the effects of injustice to challenge the sources of injustice and a greater self-disinterest for sake of prophetic action. In the case of the "Church at the Margins" strategy, a confusion between Kingdom focussed mission and church building mission requires resolution. This confusion was a significant concern for Hull in his critique⁶ of the Church of England's *Mission-shaped Church* report.⁷ While evangelisation is an integral missiological component, there needs to

¹ John M Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

² Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: Rediscovering Christianity's Forgotten Love for This Earth* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012). p.xv

³ It should be noted that this definition does not encompass the entirety of the Methodist tradition found in Great Britain. Not all Methodist aligned churches chose to be included in the 1932 union and some have left the British connexion since.

⁴ The Methodist Conference is the governing body of the Methodist Church in Britain and corporately offers oversight of the whole Church and is the final authority on the interpretation of the doctrine of the Methodist Church as defined in the Deed of Union. See *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2019). pp 214, 216 and 219

⁵ The Methodist Conference, *Called to Love and Praise* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999). para. 3.2.5

⁶ John M. Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006)

⁷ The Church of England, *Mission-shaped church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)

be greater clarity on the motivations behind the strategy. Finally, there are clear signs of a prophetic spirit within the Network of Methodist Activists' *Open Letter to the Methodist Church* which demonstrated the elements of the prophetic methodology developed in chapter 3.

Structure

Chapter 1 explores what Hull considers to be the underlying need to challenge the effects of Modernity and imperialism. Chapter 2 sets out the main characteristics of the prophetic witness from the Hebrew scriptures and the gospels. Chapter 3 develops a prophetic methodology out of Hull's concept of the prophetic church and drawing on Hull's premise that faith has to be contextual.⁸ This methodology draws on the contextual methodology of the base ecclesial communities of Latin America which is given clarity by the Methodist quadrilateral and John Paul Lederach's charisms of a moral (prophetic) imagination. Finally, chapter 4 compares this methodology with the specific examples within the present-day Methodist Church listed above.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study of the espoused missiology in defined areas that have been considered by the Methodist Conference and within the grass roots of the Methodist Church. Therefore, the scope is limited to drawing conclusions on what can be observed in the published narrative without extrapolating the conclusion to a wider understanding of the Methodist Church. Furthermore, this research is ethnographic in approach. I am a presbyter within the Methodist Church in Britain exercising a leadership role. I was also a voting member of the Methodist Conference in its meetings when the reports and statements considered in this paper were received and adopted. I am also a member of the grass roots movements considered here. That said, the critique that this piece of research has enabled has changed my opinion of those reports, statements and movements. Whereas I once thought them to be high quality examples of Methodist missiology, this research suggests significant ways that they could be improved.

The conclusions from this research are formed from limited though prominent areas of life of the Methodist Church and are therefore only indicative. The scope has been narrowed by the constraints of this paper and have been defined to be pertinent to the Church's broad socio-economic context. Further research into the inhabited theology of local churches would be a valuable extension of the current project. Further, the conditions caused by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and global Black Lives Matter demonstrations⁹ prevalent during the preparation of this paper suggest that the engagement of Hull's work with broader theological methodologies such as black liberation, feminist and womanist theologies would be beneficial for the church.

⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 241

⁹ Dan Sabbagh and Aamna Mohdin, 'George Floyd protests give fresh impetus to UK anti-racism campaign' *The Guardian*, 6 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/06/george-floyd-protests-uk-anti-racism-campaign> [last accessed 22 August 2020]

1 Why do we need the Prophetic Church?

Introduction

To understand Hull's desire for the prophetic church is to understand what, for some, may be a paradigm shift in our understanding and experience of God and how we encounter God through God's mission to the world. This chapter identifies Hull's central thesis and his rationale using his seminal work *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission*¹⁰ and his earlier works, notably, but not limited to: *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*¹¹ and *Mission Shaped Church: A Theological Response*.¹²

Stating the issue: why is the prophetic church important?

The central thesis of Hull's work is to reframe Christian mission from understanding the church to be the *outcome* of mission towards the church being the *agent* of God's mission, the *missio Dei*,¹³ that is, being agents of the Kingdom of God and being Kingdom-focussed.¹⁴ This places the responsibility on the church to be active in the world because, for Hull, the idea of the Kingdom of God is not a spiritualised private concern removed from human history, but a realisation of God's purposes for creation¹⁵ which includes the human disposition as an integral part of creation. Rather than a purely spiritual personal salvation, it is, Brock and Parker argue, the rediscovery of paradise, not in a post-death eternity but in the temporal history of the world.¹⁶ Throughout its history, Israel was conceived as the agent of reconciliation but Israel's self-understanding was to be the object of God's mission. This is repeated in the church today where the *missio Dei* has been replaced by ecclesiastical expansion and where the prophetic role of the church, that is to be a constant presence in the public life of the world, is lost.¹⁷

Using the term "agency" to describe this missionary movement is not without problem and is unresolved in Hull's work. It is not neutral nor necessarily a positive term and becomes toxic when agency is confused with power. An imperialistic reading of scripture, which is discussed below, is an example of where women and men have thought of themselves as "agents of God" but it can be argued that it was often a god of their own definition. Further, there is the question of who tells the story of agency and why and to whom.¹⁸ That said, the term will be used throughout this text with alertness to its difficulties.

¹⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*

¹¹ Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: SCM Press, 1985)

¹² Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response*

¹³ Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 209.

¹⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 209.

¹⁶ Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, p. xv.

¹⁷ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 219.

¹⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 160.

The need for this missiological shift is the distortion to biblical hermeneutics caused by a Christian imperialism and the condition of Modernity. For Hull, the ideological shifts of Modernity, which can chiefly be described as the privatisation of the individual, upon the biblical revelation of how we come to know God have resulted in a privatised inward search for God¹⁹ rather than seeking God through our relationship with the other. One is the purview of the soul, the other the body. By eisegesis, a Cartesian dualism between self and other has been used to read scripture²⁰ through the lens of the privatised self. Ultimately, the concept of mission adopted by the 21st century church is significantly different from what the early church may have understood and often seems to only pay superficial attention to being agents of the kingdom of God.

Despite Hull's insistence on Modernity being the reason for this dualism, the shift can be seen in the works of Martin Luther and Augustine before him. Both conceived of the world being against the church creating an exilic experience. In this landscape, salvation is begun in the life of the individual and is consummated only at the end of history.²¹ However, this oversimplifies Augustine's thesis who, argues Rowan Williams, was not disinterested in the public square in favour of privatised religion, but rather Augustine identified the locus of an ethic of justice in the individual's relationship with Christ.²² This "problem" can be traced back to the Hebrew prophets themselves. Walter Rauschenbusch notes that Jeremiah, when the nation of Israel was breaking up around him, turned towards inward piety. This was not, however, the triumph of an inward over an outward expression but was rather the product of the national condition under exile and was a privatised means to a social end – the restoration of Israel.²³ Even though Brueggemann uses the metaphor of exile to describe aspects of our twenty-first century condition,²⁴ it is hard to say that a twenty-first century North Atlantic experience of exile is similar to that of ancient Israel and so the exilic reasons towards privatisation may be called upon but are not entirely reliable in this case.

Despite this challenge, the effect of Modernity is still relevant. So too is the impact of British imperial history which used scripture, in the name of Christianity, to defend the imperialist expansionism of empire as the bible was interpreted through the lens of power. Britain claimed for itself the status of the chosen nation and the mission of Britain was to witness to the purposes of God through British imperialism. The relationship between other nations and their indigenous populations were seen through the lens of Israel and their heathen neighbours. Seventeenth century preachers found proof texts to justify what might now be seen as the brutality

¹⁹ Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*, p. 16.

²⁰ C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead* (West Conshohocken, Pa: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008). p.9

²¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 448.

²² Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 129.

²³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke up the Church* (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2007), p. 21
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=204789> [accessed 7 July 2020].

²⁴ See: Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

of expansionist policies. Troubling texts, such as Psalm 137 where God would take the idolatrous Babylonians and cast them against the stones, were used to justify expansionist policies.²⁵

Hull finds traces of this imperialistic hermeneutic in the hymnody and poetry of Isaac Watts, the seventeenth century priest who, argues Hull, attempts to justify the “chosenness of Britain” and “possessive individualism.”²⁶ Watts also delineated an inward and outward reality. Spirituality was to contend the sin and desires in the temporal era with the hope of the eternal other world. This sense of a privatized religion leads Watts to understand that the church has no need to criticise government policy which Hull assumes to be because Watts believed the government to be Christian and thus beyond criticism because of its belief in being the chosen state.²⁷

The consequence of these distortions is the human and ecological cost of perpetuating an unjust world – a primary concern of the Hebrew prophets. To move towards the prophetic church, Cartesian duality needs to be recognised and addressed.

Overcoming the Cartesian duality

The impact of Cartesian duality, which has arguably always existed but brought into focus in Modernity and imperialism, has developed the concept of Christian mission to become “church-shaped.” That is, the church has become the authority of a privatised and right relationship with God, caricatured as a “vertical relationship” and the role of the church is to recruit more people into such a relationship. This in turn inspires and motivates us to remember a responsibility to the world, the horizontal outworking of our faith in Christ. Social responsibility becomes an optional, but necessary, extra dimension which should never come at the expense of the more important vertical relationship with God.²⁸ This way of experiencing God puts God beyond the realised and earthly realm into a privatised and spiritualised concern which, for Hull, is the ideological framework of Modernity’s possessive individualism in which a person is thought to be the ‘owner’ of their own skills and owes nothing to society.²⁹ Hence, in Modernity’s view, we can operate in autonomy. We develop a “consuming ego” in which our primary concern is our relationship with God divorced from our responsibility for the other and in which the ethic for the other is infrequently considered.³⁰

The consuming ego veils a more biblical understanding of mission, argues Hull. Such mission is a kingdom-focussed mission in which the church becomes disinterested in itself and only interested in seeing the kingdom of God realised.³¹ This tension in Modernity forges a dichotomy between what Hull calls the “vertical”

²⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 104–6.

²⁶ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 125–28.

²⁷ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 132–35.

²⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 210.

²⁹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 218.

³⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 218.

³¹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 209.

and “horizontal” dimensions of faith and spirituality. For the church to become active in this kingdom-focussed mission requires the collapse of the separated vertical into the horizontal.

To explain this further, the vertical relationship describes a vertical transcendence of hierarchy between the earthly and spiritual.³² Theologian John Haught argues the word hierarchy is derived from *arche* meaning substance and *hier* being sacred. So, in hierarchy, all matter has a sacred origin. Haught would take issue with Hull’s development of a horizontal transcendence in which we experience transcendence when we are confronted with the otherness of another person. For Haught, this idea is oxymoronic as any suggestion of a horizontal dimension empties the very idea of transcendence which relies on a hierarchy to rise above the earthly into the spiritual. This, however, is a too rigid interpretation of what is a metaphorical understanding of transcendence. Goodenough, for example, takes a different approach arguing that a key attribute to any religious orientation is the ethic it elicits. Hence a horizontal relationship becomes transcendent by the ethics exposed in an encounter with otherness.³³ But still this is insufficient for Hull who argues that only through a horizontal transcendence can any experience of God be realised. This necessary collapse is made real through the incarnation of God in the form of Christ.³⁴

Hull extends this idea of transcendence into a future realm in which God draws us into the other which is beyond the immediate other before us. Otherness is not just seen in the person in front of us, but in their brother or sister and theirs and so on to the ends of the earth.³⁵

The movement of the vertical into the horizontal can be found in scripture which is the essence of the prophetic tradition. Hull uses two examples of paradox to explore the theme: the great commandment in Matthew’s gospel and the creation of humanity in Genesis.

First, the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer in Matthew 22.34-40. When questioned, Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”³⁶ This is the vertical relationship with God. Jesus then says the second is *like* it: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”³⁷ – the horizontal dimension. A superficial reading of the English translation can assume the precedence of the vertical over the horizontal. However, Hull argues that love of the transcendent is not ontologically the same as can be expressed in the love of the immediate other, but it is not necessarily greater. Later in Matthew’s gospel the writer describes the love of the transcendent being fulfilled in the love of the other which renders them as close to identical as they can be. Donald Hagner points out that in rabbinic practice the

³² Haught, John F. *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*. (Boulder, Colo.: West-view Press, 1999) in Ursula Goodenough, ‘Vertical and Horizontal Transcendence’, *Zygon*, 36.1 (2001), 21–31 (p. 25).

³³ Goodenough, ‘Vertical and Horizontal Transcendence’ p. 28.

³⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 210.

³⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 210.

³⁶ Matthew 22.37 [NRSV]

³⁷ Matthew 22.39 [NRSV]

common word between the commandments, *agapēseis*, makes the two commandments of “equal category.”³⁸ Therefore, the logic of this language means that the preference for the vertical has been merged with the horizontal: to love God you have to love neighbour. Interestingly Hagner makes what seems to be an incongruous conclusion: even though the language suggests they are tantamount to the same thing, he concludes that the vertical takes preference over the horizontal.³⁹

Secondly, a paradox is found in the Genesis creation myth. God made humanity in God’s own image yet we do not conclude that we all look like God. Rather, the image of God is found in the inter-subjectivity of human relationships. It is interesting that Hull does not develop this theme with reference to the trinity of God which provides a corrective to the modernist individual obsession.⁴⁰ This is especially seen in the perichoretic understanding of the trinity in which the three “persons” of the trinity are not conceived in a hypostatic or individual sense, but as an interrelation in which we appropriate an activity or way of relating to one that properly belongs to all three.⁴¹ That is, each person of the trinity cannot be objectified but only known through relationship. Richard Rohr observes that this only takes us part way to knowing God because God, even in this form, is beyond objectification. We can only know God-in-relationship through relationship with each other.⁴² Rohr argues that in the sixteenth century icon of the trinity written by Rublev, there is an opening in the circle for a fourth participant. It is believed that when Rublev first painted the icon, there was a mirror in this fourth place which invited the one praying before the icon into its mystery.⁴³ Hull would argue that we experience this invitation when we relate to each other in mutual interdependence.

The revelation of God between persons is qualified in the particular manner of justice⁴⁴ because scripture reveals a God of justice, not just in character but also in action (see for example Psalm 9.16, 11.7 and 103.6). Given that God is a God of justice we find God where justice is found.⁴⁵ This is demonstrated in Deuteronomy 10.18-19 where God is described as a God who executes justice and welcomes the stranger. Israel is reminded that God was their liberation from a land of slavery and so they too should welcome the stranger. This is also seen throughout the prophets. For example, in Amos 5 the prophet laments that worship without justice is a blasphemous insult. Isaiah 1.11-17 says that when the vertical relationship is honoured in exception to the horizontal, it becomes trivial and corrupt - a theme found also in Hosea.⁴⁶

³⁸ Donald A. Hagner and others, *Matthew 14 - 28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), p. 647.

³⁹ Hagner and others, p. 648.

⁴⁰ David S Cunningham, ‘The Trinity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, pp. 186–202 (p. 188)

⁴¹ John MacQuarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 194.

⁴² Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, (London: SPCK, 2016), p. 51.

⁴³ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 212.

⁴⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 212.

⁴⁶ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 215.

One way to address this complaint of the prophets is to ensure that we avoid the corruption of our relationship with God by paying proper attention to the relationship with the other. However, this approach remains dualistic in the separation of the two forms of independent relationship. Using the work of German theologian Walter Brueggemann outlines that the whole of the history of the relationship between Israel, the world and God could be found in the central idea of “covenantal relatedness” in which the balancing of transcendence and immanence is rejected in favour of mutuality in which all relationships impact on our relationship with God, the other and the world.⁴⁷ The notion of Modernity’s privatised person is rejected and the “covenant” theme becomes a radical understanding of inter-subjective transcendence. This is seen most clearly in Jeremiah 22.15-16 in which God says that judging the case of the poor was equivalent to knowing God where “knowing God” is not an intellectual knowledge but realised in right relationships.⁴⁸ Brueggemann points out that either one is not the cause and object of the other, rather they are truly equivalent, that is “judging the cause of the poor is the substance of knowledge of Yahweh.”⁴⁹

The impact on mission

So far, Hull has argued that scripture envisages our relationship with God to be mediated in the public relationship with the other in which we seek justice. We cannot know God except through relationship with the other. However, through imperialism and Modernity, this understanding has been distorted and we seek God first and then use this motivation to serve others in the pursuit of justice. This distortion has a significant affect on how the church understands her role in the mission of God to the world. This confusion manifests itself in the confusion of church and kingdom.

Mission is often cited as the great commandment from Matthew 28 when Jesus sends out the apostles to go and make disciples of all nations which is interpreted as a sending into the world for the evangelisation of the world which in turn is interpreted as inviting people to explore a vertical, private relationship with God. Even where mission is framed more widely, there is still a distinction between evangelisation and prophetic mission and often what looks like prophetic mission is a thinly guised veil for evangelisation. This becomes more prevalent as the church becomes preoccupied with institutional numerical decline of members and worshippers. Success of a church is measured by how many people attend worship.

Hull illustrates this in his critique of the 2004 Church of England “Mission-shaped Church” report. Hull identifies that even though the report talks about mission amongst the poor, it was couched in language of liberation through forming their own ecclesial communities rather than seeing mission as liberation by enabling the escape from poverty.⁵⁰ Thus, the success of mission is not the relief of injustice but in more people enjoying a privatised relationship with God.

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Peter C. Craigie and others, *Jeremiah 1 - 25*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 26, Nachdr. (Nashville: Nelson, 2000). p.310

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 613.

⁵⁰ Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 33.

Mission does not, however, have to be either evangelisation or prophetic. The prophetic element of mission reveals the good news embodied in Jesus Christ inviting us into a relationship with God. In a 2016 article, Hull tells the story of how a person attended an act of prophetic witness which involved an invitation to receive Holy Communion. The person took the bread and wine and was drawn back into the life of the church she had abandoned years before.⁵¹ Even in this example, however, there is a separation of the two elements. Namsoon Kang perhaps offers a greater unity. She writes that Jesus' invitation to be born again was an invitation not into a private spiritualised relationship but an invitation into a "prophetic critique of and transformation of self, world, and others."⁵²

Conclusion

This chapter has set out the importance to Hull for rediscovering the prophetic mission of the church which enables the restoration of inter-subjective relationships upon which the experience of God is based. While the remainder of this paper will be considering mission defined in the prophetic sense as Hull understood it, Hull would argue against understanding mission as exclusively prophetic.

⁵¹ John M. Hull, "'Come Back, Christianity – All Is Forgiven': Public Theology and the Prophetic Church", *Theology*, 119.2 (2016), 83–90 (p. 86)

⁵² Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), p. 113.

2 What does the “Prophetic Tradition” mean?

Introduction

Having stated the case for re-focussing on the prophetic tradition in chapter 1, this chapter sets out what Hull discerned as the prophetic tradition to be generally and by specific themes in the Hebrew prophets, and in Jesus the prophet. A brief review of the negative aspects of the prophetic voice and Hull’s prophetic hermeneutic is also explored.

The prophetic tradition

The task of determining what is meant by “prophecy” is complicated by a dislocation of the modern day interpreter from the prophet in their own locus and, as Brueggemann points out, generalisations about prophecy misrepresent the witness of scripture.⁵³ That said, Hull considers three ways in which the term prophecy is used in the modern church: futurology, ecstatic immediacy of God and prophetic theology in the biblical tradition.⁵⁴ Hull dismisses futurology, where the future is predicted by interpreting biblical texts, concluding it should not be considered prophecy at all because it has been rendered unconvincing by predictive failures making it irresponsible in the current age.⁵⁵

Hull has more sympathy for prophecy as the “ecstatic immediacy of God”⁵⁶ which is common among Pentecostal and charismatically aligned churches. In this tradition, the prophet is an instrument through which God speaks to the congregation through the gift of tongues. It is seen as a continuation of how the early church recorded in Acts perceived itself in the same prophetic tradition of the prophets of Israel. Indeed, the reaction of the crowd in Acts 2.12 is reminiscent of the reception of the Hebrew prophets in their own time. Brueggemann argues that the emergence of people who brought a word from Yahweh speaking with “an authority beyond themselves” would have been strange to witness.⁵⁷

Rather than futurology or ecstatic immediacy, Hull argues for recapturing the prophetic spirit found in the Hebrew prophets and Jesus as a voice which critiques the church herself as well as the world. The church can be a “prophet-hood of all believers”⁵⁸ when it sifts through the debris of the artificial and points to life in God.

However, the way in which the church has received the prophecy canonized in scripture has shifted over the centuries and is again subject to ideological overlays. In his much earlier work, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* Hull

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 622.

⁵⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 622.

⁵⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 5.

discusses the gradual, almost unnoticeable re-ideologisation of the Christian faith.⁵⁹ Because the process is so gradual, any challenge to the ideology is met with fear and reticence. However, a careful hermeneutical approach can challenge re-ideologisation revealing a dynamic faith energised by changing contexts rather than being fearful of it.

Isaiah 2.4 can be used as an example:

[The LORD] shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. [NRSV]

Unlike other texts from Isaiah (such as 7.14 which is quoted in Matthew 1.22 and Isaiah 42.6 which is quoted in Luke 2.32) this text seems to have been overlooked by the early church. This could be because it relates to a non-transferable historical context, a specific threat against Judah or suggesting an eschatological frame. By the twentieth century the pericope is more widely received as a political statement against disputes being resolved by violence yet the concept is often seen as irrelevant to our current political climate because we have been ideologised from thinking that it could be relevant.⁶⁰

That said, Hull concludes that the prophets speak to our present contexts because of the canonisation process and the quality of inspiration. On the importance of canonisation, Brueggemann observes that the work of prophecy handed onto us enabled Israel to reimagine its life with Yahweh against other options for reimagination contained in the vast contemporaneous volume of other prophets. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the canonical form has been shaped to provide a continual mechanism to reimagine life with Yahweh.⁶¹ In other words, there is a spirit within the prophets which speaks a timeless word of truth.

On inspiration, Hull argues that rather than think about the “inspiration of the Bible” we should think about the “quality of inspiration.”⁶² By the work of the Holy Spirit, a flash point sparks between an inspired text and an inspired people. That means that the Spirit has worked through the process of canonisation and works through the modern reader to find the “spark of inspiration”⁶³ which dialogues with our contemporary experience. Therefore, it is conceivable that the way the message of the prophets is understood, as with all scripture, is not static but dynamic. In liberation theology, for example, this flashpoint would be described as the intersection of the immanence of God with the poor and marginalised which is

⁵⁹ Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*, 48.

⁶⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 9.

⁶¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 633.

⁶² Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 43.

⁶³ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 43.

confirmed by scripture.⁶⁴ We must, as Barton argues, not be too preoccupied with the idea that the prophets only function is to predict the coming of Christ, if indeed that is how we should read the prophets at all, because doing so obscures their moral teaching for today.⁶⁵ Against the challenge of how to discern the Spirit's flashpoint Hull offers a simple test: does it bring life or death?⁶⁶

The message of the prophets for today

The prophets of ancient Israel made theology public not only by making their utterances in the public space but through their critique of the public life of Israel in areas such as social class, economic and historical issues, treaties, contracts, peace and public policies.⁶⁷ The first challenge for the prophetic church is, therefore, to bring theology out of our private sphere to speak into the public square. Once in the public arena, Hull identifies the following prophetic themes in the canonised prophets which will help shape the critical themes of a prophetic church today.

Conceiving of society as a community

The prophets treated Israel as a covenantal community rather than a collection of individuals bound by the market.⁶⁸ Israel was conceived as groupings of families within tribes and it was the development into a monarchical society that precipitated the prevalence for the deep injustices objected to by Micah. In Micah 2.1-2, for example, Micah describes a breakdown in community trust caused by the autocratic nature of power oiled by bribes. The prophets make clear that this is not what God desires. Covenant means that Israel was not just a gathering of privatised individuals but a community in relationship with God and each other. This inter-subjectivity reveals the God of justice in community relationships (see Jeremiah 22.15-16).

Uses prophetic imagination in the resistance of unjust structures

Micah could be considered the vanguard of exposing and attacking unjust structures. In Micah 2, the prophet articulately denounces a capitalist structure in which land is coveted and Judah ignores the needs of those made destitute by their "wickedness." The capitalists buy leaders with bribes.⁶⁹ As well as Micah, Amos denounces those who "trample the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land" (8.4).

Challenging unjust structures is often one of the most controversial and uncomfortable charisms of the prophetic tradition. Such discomfort is, for Hull, because systems do not often, but not exclusively, set out to be unjust but they adapt

⁶⁴ *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland, Cambridge Companions to Religion, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

⁶⁵ John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*, 1st ed (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 131.

⁶⁶ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 29.

⁶⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 30.

⁶⁹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 35–36.

and change over time to suit the interests of particular constituencies. The comfort derived from the profits of such systems shield the profiteers from the damage the system perpetuates. The injustice is not wealth creation per se, but that the wealth created is concentrated for a minority. Unjust structures are difficult to transform because it requires disinterest in the profits of the system.⁷⁰

Furthermore, there is difficulty in objectifying truth and power. While it is true that the prophet must go beyond what is observed and awaken the imaginative alternative⁷¹ which is the herald of the kingdom of God, questions about what is truth and power prevail. These are important questions for Graham Smith who considers what it means to speak truth to power under the conditions post-Modernity⁷² which challenges the belief that truth can be objective.⁷³ Using the philosophical idea of “edification” developed by Richard Rorty, Smith suggests that truth is not objective and the task of the prophet is to redescribe social, cultural and political phenomena to a broad audience who, by adopting the redescription as a desirable alternative, will work with whatever levers they have to bring it about.⁷⁴ Here, power is relocated in the audience rather than in external actors. This is an interesting methodological shift and helps to imagine a prophetic role within a complex globalised community.

As useful as Smith’s argument is, it does not go far enough to tackle the question of truth in post-Modernity and imperialism. Miroslav Volf writes that in the post-colonial era, we want to affirm both in the inviolability and plurality of cultures and humanity where our ideas of truth are challenged in the otherness of others.⁷⁵ It is likely that one person’s truth, argues Volf, is another person’s violence. Until there are shared concerns, Micah’s vision of sitting under one owns fig tree cannot be realised (4.4).⁷⁶ Despairingly it seems that perpetual injustice should simply be accepted because transcended justice, which can only ever happen in a state of perfect freedom of love, seems too remote.⁷⁷

Faced with this despair, Volf offers the solution of “double vision” through a relational model where insight can be found in the intersection of differing ideas. This envisages an iterative process of reflection and action, not unlike a classical pastoral cycle. For Volf, this approach needs to be initially suspicious of the powerful but with a desire to embrace the other.⁷⁸

Worship and false Gods

In Amos 4.4-5, the prophet sarcastically criticises the worshipping life of Israel for multiplying their transgression against the poor when they offer worship

⁷⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 34.

⁷¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 14.

⁷² Graeme Smith, ‘No Longer “Speaking Truth to Power”’, *Practical Theology*, 13.1–2 (2020), 75–86 (p. 75)

⁷³ *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. 8.

⁷⁴ Smith, ‘No longer “Speaking Truth to Power”’, p. 84.

⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 194.

⁷⁶ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 195.

⁷⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 223.

⁷⁸ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 213

which is not matched with justice.⁷⁹ Worship itself becomes an injustice when it is separated from ethics. In other words, for a worshipping community to offer right worship, it must be matched by justice.⁸⁰ It is the integration of the whole life of the community which cannot profess one ethic in temple worship and another beyond its walls.

Similarly aligned to this strand of prophecy is the warning against false Gods. Using Tillich's idea that a faith in anything that is only preliminary is an example of idolatry, Hull argues that humanity's desire for security in the immediate gives rise to idols.⁸¹ Hull quotes Daniel Berrigan who argues that humanity is lured by the security of nuclear weapons, the false god, rather pursuing the way of justice and peace found in God.⁸²

Integrity of creation

Care for creation is often assumed to be a modern-day concern as we face catastrophic climate destruction⁸³ so it can be deduced that the prophets say little about it. This is not, however, such an obvious conclusion. Hilary Marlow concludes that the prophets use nature language more than simply as metaphor as the prophetic corpus speaks of the realisation that creation is threatened by human greed. Amos, for example, prophesies that because of human greed, the ground suffers and vineyards are blighted. This was a significant factor for communities reliant on the land to live. Conversely, the earth flourishes when peace and justice reign.⁸⁴ Concern for the welfare of creation cannot be separated from the welfare of humanity, itself part of God's creation, so it follows that justice for creation should be central to the prophets message, not least because everyone relies on the land even though globalised supply chains hide the land-reliant from the land.

The most pressing question for the church today is not whether there are prophetic oracles concerning the environment, but rather to what extent the church heeds them and encourages others to do so.

The experience of God

This relates not only to the prophets own experience of God and Israel's through them, but also God's experience of Israel. Abraham Heschel writes that God is revealed as a God of pathos which means that God is not an "otherness" but is intimately involved in the human predicament. God is moved and affected by what the prophet confronts. Pathos means, Heschel argues, that "God is never neutral, never beyond good and evil, [God] is always partial to justice."⁸⁵ Combining the idea of pathos with covenant, Heschel concludes that pathos means that God acts

⁷⁹ Daniel J. Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 187.

⁸⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 37.

⁸¹ Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion the Search for The Ultimate Reality* (London: James Nisbet, 1955), p. 59 in Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 40.

⁸² Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 39.

⁸³ Jem Bendell, 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy', p. 3 Available at: <http://lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf> [last accessed 29 July 2020].

⁸⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 30.

⁸⁵ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, Perennial Classics, 1st Perennial classics ed (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 285–98.

intentionally with determination and transitively.⁸⁶ Thus the prophet is not representing a fixed notion of justice to Israel, but rather the outworking of God's covenantal relationship with God's people. A task for the church is to remain alert to the relational aspects and allow itself to be changed by those relationships. The doctrines of the church should always be open to challenge within the church's covenantal relationship with God.

Hope

Hull devotes a surprisingly short section on the prophetic voice of hope with reference to the hope of childhood with reference to Isaiah 11.⁸⁷ However, there is much more that could be said about the prophetic task of embodying hope. For example, Brueggemann writing about reality, grief and loss in his response to the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, makes the comparison between the prophetic task in the post-exilic era which engenders the hope amongst Israel that their current experience is not the only experience possible. Brueggemann extends this point to the ministry of the church post-September 11 in embodying hope in the midst of despair.⁸⁸ It could be argued that when the church sees mission framed in the prophetic voices as outlined above, hope is a natural consequence amongst the marginalised who suffer injustice. Sometimes, however, the message of hope is needed when it seems that an injustice cannot be undone or overturned quickly. How can we live within a state of despair? Brueggemann argues that the prophet must use existing symbols within a particular history which reminds the prophet and people that hope is not crisis contextual but is woven into the covenanted relationship with God. The prophet uses symbols to speak of God's promise: to bring light out of darkness; the gift of life to the barren Sarah and freedom to the enslaved. Therefore, the prophets speech is to tell the stories of hope, using the symbols within our own history, to speak the word of God which contradicts the dominant and suppressing speech which inflicts injustice.⁸⁹ The task of the church is to speak those stories which offer hope and to remind ourselves and others of the power of the symbols within our tradition. An example of this is the symbol of the rainbow which is gifted by God as a sign of God's covenant made with Noah after the flood in which God promises not to repeat the great catastrophe of the flood (Genesis 9.11-17). In the spring of 2020 as the world became gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic and there was a widespread fear of catastrophe, a rainbow was displayed by many households in the UK which became a symbol of hope.⁹⁰

The prophetic tradition in the Gospels

In *Towards the Prophetic Church*, Hull make a passing reference that "Christology has been the enemy of prophecy" because the prophetic Jesus became an imperial character and it was much more convenient to worship Christ as the Son

⁸⁶ Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 298.

⁸⁷ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 42.

⁸⁸ Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope*, pp. 101–28.

⁸⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, pp. 64–65.

⁹⁰ Matt Mahers, 'Coronavirus: Rainbow Posters from around the Country Show How Children Pay Tribute to NHS Workers', *The Independent*, Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/coronavirus-nhs-nightingale-hospital-rainbows-art-drawing-painting-a9452806.html>. [last accessed 24 June 2020]

of God than to follow the subversive prophet.⁹¹ However, it is clear that the prophetic message continues in the gospels.

For some, Jesus is apolitical, meek, mild and more concerned with the vertical relationship between us and God. Hull wonders, however, what Micah would have made of the situation that Jesus found himself in.⁹² Jesus' ministry was in a context of an aristocratic empire in which eighty percent of the Palestinian population were peasant farmers under the burden of Roman tribute and temple taxes. Enforcement took the shape of the ritual purity codes and any refusal to pay was considered a rebellion which needed repression.⁹³

Perhaps Micah would have acted as Jesus did by offering a prophetic response by establishing a renewal movement in Galilean villages which provoked the temple authorities. Jesus challenged the power enforcement mechanism of the purity code. For example, in Mark 1.40-45 Jesus touches the unclean leper to make him clean in contrast to the purity code which should have made Jesus unclean. The same thing happens in the incident when a woman was made ritually unclean by her menstruation touches Jesus' cloak in Luke 8.44. Instead of making him unclean, it makes her clean. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus pays no attention to the need to make himself clean and goes to heal Jairus' daughter (Mark 5.35).⁹⁴

Secondly, Jesus proclaims a message that the kingdom of God has come. This was not the spiritualised motif but a present reality. For the hearers of Jesus' message, talk of the Kingdom of God would have related to an essential covenantal theme about how land was owned and managed. In the theology of jubilee, God is identified ultimately as the landowner. By first century Palestine, however, the land was overtaken by a brutal enemy for the benefit of the powerful elite. It was from the power of the Roman empire that Jesus admonished his hearers to repent (Luke 13.1-5).⁹⁵

Thirdly, Jesus' prophetic mission spoke against the money-god. Money was the rival to God in a very practical sense and throughout the gospels there is a tension between Jesus and how the wealthy use their wealth. In Mark 10.23-26, Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those who have wealth (Mark 10.25). In Luke 4 Jesus declares himself the good news for the poor. Again, this can be read as a practical not a spiritualised good news in the sense that Isaiah uses "good news" to signify the intervention of God into a situation where refugees were held in captivity (Isaiah 52.7). Furthermore, the Lord's prayer encapsulates the forgiveness of debts. Finally, in the parable of the workers found in Matthew 20.1-16, the labourers, who would most likely have lost land through confiscation, now worked on the land for different hours during the day yet they all got paid the same. While this seems incredibly unjust, it demonstrates the idea of a

⁹¹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 63.

⁹² Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 48.

⁹³ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 49.

⁹⁴ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 49-51.

⁹⁵ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, pp. 54-58.

basic guaranteed income which enables them to live. God's generosity is contrasted against the stinginess of the dominating landowners his hearers would know about.⁹⁶

Fourthly, during the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus lays the foundation of a "community of reconciliation" with the instruction to follow an ethic of reconciliation before sacrificing at the altar so as to break the conjunction of anger and sacrifice and of violence and retribution found in the murder of Abel by his brother. This reinforced an ethic of peace and justice⁹⁷ and it is by that ethic that our relationship with God is held. Elsewhere in Matthew there is a prophetic principle of mercy overcoming sacrifice. For example when Jesus talks about new wine in old wineskins in Matthew 9.17 and exonerating the disciples for picking grain on the sabbath in 12.7.

Finally, in the gospels there are references to Christ's presence in the inter-subjectivity with the other in the absence of the physical Christ. For example, in Mark 9.37 Jesus says that welcoming children is to welcome him. In Matthew 25.37-40 Jesus is found in the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the prisoner.⁹⁸

Even in this brief exploration of Jesus the prophet it is hard to spiritualise his actions and message as a privatised relationship which is a preoccupation of the Christ-mystic tradition when it focusses purely on a vertical relationship.⁹⁹ Instead, a prophetic Jesus is found in the person of Jesus and found in the inter-subjectivity of human relationships where love is found.

What about the difficult elements of the prophetic voice?

It is true that there are elements of the prophets which we find hermeneutically difficult and Hull deals briefly with some of the most troubling aspects offering convincing hermeneutical arguments for a present-day reading.

Firstly, Hull identifies a God willing to use divine power and violence. Isaiah 9.11-12 tells how God raised up armies against Israel. Then there is the matter of God as the giver of death in Ezekiel and violent sex and prostitution in Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Very little is found in the prophets concerning forgiveness and interpersonal reconciliation and finally there is the use of the prophets to justify an anti-Semitic supersessionist condemnation of European Jews which sits uncomfortably for many today.

Seeking to reclaim the understanding of some of these aspects Hull uses several arguments. In the use of power, Hull uses Carol Dempsey's view that what Isaiah is offering is a mirror of the people. An attempt is therefore made to redeem the God of justice from the reading of violence. Isaiah is offering two contrasting views: redemptive violence leads to destruction whereas God's way leads to peace and prosperity.¹⁰⁰ However, this is not an incontrovertible understanding as

⁹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, New ed (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2009), p. 482.

⁹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2015), p. 68.

⁹⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 217.

⁹⁹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁰ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 20.

demonstrated by Walter Wink who recognises this redemptive violence motif in every just war theory which leads many to conclude that redemptive violence is permitted by God.¹⁰¹

In the case of God the giver of death, Hull advocates Brueggemann's idea of Israel's counter-testimony of God. While Brueggemann would challenge any understanding that these matters are an ideological human projection which argues away any sense of negativity in God,¹⁰² Brueggemann suggests that the negative aspects of God's behaviour are a consequence of covenantal disobedience.¹⁰³

Hull recognises that passages about sex and prostitution have undoubtedly given permission for misogynistic readings of the text. However, Hull refers to the work of Renita Weems who approaches the texts using a reader-response hermeneutic to argue that the prophet is using a literary device to shock the mainly male audience into taking action lest they become the abused bride of God's groom.¹⁰⁴

Hull also uses the work of Barton who observes that the Hebrew scriptures do not deal extensively with forgiveness in our human relationships. Barton identifies that forgiveness is an ethos of the Hebrew scriptures rather than an ethic – it is there in the atmosphere rather than by diktat.¹⁰⁵ The idea of forgiveness is found more in the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures rather than in prophetic utterances which is understood because narrative is the work of human relationships whereas the utterances are concerned with relationships with God.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

In this brief overview of the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew scriptures and gospels, justice restoring strands have been identified and some of the more difficult aspects of the prophetic texts have been recognised along with hermeneutical lenses to reclaim the narrative. This exploration will now be taken forward to consider the charisms of a prophetic church in the twenty-first century.

¹⁰¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, v. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 25.

¹⁰² Walter Brueggemann, 'Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy Revisited', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 74.1 (2012), 28–38 (p. 31).

¹⁰³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 373.

¹⁰⁴ Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 41.

¹⁰⁵ Barton and Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 27.

3 A prophetic methodology

Introduction

In the previous chapters, the importance of rediscovering a prophetic mission and important charisms of the prophetic tradition have been outlined. It was noted that the complexity of injustice and oppression means it is often difficult, if not impossible, to find a consensus on what justice looks like and how to achieve it. This means that the extent to which a church could be described as prophetic is subjective. Therefore, before considering the extent to which the present-day Methodist Church can be considered prophetic, a prophetic methodology will be developed which will allow evaluation without agreeing with the outcomes.

Firstly, it will be argued that Hull's idea of a "prophethood of all believers" is an interpretation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in which inter-subjective relationality is a central theme. Secondly, Hull's insistence that faith has to be contextual¹⁰⁷ finds resonances with the see-judge-act method seen in the Latin American base ecclesial community model. This overarching method is enriched by the Methodist quadrilateral and John Paul Lederach's four characteristics of moral imagination¹⁰⁸ (which can be taken to also mean "prophetic imagination"). Specifically, scripture, reason, experience and tradition from the Methodist quadrilateral and the importance of relationships; the practice of paradoxical curiosity; the space for the creative act and the willingness to risk from Lederach will be considered. Combined, this methodology will enable the church to receive, interpret and act on the data available and provide the broad base for the church to pay attention to the prophetic characteristics identified above being: the importance of community; rejecting false gods; the integrity of creation; the experience of God; and hope as well as the prophetic tradition in the gospels. While the methodology of this chapter is critically important for the church, what is argued for here is not a transcending methodology but rather an ingredient in the missiological blend of the church.

Prophet-hood of all believers

The phrase "prophet-hood of all believers", despite being an almost throw away remark in the introduction to *Towards the Prophetic Church*,¹⁰⁹ offers a way of conceptualising an ethos of the prophetic tradition within the church. While at first it looks like a re-appropriation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, it seems more likely to be a definition of the priesthood of all believers that Hull had in mind.

The doctrine called the "priesthood of all believers" derives from 1 Peter 2.9 where Peter names the exiles as a "royal priesthood." The doctrine was a fundamental part of the sixteenth century Reformation in which Luther used the idea to rebut the understanding that priests were part of a spiritual "estate" compared with

¹⁰⁷ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p.241.

¹⁰⁸ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 31-40.

¹⁰⁹ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 5.

the laity in the temporal estate. Against this Luther argued that all the baptised are of the spiritual estate by baptism. Therefore, all believers are part of the royal priesthood in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are identified in people selected to perform particular functions within the whole body.¹¹⁰

Using Michael Ramsey's argument that the calling of the church is to reflect the priestly nature of Christ's witness to God¹¹¹ and the scriptural revelation of Christ is of a prophet, it follows naturally that being a priesthood of all believers encompasses the concept of a prophethood of all believers. A broad ecumenical consensus can be found to support this. The 1982 Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, states that it is the calling of the whole people of God, the royal priesthood, to "proclaim and prefigure the Kingdom of God in the world."¹¹² In living out this vocation it the responsibility of the members of the body, the baptised, to identify with the "joys and sufferings of all people," to "struggle with the oppressed towards the freedom and dignity promised in the coming kingdom" and to bring a foretaste of God's kingdom.¹¹³

This suggests that the "church lives through the participation of its members, the laity and the ordained, and is constituted through them by the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁴ Therefore prophet-hood is an expression of the collective identity of the whole body. However, this can suggest that this prophetic body has the answer that the world beyond the church needs to hear. This can be dangerous if the concerns of self-interest influence the prophetic oracle. Even if the whole body could speak with one voice, the ability of the body's internal dialogue to be prophetically self-critical is crucial.

Therefore, calling the church a prophethood of all believers is more than seeing prophecy as just one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which can be deduced from the New Testament, for example in I Corinthians 14. Although what is meant here is more likely to be a charismatic experience of God rather than in the prophetic tradition, it may be argued that the prophetic element is just one of several gifts and charisms alongside others. In Hull's understanding, while the diversity and complementary of gifts should not be diminished, there is something more pervasive about the prophetic tradition to overcome the ideological overlays of Modernity discussed in chapter 1. A prophethood is about the orientation of the church to be prophetic. Brueggemann, addressing ministers suggests that prophetic ministry, which for our purpose here is the ministry of the whole church, is "a stance and posture or hermeneutic about the world of death and the word of life that can be brought to life in every context."¹¹⁵

This is the experience of the base ecclesial communities developed in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the shortage of parish priests. While

¹¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 211.

¹¹¹ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 107.

¹¹² *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). I.4

¹¹³ *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. I.4

¹¹⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'The Calling of the Whole People of God into Ministry: The Spirit, Church and Laity', *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 54.2 (2000), 144–62 (p. 150)

¹¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 117.

the original idea had been to appoint lay catechists to keep the faithful engaged, the communities evolved using a see-judge-act model of reflection to respond theologically to the experience of the small communities in which they were based. The faith preached and taught had no resonance unless it paid attention to people's lived experience. Out of their reflection came a deepened faith in the God who loved them and a resolve not to be abused and rejected by unjust systems.¹¹⁶ Therefore, it is the whole body with its internal and external interconnectivity which defines a prophethood of all believers.

Using the see-judge-act model

Discussing base ecclesial communities in Brazil, Andrew Dawson describes how the communities practice the see-judge-act model which offers an intuitive methodology for the prophethood of all believers. In a gathering of the community, there is a time of "revisao de vida (life review)" when the people gathered share their experiences and concerns of the past week. This review relies on the interconnective relationships of the community and hears the witness of the community about the injustices they face on a daily basis. The boundaries of this sharing community need to be porous and blurred to find God in the embrace of the other in the mutual inter-subjectivity of creation. It is interesting to note that the epistle upon which the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is derived from is a letter addressed to the *paroikoi*, a group of citizens who have no legal citizenship but nor are they aliens. While this may have an instant resonance with the enduring migrant "crisis," the idea of *paroikoi* could also be read metaphorically about social alienation more generally.¹¹⁷ The reminder that *they* are a royal priesthood reinforces the need for radical inclusivity for the very people excluded by civic society to be included in the community's web of relationships.

This community based shared recollection is used as the hermeneutical lens through which the biblical text for the week is read as the community seek the insight of scripture on their experience and seek empowerment as the people of God who has a preferential bias for the poor. The community then seek to embody what they have learned together in practical action with the pressing issues of the neighbourhood.¹¹⁸

The way in which Dawson presents the model suggests that this technique uses experience to instigate dialogue with scripture which is inherently a biased dialogue limiting the opportunity for scripture to challenge experience. The model can be enhanced by broadening the "judging" stage in the light of the Methodist quadrilateral.

The quadrilateral was developed from John Wesley's theological method by Albert Outler in the late twentieth century to express the interpretative tension

¹¹⁶ Andrew Dawson, "The origins and character of the base ecclesial community: A Brazilian perspective" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland, Cambridge Companions to Religion, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.139-158

¹¹⁷ Robin Hawley Gorsline, '1 and 2 Peter', in Guest, Deryn, Goss, Robert E., West, Mona and Bohache, Thomas (eds) *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 724–36 (p. 725)

¹¹⁸ Dawson, "The origins and character of the base ecclesial community: A Brazilian perspective" p.148

between scripture, reason, tradition and experience and interpretation is found in the dialogue of the four elements.¹¹⁹ There is no consensus within British Methodism about the authority of scripture nor of the most appropriate weighting between the elements. The 1998 Conference report *A lamp to my feet and a light to my path* identifies seven possible models. These models range from a dominance of scripture over all other elements to an understanding of scripture as the experience of God by diverse cultures and should be interpreted carefully to remove the vested interests of the writers.¹²⁰ Here then, reason and experience become more important. The danger of this extreme method is to remove the critique of ourselves in the light of scripture if scripture is only invited into dialogue at the behest of experience and never the instigator to challenge experience.

Perhaps a more robust method is found in the work of Seward Hiltner. His theory of theological dialogue between theology and culture was a resource for the “shepherding” of the flock of Christ. When experience is read in place of culture, Hiltner proposes that sometimes faith answers the questions posed by experience and at others experience can answer a question raised by faith. Deepening our understanding of each is found in the dialogue between the two. Hiltner rejects the criticism that this locates theological enquiry in an extra-theological source by arguing that faith only remains faithful when it is in a “discriminating dialogue with culture.”¹²¹ The significance of Hiltner’s approach is to orientate theological enquiry within the whole of creation rather than within the closed economy of the community of faith. Secondly, scripture does not necessarily hold a separated and objective revelation that stands apart from experience, but the revelation of scripture is found in the interaction of the text and experience. Brueggemann concludes similarly that exposition needs to be both consistent with the text while at the same time being consistent with the context of the exposition.¹²²

The Methodist quadrilateral adds the further dimensions of tradition and reason to Hiltner’s model. Shier-Jones describes Methodism as having a high regard to the tradition of the church being a dialogue partner which is not always agreed with but is listened to.¹²³ This regard for the tradition is imperative in the prophetic church as Hull envisions it since the need for the prophetic outlook is to partly counter the inherited imperialism which we should rightly now treat with regret and suspicion. To this end, the church needs to practice self-criticism in the light of tradition. Secondly, Methodism draws on John Wesley’s understanding that reason is a means of grace by which God, through the gift of reason, interprets scripture within us.¹²⁴ This helps the church to challenge received hermeneutical assumptions thus

¹¹⁹ Albert C. Outler, ‘The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20.1 (1985), pp. 7-19, p.11, available at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/sermons-essays-books/wesleyan-theological-journal-1966-2010/comprehensive-volume-index/> [last accessed 25 August 2020]

¹²⁰ The Methodist Conference, ‘A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path’, *The Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1998, 644–68 (pp. 663–664).

¹²¹ Seward Hiltner, ‘The Meaning and Importance of Pastoral Theology’, in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 25–48, p. 26.

¹²² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 726.

¹²³ Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Werrington: Epworth, 2005), p. 46.

¹²⁴ Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress*, p. 45.

opening the possibility for Volf's "double vision" method of seeking justice between competing voices.

The see-judge-act model should not imply a wholly linear nor enclosed process. Given that the conditions leading to injustice are often complex and multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary, to be most effective the methodology needs to be iterative so actions are continually judged and nuanced. Lederach's moral imagination conditions will help the model to engage iteratively.

Lederach's moral imagination

Using the quadrilateral in practice is further enhanced by considering the four charisms of the moral imagination suggested by John Paul Lederach which can easily be seen as "prophetic imagination." In writing specifically about peace building, Lederach sets out four conditions for the ethos of a moral imagination which reinforce and enable the operation of the see-judge-act model incorporating the Methodist quadrilateral.

Firstly, consistent with the see-judge-act model, Lederach identifies the "centrality of relationships"¹²⁵ because relationships are the context in which violence happens and out of which the energy is found to transcend violence. For Lederach, relationships are not just a means of sharing experience but also the means of creating justice through the re-conception of relationships in order to allow the prophetic reimagining of community. Justice can be conceived and birthed in the interaction between the oppressed and oppressor. Further, Brueggemann suggests that the prophetic ministry is to conceive of a community which stands for the kingdom of God and is in constant relationship with the dominant culture around it.¹²⁶

Secondly, Lederach speaks of the "practice of paradoxical curiosity"¹²⁷ which gives a methodology for dealing with the experiences shared. This challenges reductionism into dualistic polarities which speaks simply of rights and wrongs, of wronged people and places. The idea of paradox suggests we find a greater truth when we hold together what initially seems to be contradictory truths.¹²⁸ Curiosity is an attentiveness to exploration not being stalled by the complexity of a situation. Together, these two ideas combine in an approach that seeks to understand the under-currents from which new potential emerges. This helps a prophetic church to grapple with the question of competing ideas of justice and allows engagement where there is a fear of a complex web of relationships where pulling the levers of interlocking dynamics results in misunderstood, unforeseen, or at least too costly, outcomes. Further, this paradoxical curiosity is integral to the prophetic challenge of false idols as we seek to hide behind complexity because of our own interests. Challenging our own complicity in the unjust structures of the world challenges the idol of our own security.

Thirdly, there is the need for the space for creativity. Chapter 2 discussed how, for Hull, there is a flashpoint as the Spirit brings together the canonised prophets and the current context which reveals something new and challenging. It is

¹²⁵ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 34.

¹²⁶ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 117.

¹²⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 35.

¹²⁸ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 36.

in this space that the creative act is born. Yet to allow this creative act, there needs to be a disposition towards the liminal space within the quadrilateral's dialogue where the Spirit's alchemy is observed. This is often a vague and uncomfortable space in which we wait for the creative act to birth.

In its simplest form this creative act is the movement from death towards life. It is the movement from injustice to justice, from despair to hope. The creative act is that which inhabits the vacuum and conceives of what life, justice and hope can look like. The prophetic creative act is, therefore, not just identifying or speaking into injustice, but imaginatively using inherited and newly acquired symbols to illuminate hope. Creativity reveals God's kingdom within us. In the stories of creation God creates to separate out elements of the created order to amplify individual components so we can see them more clearly.

This creativity can be seen in a number of different ways using several complimentary and interdependent gifts in the prophetic task. An example of such revelation can be found in two films by Ken Loach, *I, Daniel Blake*¹²⁹ and *Sorry We Missed You*,¹³⁰ which allow a wider audience to empathise with welfare benefit recipients and workers in the gig economy in an impactful way. Here, creativity speaks to our theological understanding as we find the pathos of God revealed in the in-betweenness that the creative arts open up in our perception of the world.¹³¹ The challenge for the church is to find the symbols that point to God but also have cognisance beyond the community of faith.

Secondly, creativity is needed to help us conceive of what the Kingdom of God could look like in the temporal world and to conceive how the public sphere of our communal civic life needs to be shaped. This needs to use the term creativity in its broadest possible sense as it will need to draw on the disciplines of social and political science as well as theology.

Finally, Lederach speaks of the "willingness to risk" which is the process of stepping into the unknown without any guarantee of success.¹³² In the context of the church this is shown in a disinterest in its own success and a willingness to risk reputation and standing in order to challenge injustice. Reading the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, there is often a sense of the personal risk they took. In the eyes of the community to which they spoke, they were counter-cultural, dangerous and could easily be ignored and rejected (see Jeremiah 20.14, 17 and 18, Amos 5.10, Hosea 9.7 and Matthew 23.31-36).¹³³ However, they persisted because of their vocation to restore God's people back into the covenantal relationship with God which was the base for the flourishing of the whole of creation. It can be argued, therefore, that to be prophetic, the church cannot be simultaneously self-interested. The church cannot be preoccupied with its own status and reputation at the expense of injustice.

¹²⁹ *I, Daniel Blake*, dir Ken Loach, (eOneUK, 2016).

¹³⁰ *Sorry We Missed You*, dir Ken Loach, (eOneUK, 2019).

¹³¹ Clive Marsh, 'Theology in Practice, in an Age of Wizards, Hobbits and Vampires', *Practical Theology*, 13.1-2 (2020), 48-59 (p. 50)

¹³² Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 39.

¹³³ Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 20-23.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed a prophetic methodology through which the church can be prophetic in the sense that Hull intended. This methodology is based on the idea of the prophethood of all believers within which consideration has been given to the base ecclesial community's see-judge-act model which listens to the experience of the community members and uses this experience to interpret scripture and to develop prophetic action.

The Methodist quadrilateral helpfully expands the see-judge-act method by holding scripture, experience, tradition and reason in tensions while recognising the need for ecclesial self-criticism particularly in relation to the tradition. The tools to adopt this expanded methodology have been offered based on John Paul Lederach's four elements of moral (prophetic) imagination.

This iterative methodology expects the church to listen to the experienced reality of both its members and wider community and hold experience in dialogue with scripture, reason and tradition with the expectation of developing an action to challenge injustice. The methodology is enhanced by incorporating the four tools of Lederach's moral imagination: holding relationships of central importance, practising paradoxical curiosity, creativity and having the willingness to risk.

4 The present-day Methodist Church

Introduction

Chapters 1 and 2 set out Hull's argument for the need for the church to be a prophetic church and what can be learned from the Hebrew prophets and Jesus the prophet. Chapter 3 developed a prophetic methodology to enable a comparison of specific examples of the present-day Methodist Church explored through Conference reports on poverty, missional strategy, climate change, and an open letter written by the Network of Methodist Activists. These areas have been chosen for their relevance to the Methodist Church's current context. From the methodology, the following elements are expected: active listening to the experienced reality of both its members and wider community, holding experience in dialogue with scripture, reason and tradition with the expectation of developing an action to challenge injustice and to reveal the justice God desires.

The Methodist Church – definition and identity

The plurality of the church that “lives through the participation of its members, the laity and the ordained”¹³⁴ makes any attempt to define a church by a single characteristic implausible and arguably undesirable. Added to which, Methodism's large, global and diverse body¹³⁵ makes the task of assessing its prophetic character in its entirety beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the scope of this review is limited to the Methodist Church in Britain, also known as the British Connexion, (hereafter “MCB” or “the Church”) by which is meant the institution rooted geographically almost entirely in Great Britain and formed through the Deed of Union of the Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist denominations in Great Britain of 1932¹³⁶ which is governed by the Methodist Conference (hereafter “the Conference”).¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, ‘The Calling of the Whole People of God into Ministry: The Spirit, Church and Laity’, *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 54.2 (2000), 144–62 (p. 150)

¹³⁵ Worldwide, Methodism consists of at least 80 self-governing churches from the Wesleyan traditions as well as related Uniting and United Churches in 138 countries federated within the World Methodist Council. The World Methodist Council describes itself as a body which engages, empowers and serves member churches in unity in witness, mission to the world and fostering interfaith and ecumenical activities. It promotes “vibrant evangelism, a prophetic voice, cooperative programs, faithful worship and mutual learning.” However, member churches are autonomous and self-governing. See: <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about-us/> [last accessed 17 August 2020]

¹³⁶ It should be noted that this definition does not encompass the whole of the Methodist tradition found in Great Britain. Not all churches chose to be included in the 1932 union and some have left the British connexion since.

¹³⁷ The Methodist Conference is the governing body of the Methodist Church in Britain and corporately offers oversight of the whole Church and is the final authority on the interpretation of the doctrine of the Methodist Church as defined in the Deed of Union.

In 2000, the Conference received the report *Our Calling* which sets out a holistic missiological understanding broadly consistent with the Anglican communion's five marks of mission which Hull recognises as a checklist of missiological scope:¹³⁸

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

The Church exists to:

- Increase the awareness of God's presence and celebrate God's love (Worship)
- Help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care (Learning and Caring)
- Be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice (Service)
- Make more followers of Jesus Christ (Evangelism)¹³⁹

Arguably, though, this statement does not give a clear view of Methodism's distinctiveness. Brian Beck argues that to set out a distinctive definition of Methodism is impossible because many of the charisms associated with Methodism are shared within the larger ecumenical body of the church.¹⁴⁰ Rather than unique charisms, Beck argues that the MCB is distinctive in the blend of charisms important to the Methodist ethos.¹⁴¹ Included in Beck's list is the struggle for justice which is held in tension with broader understandings of the *missio Dei*.¹⁴² While concern for justice can be traced back to John Wesley, Methodism's founder, who proclaimed that there is no holiness except social holiness,¹⁴³ it perhaps found greater focus since the late nineteenth century¹⁴⁴ through the work of notable Methodist pioneers such as John Scott Lidgett, Donald Soper and Sybil Phoenix who actively challenged injustice in the society of their day.¹⁴⁵ This suggests that within the MCB signs of the prophetic church should be seen, at least in espoused missiology given Beck's observation that there is a widening gap between what the Conference espouses and what local congregations practise.¹⁴⁶ The rest of this chapter therefore considers this espoused missiology of specific elements of the work of the Conference as well as examples of grass roots organisations.

See *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. pp 214, 216 and 219.

¹³⁸ Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p. 236.

¹³⁹ The Methodist Conference, 'Our Calling', 2000, available at: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-reports/selected-reports-from-2004-and-earlier/> [last accessed 17 August 2020].

¹⁴⁰ Brian E. Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, Routledge Methodist Studies Series (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), p. 114.

¹⁴¹ Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, pp. 113–19.

¹⁴² Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, p. 115.

¹⁴³ See John Wesley, 'Preface to the 1739 Hymn Book' quoted by Brian Frost and Stuart Jordan, *Pioneers of Social Passion: London's Cosmopolitan Methodism* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, p. 115.

¹⁴⁵ Frost and Jordan, *Pioneers of Social Passion*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁴⁶ Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, p. 113.

Methodism – a prophetic church?

Inter-subjective relationships are a necessary characteristic of the prophetic church. Through relationship, the church can experience God who works intentionally through covenanted relationships with God's people to seek justice in the developing contexts the church finds herself in. Covenantal relationships are an important aspect of the MCB's ecclesiology held within the concept of connexionalism. Connexionalism is a way of relating in which members only know themselves through relating to the other. Such relationships are understood within the covenantal relationship between people and God as well as inter-subjectively with each other. Methodist congregations are encouraged to recommit to such relationships each year in the annual Covenant Service.¹⁴⁷

This way of relating is multi-faceted. An important area for this analysis is how this connexional inter-subjectivity reveals injustice. The Conference is essentially a grass roots body being formed in the majority by representatives of the districts.¹⁴⁸ District synods and circuit meetings can use Conference mechanisms to raise local concerns in addition to the Conference listening to the representatives constituting the Conference. The Conference also includes representatives from other Methodist affiliated churches from around the world which also brings a broader perspective to its conferring. Nevertheless, the prophetic church must intentionally seek to hear from beyond itself and dominant institutional narratives.

In recent years the Conference has renewed attention to two particular constituencies which address the need to broaden dialogue. Firstly, the voices of young people are creatively facilitated through the young people's gathering "3Generate"¹⁴⁹ and have shaped the Conference's agenda. For example, 3Generate representatives have asked the Conference to address the injustices of climate change and a range of questions about human sexuality and relationships¹⁵⁰ which has positively focussed and informed the work of the Conference thus speaking the truth to the power of Conference.

¹⁴⁷ Neil Dixon, *Wonder, Love and Praise: A Companion to the Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003), p. 117.

¹⁴⁸ Within the structure of the MCB, local churches are grouped in Circuits which are in turn grouped into Districts. Each local church is represented at the Circuit Meeting which sends representatives to the District Synod which in turn sends representatives to the Methodist Conference.

¹⁴⁹ 3Generate is an annual gathering of Methodist children and young people. It aims to "create an inclusive and diverse space for the prophetic voice of children and young people to emerge and be heard, enabling them to speak courageously, and listen to God and each other. Through the process of 3Generate, children and young people are equipped to become participants in advocacy, change and growth and have an impact in their local Methodist communities. 3Generate calls the Church to listen to, and be in relationship and dialogue with and amongst, children and young people, so that change can happen together as a community." See: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/children-youth-family-ministry/3generate/> [last accessed 17 August 2020]

¹⁵⁰ The Methodist Conference, '3generate 2019 – Methodist Church and Youth Assembly', *The Conference Agenda 2020*, 3 vols (London: Methodist Publishing, 2020), II, 109-115 (p. 111).

Secondly, following the Past Cases Review of safeguarding concerns, the Conference adopted the recommendation to establish a survivors group.¹⁵¹ As this group has developed, the voices of survivors are informing the practice of the Church in safeguarding policy.¹⁵² This significant shift in focus carefully places the witness of survivors of abuse central to the response which is key in the prophetic church. While this response to safeguarding concerns could be described as prophetic, the fact that the theology of safeguarding is yet to be considered by the Conference suggests that the responses to the Past Cases Review, no matter how valid, have been formed through an extra-theological process. That said, it would be difficult to argue that the responses are not shaped by the central Methodist understanding of the love of God for all humanity.¹⁵³ Further, this extra-theological approach was precipitated by the significant public interest into the response to safeguarding concerns by all churches as well as the UK Government's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Even so, the work of the Conference in connection with Safeguarding has spoken truth to power by revealing the extent of generative cultures allowing abuse to happen within the church and spoke to the fundamental need for a cultural shift. The powerful in this situation are more than the people holding leadership roles within the Church but extends to all who are involved in the life of the Methodist Church.

Thirdly, in line with the Methodist ethos of joining the struggle for justice, the MCB is a partner in the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team ("JPIT") which is a partnership between the MCB, the United Reformed Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Quakers and the Church of Scotland. JPIT's mission statement commits the team to equip Christians to act and pray, to resource churches to reflect and campaign and speak out with a distinctively Christian voice. As of 2020 the teams work is aligned to "six hopes for society." This strategy seeks a just economy, environmental renewal, the inclusion of the marginalised, peace, a new way of doing politics characterised by listening, kindness and truthfulness and, welcome for the stranger.¹⁵⁴ Given that JPIT was instrumental in the work of the Conference with concern for poverty and climate change, further discussion on JPIT's effectiveness is implicitly considered more fully below.

Poverty: "Of Equal Value: Poverty and Inequality in the United Kingdom" (2011)

The 2011 Conference adopted the significant report "Of Equal Value: Poverty and Inequality in the United Kingdom" resourced by JPIT and written in the context of austerity economic policies pursued by the government of the day to reduce the significantly increased public debt following the 2007 banking crisis.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ The Methodist Conference, *Courage, Cost & Hope: The Report on the Past Cases Review 2013-2105* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2015), p. 39.

¹⁵² The Methodist Conference, *Conference Agenda 2018* (London: Methodist Publishing). Item 30, para 4.3. Available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-reports/conference-reports-2018/> [last accessed 11 August 2020]

¹⁵³ Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, p. 115.

¹⁵⁴ See: <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/about-us/> [last accessed 6 August 2020]

¹⁵⁵ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value: Poverty and Inequality in the United Kingdom* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2011) available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-reports/conference-reports-2011/> [last accessed 11 August 2020]. para 2.10

The report set out principles adopted by the Methodist Council¹⁵⁶ that all people are of equal value, that value is not measured economically, that the church will welcome the day when all people can achieve their God given potential, that government policies should be measured by the impact on poverty and inequality and that taxation is a contribution to the common good and a system free of abuse is critical to a just society.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore the report recommends a wide range of proposals to the Methodist people: that the Church recommits to ending the scourge of poverty, to consider personally how each member can play their own part, challenges government policies and rhetoric about the poor, promotes and contributes to a fair system of taxation, promotes safe working practices, and commits to working with the government to make the benefits system simpler, to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and reaffirms a commitment to allowing people relying on benefits to live with dignity. The report contains significant depth of analysis of the changing economic climate and its impact upon the poor including child poverty.¹⁵⁸

The report contains a significant level of detail in economic indicators and measures of poverty and inequality and sets out how a bias against the poor is seen in the British media and government documents as well as in research carried out by other authors. There is also a brief summary of work done by ecumenical partners as well as within the MCB. The report, however, only gives limited space to the voice of the people that the report is about albeit that evidence taken from organisations such Church Action on Poverty is based upon personal testimony from “truth hearings.” While the report refers briefly to the work done by local Methodist Churches, in which it is assumed a relational dimension is nurtured, the evidence is more secondary. It could be argued, therefore, that the report conceives the question of poverty from an ethical perspective suggesting the Church’s own self-understanding is that it is not a church of the poor. A contrasting approach which would be more in keeping with an understanding of the prophetic church would include hearing the voices of the poor directly as interlocutors in the Church’s reflection.¹⁵⁹ This is not perhaps how this report would be approached if it were written today as there is evidence of a shift in JPIT’s methodology since 2011. For example, in August 2020 the team have asked for witnesses with lived experience of homelessness to be central to their work on tackling homelessness.¹⁶⁰

The report compares the narrative of poverty and inequality against scripture and tradition using the Methodist quadrilateral. The scriptural analysis focusses on the incarnation of Christ and the call to love our neighbour as ourselves concluding that the call to discipleship in the 21st century is to love our neighbour as ourselves

¹⁵⁶ The Methodist Council is a committee of the Conference which has responsibility to keep under constant review the life of the Methodist Church, to indicate where change is required and to give spiritual leadership. The Council also acts on behalf of the Conference between Conferences. See *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. SO211

¹⁵⁷ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value*. section 10.1

¹⁵⁸ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value*. para 10.10

¹⁵⁹ Gerald West, ‘The Bible and the Poor: A New of Doing Theology’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 159–182 (pp. 160–61).

¹⁶⁰ JPIT, ‘What Will You Do to End Homelessness?’ available at <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/endhomelessness/> [last accessed 17 August 2020].

by showing compassion, mercy and hospitality and to challenge injustice. There is broader ecumenical insight from Roman Catholic social teaching that all are made in God's image and all deserve to be treated with dignity.¹⁶¹ From a Wesleyan tradition the reports draws on Wesley's own experience of poverty and the work of early Methodists in the relief of poverty and inequality. Furthermore, the report draws on other Conference reports such as *The Ethics of Wealth Creation* received in 1990 which affirms that all things belong to God and the discipleship duty is stewardship rather than hoarding what we have – an attitude, the report concludes, that shapes our values and actions. This approach seems to adopt the position that the vertical transcendence facilitates the ethic of horizontal relationships with the poor. A more robustly prophetic approach would be to challenge what Hull called the consuming ego and to advocate that our experience of God can be only be realised through our relationship with the other. More specifically the theological reflection could draw upon Jesus's critique of the money God in Mark's gospel.

The recommendations adopted by the Conference speak from the witness narrative as well as theological reflection. However, the narrative oversimplifies truth and power. The interpretation of the gospel command to love others as we love ourselves can be challenged with integrity. If we hold our wealth for the common good, then how is our own need measured in terms of present and long-term need alongside the need, for example, to provide for one's old age within a capitalist system without challenging the system itself? In terms of tax justice, we can identify transnational corporations who use cleverly designed international systems to exploit legal loopholes to reduce their tax burden,¹⁶² but how is this different from personal use of incentives to reduce personal tax burdens?

Further, the report assumes that the readers are the powerful as they have the power to change personal behaviours and use their voices to relieve the poverty and inequality in others. While the empowerment of people who have the means to help may be a symbol of hope to the communities living in poverty, there is a tendency towards benevolence rather than empowerment.¹⁶³ While the report does recommend engagement with the government where policies disproportionately impact the *poorest* and *most vulnerable*,¹⁶⁴ the recommendations stop short of challenging economic policy based on political judgements made by properly elected representatives¹⁶⁵ which could be viewed as complicity with harmful policies. Conceivably, this approach could be justified from the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10.25-37 where the Samaritan *relieves* the wounds of the man he finds. However, the parable teaches the identity of the neighbour not the nature of the best remedy. Reading this parable along with the command on the lawyer's lips to love your neighbour as yourself, it is a reasonable conclusion that seeking to stop the violence in the first place might be a better strategy. This would transform the action from an ethical concern to the liberation of the poor.

Furthermore, the analysis of the impact of economic policies reduces the inherent complexity of poverty and its causes into a polarity: government policy

¹⁶¹ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value*. para 3.14

¹⁶² David Haslam, *A Luta Continua ... (the Struggle Continues): Memoir of a Sometimes Radical Christian*, (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016), p. 132.

¹⁶³ *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value*. para 2.11

¹⁶⁵ The Methodist Conference, *Of Equal Value*. para 2.11

against the poor and vulnerable. Questions such as the perspective of the wealthy or the levers impacting on government policy are not explored. This reduces the possibility of curious paradoxical investigation limiting the likelihood of finding Wolf's double vision stopping instead with a scepticism against the wealthy.

While *Of Equal Value* shows the potential to be prophetic, it treats the problem of poverty from an ethical rather than a dialogical perspective limiting the opportunity for the liberation of the poor. The report oversimplifies the complexity of relationships which limits the perspective to a scepticism of the wealthy without seeking to find a relational outcome.

Mission strategy: "God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth" (2020)

Some of the criticisms of *Of Equal Value* might be addressed in the mission strategy adopted by the Conference in 2020 presented in the report *God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth*.¹⁶⁶ The strategy was built collaboratively with significant consultations around the Connexion¹⁶⁷ and emerges out of the Conference's urgent need to address institutional numerical decline. The Methodist Council adopted priorities arising out of the Church's 2017 membership statistics which included renewed focus on evangelism and prophetic mission.¹⁶⁸ The mission strategy is wide ranging and covers many aspects of MCB's ecclesiastical praxis. One aspect of the strategy, 'Church at the Margins,' is considered here. This strategy seeks to start a movement of new Christian communities "strategically seeded, led and rooted amongst the marginalised" which will live in solidarity with people experiencing poverty which will deepen community engagement.¹⁶⁹

Although the strategy is only described briefly and there are many aspects to be established, the strategy appears to be a positive development of a prophetic church. Using the "see-act-judge" model this strategy provides a basis where the experiences of people living in poverty and vulnerability can be the lens through which scripture can be read and God experienced. It provides the possibility of paradoxical curiosity and the hope of liberation from injustice rather than merely relief. The action will be locally discerned depending on the experiences of each community.

However, Hull's criticism of the Church of England's *Mission-Shaped Church* report has deep resonances read alongside *God for All*. The main criticism is the implied confusion in *God for All* of the missiological purpose. The strategy for the church at the margins implies an understanding of mission as the participation in God's mission which is to bring the Kingdom of God into the history of the world through liberation out of poverty and vulnerability. However, the insistence of seeding new Christian communities suggests the strategy sees the Church as the fruit of mission measured in terms of numerical growth.

¹⁶⁶ The Methodist Conference, 'God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth', *Conference Agenda 2020*, II, 39–82.

¹⁶⁷ The Methodist Conference, 'God for All', II, p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ The Methodist Conference, 'Reaffirming Our Calling: The Future Call of the Methodist Church', para 11, available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/> [last accessed 13 August 2020].

¹⁶⁹ The Methodist Conference, 'God for All', I, pp. 64–65.

Therefore, there is prophetic potential in the *God for All* strategy however there is confusion over the inherent understanding of the Kingdom of God. What looks like a strategy for challenging and overcoming the injustice of poverty is cloaking the desire to build a numerically larger institution. Hull would not argue that evangelisation should be eclipsed wholly by prophetic mission but he would argue for clarity in the missiological assumptions used.

Climate change: "Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change" (2009 & 2011)

The Methodist Conference first received the ecumenically produced and JPIT resourced report, *Hope in God's Future* in 2009 and recommended it to be adopted as a Statement of the Conference¹⁷⁰ which was approved by the 2011 Conference.¹⁷¹ The statement follows a see-judge-act methodology of reflection where the witness to injustice caused by climate change is presented in the scientific understanding of climate change extant in 2009. As a statement it prophetically calls for the attention of disciples to the integrity of creation – a concern for the prophetic tradition. While the statement hears the witness of the Pacific Conference of Churches which speaks of the human cost for the Pacific region,¹⁷² the statement does not hear significantly from the people most affected by climate change which makes the statement theoretical and lacks relational dynamics.

The statement's theological reflection is reminiscent of Brueggemann's work *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three urgent prophetic tasks* by facing reality, by lamenting and finding ways to hope through our actions.¹⁷³ Reflection begins with a recollection of the overarching biblical narrative of creation, reconciliation and redemption leading to the human vocation to love and do justice which extends to non-human creation as well as human. This approach calls for disciples to repent and adopt a new way of living which is less harmful for the whole of creation.¹⁷⁴ Although not referencing the Hebrew prophets, the theological approach is consistent with the Hebrew prophets concern for the natural world which is one of Hull's key themes from the prophets seen, for example, in Amos 5.6-8 where it is the abuse of justice and the poor and vulnerable which leads to ecological disaster in famines and floods and out of which a call to a different way of living is made.¹⁷⁵

In response, the statement calls for repentance for individual complicity in the structural sin that has contributed to climate change. Repentance also means changing behaviour to ameliorate the impact of climate change. Therefore, the

¹⁷⁰ A Conference statement is a document stating the judgement of the Conference on a major issue of faith or practice. Statements are intended to last for many years. See *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. Standing Order 129

¹⁷¹ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Conference, and United Reformed Church, *Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2012).

¹⁷² The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Conference, and United Reformed Church, *Hope in God's Future*, p. 17.

¹⁷³ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Conference, and United Reformed Church, *Hope in God's Future*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁴ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Conference, and United Reformed Church, *Hope in God's Future*, pp. 13–21.

¹⁷⁵ Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Re-Reading Amos, Hosea, and First Isaiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 104.

statement seeks to speak truth to the power of the reader to make informed lifestyle changes. However, power is also recognised in the Church as an institution and encourages ways the Church can reduce its carbon footprint as well as encouraging political engagement. The statement nuances the calls to action by referring to the complexities of interrelated factors contributing to climate change and how any action has consequences. For example, trying to protect poor communities by buying fair trade has a consequential environmental cost of transport.¹⁷⁶

While the statement presents a prophetic call to action in response to climate change, putting the intention of the statement into practice has been more difficult in the intervening years. One such example is the call by members of the Conference for the Central Finance Board, the trustees charged with managing MCB's investments and pension funds, to divest of fossil fuel companies. The Conference of 2020 received a report from the committee which advises the Central Finance Board on the ethical implications of investment concerning climate change and fossil fuels. The committee had been asked in 2017 to consider divestment from fossil fuel companies which are not aligned with the Paris Agreement on climate change to limit global temperature rises to well below 2°C. In conclusion the committee recommended divesting from ten out of fifteen fossil fuel companies.¹⁷⁷ Members of the 2020 Conference attempted to amend the resolution because the committee did not suggest divesting from companies who were only *closely* aligned. The financial impact of this proposed resolution was judged by the Conference's finance committee to be significant because of the lost investment income from lucrative fossil fuel companies which would endanger investment returns for the Methodist Church pension funds and increase the investment risk to "significant."¹⁷⁸ This dialogue between the committee and Conference members demonstrates the need to pay attention to the complexities of injustice and the way to establish justice. That said, it also demonstrates the difficulty for an institution to become self-disinterested to pursue prophetic action. On one level this appears a utopian hope ignorant of the needs of the real world. However, such an approach is consistent with the prophetic *kenosis* of Jesus (Philippians 2.7).¹⁷⁹

Grass roots movements

Anecdotally, at least, the influence of historical groups such as the Methodist Peace Fellowship has diminished over recent years. In their place, others have been established such as the Network of Methodist Activists which is an informal network of activists from both campaigning and community engagement backgrounds.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Conference, and United Reformed Church, *Hope in God's Future*, p. 35.

¹⁷⁷ The Methodist Conference, 'Climate change and fossil fuels: response to Memorial 32 (2017) and Conference reply' in *Conference Agenda 2020*, II, pp. 246–265.

¹⁷⁸ The Methodist Conference, 'The Methodist Conference 2020 Notices of Motion', 2020 available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-2020/daily-record-papers-and-notices-of-motion/> [last accessed 17 August 2020].

¹⁷⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁸⁰ See: <https://groups.io/g/network-of-methodist-activists> [Accessed 6 August 2020]

Before the Methodist Conference in 2020, the group published an *Open Letter to the British Methodist Church* which has been signed by 700 Methodists.¹⁸¹

The letter sets out a vision for the priorities of the church which reflect a more holistic understanding of mission as *missio Dei* as opposed to strategies for institutional survival. The letter articulates a prophetic vision in which the church must become disinterested in itself to allow engagement with God's mission. Like the Hebrew prophets, the letter speaks in a time of crisis, in this case the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic which has seen global restrictions in movement and human activity to reduce the spread of the virus. The letter identifies the damage executed by wealth accumulation at the expense of indispensable yet undervalued service industry employees; the inequalities in society and the discriminating impact of the virus on poor and BAME communities; that less human movement has positive impacts on the non-human and human creation; and, a growing realisation in the value of embracing the other.

From this witness the letter "judges" the situation in the light of the gospel in which the writers draw on the "birth pain" motif found in Mark's gospel and encourages attention to Jesus' prophetic words to realise a new reality that embraces and values the other in recognition that personal wellbeing is bound up in the wellbeing of others. The letter prophetically reimagines life beyond Covid-19, helped in some ways by the possibilities witnessed by the writers during lockdown. This leads to the "action" in the call for the church to be different after Covid-19 such that the church models God's inclusive love and justice, becoming a church on the margins, campaigning and paying attention to the grass roots. The letter takes the key themes of the prophetic tradition and seeks the wellbeing of the community through societal ethics rather than personal morality.

Open letters are necessarily obscure regarding the intended recipients but nonetheless the letter urges resistance to unjust structures. But what is "truth" and "power"? Most obviously we might assume the truth is the injustice that Covid-19 has uncovered and the power is the church "authorities." It is clear that this is addressed to the church rather than the power brokers within wider society. As we have discussed above, the "power" within the church is embodied within the membership who through their discipleship and participation in the courts of the church, have the means to change their own behaviour and influence the Church. But what about "truth"? In accusing the wealth accumulators of causing damage, a particular interpretation of truth is assumed. But, as Volf argues, simple truth statements often cause violence to others.

There is evidence, therefore, through the Network of Methodist Activists that within the church there is a prophetic voice expressed through the *Open Letter* which displays our prophetic methodology to convey a message consistent with the Hebrew prophets. However, the letter needs to consider further the complexities of truth and power.

Conclusion

This chapter has evaluated three examples of the espoused missiology of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Britain since the turn of the twenty-first century as well as evidence of the grass roots movement the Network of Methodist

¹⁸¹ See: <https://methodistopenletter.wordpress.com/> [last accessed 23 August 2020]

Activists. This sample was drawn to reflect significant areas of socio-economic concern within the Church's national context. The methodology developed in chapter 3 has been used to facilitate the evaluation within the scope of this paper recognising Beck's argument that what the Conference decides is not always what local churches do. It would be a valuable piece of additional research to research examples of local church praxis which would reveal whether the present-day Methodist Church in Britain exhibits a prophetic missiology as John Hull understood the term.

In the examples used in this chapter, there is some evidence of a prophetic methodology. Firstly, this is found in the foundational charism of connexionalism and how the Conference has listened to the voices of young people and abuse survivors. Specifically, the prophetic methodology is seen most strongly in the *Open Letter* written by the Network of Methodist Activists. The letter drew on lived reality, reflected on it theologically and helped the reader to reimagine what life could be like. Yet despite the Conference being an essentially grass roots movement, the report *Of Equal Value* and the statement *Hope in God's Future* use a mainly theoretical witness rather than the actual experience of people living with poverty or climate change. This is to the detriment of the reports which frame responses from an ethical rather than dialogical perspective which limits the scope of the proposed actions. Consequently, both reports tend to present one perspective of truth which is too narrow an approach under the condition of post-modern plurality. This results in a narrow theological reflection based on the command to love your neighbour. As important as this overarching theological motif is, the theological reflection would be improved by specifically dealing with the prophetic tradition found in the scriptures.

While both reports suggest taking action to challenge governments, the prevailing ethos is to challenge the power of the reader. While this supports Graham Smith's argument seen in chapter 1, it has been arrived at out of deference to challenging political ideologies. When these factors are combined, the Church seems to accept the role of the reliever of suffering rather than the prophetic liberator. It should be noted, however, that through JPIT and the Survivor's Group which arose out of the Past Cases Review of historical cases of abuse, there is a growing desire to be in dialogue with people suffering under injustice which will redress this imbalance.

This chapter has also recognised that implementing the recommendations of the statement *Hope in God's Future* has been more difficult in recent years as the Conference has struggled to become self-disinterested as evidenced by the continuing reluctance to forego the lucrative returns such investments give.

In considering the "Church at the Margins" strategy in the 2020 *God for All* report, the Conference accepted what looks like a significant prophetic scheme. However, the concept appears to confuse mission which is to reveal the Kingdom of God through the Church's participation in God's mission with the missional imperative to build the institution of the Church. While evangelisation is part of a missiological blend and should not be discounted, care needs to be taken to be clear about the assumptions and motivation underpinning the strategy.

In conclusion, therefore, there are signs of the prophetic church in the examples used in this chapter. There are, however, areas where the Conference could develop its methodology to show greater consistency with Hull's thesis. Firstly, the Conference needs to have greater clarity on how mission is understood and how decisions enact the mission of God which needs to be more clearly prophetic within a

broader understanding of mission. Secondly, the Conference needs to continue to develop the ethic of hearing directly from the voices of people suffering injustice. Thirdly, the scope of theological reflection should be expanded to consider the prophetic witness of scripture. Finally, the Conference needs to deepen self-disinterest to encourage prophetic actions which may reveal the Kingdom of God at the expense of the institution of the Church.

Conclusion

This paper has used Hull's seminal work *Towards the Prophetic Church* to develop a prophetic methodology which has been used to critique and suggest developments for the work of the Methodist Conference of the present-day Methodist Church in Britain.

Hull's concept of the prophetic church grew throughout many of Hull's published works as his concern grew with the way in which Modernity and Western imperialism distorted the revelation of scripture which significantly changed the missiological understanding of the church. Despite Hull's diagnosis that Modernity is the root of the duality between our relationship with God and relationships with other people can be challenged by a longer historical perspective, his conclusions remain. Put simply, the church became over-focussed on being the fruit of God's mission rather than participating in God's mission to the world (notwithstanding the conceptual difficulty of discerning what is of God). Hull saw that the corrective to this move was rediscovering the prophetic church and called the church to shift from a Cartesian duality to rediscover the experience of God through inter-subjective relationships.

For Hull, the foundation for the prophetic church is the prophetic revelation seen in the Hebrew prophets and in the gospel revelation of Jesus Christ as prophet as opposed to other definitions of prophecy being futurology or the ecstatic immediacy of God. Hull argues that the church needs to focus on the spirit of the prophets and look beneath the Christological interpretive overlays to find in Jesus a prophet of God. Hull sees the key themes emerging from this tradition as: reconceiving of society as a community; resisting unjust structures, correct worship, the integrity of creation, the experience of God and hope. Further, Hull argues that the more problematic elements of the prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible such as violence, sexual violence, and prostitution can be carefully interpreted to support the main argument to challenge injustice. In Christ, Hull found the beginnings of a revival movement that proclaimed the Kingdom of God. In this Kingdom, Jesus argued against the "money god" and the concentration of wealth; inhabited an ethic of reconciliation and pointed towards post-ascension revelation through relationship.

Taking this broad understanding of Hull's thesis, this paper developed a prophetic methodology which was used to evaluate the prophetic nature of the present-day Methodist Church in Britain. This methodology uses the concept of the prophet-hood of all believers, liberation theology's base ecclesial communities "see-judge-act" methodology, the Methodist quadrilateral and John Paul Lederach's *Moral Imagination*. The methodology states that prophetic action is born within the centrality of relationship which reveal injustice, it uses the Methodist quadrilateral to reflect on the witness to injustice in order to form actions. This see-judge-act model must take into account the practice of paradoxical curiosity, creativity and enable risks to be taken for the sake of prophetic mission.

The methodology developed has been used to assess specific aspects of the Methodist Church in Britain in the twenty-first century. The charism of connexionalism was considered a vital way in which the Conference can create the inter-subjectivity that lies at the foundation of a prophetic church. Examples such as the engagement with young people and the survivors of abuse group suggest the Conference is finding creative and innovative ways of hearing the witness from the

engagement of the Church with the wider world. Taking work done by the Joint Public Issues Team in partnership with the Conference in respect of poverty and climate change found areas where the work could be developed to be more prophetically coloured. Specifically, it is argued that there needs to be: a greater attention to the inter-subjective witness to injustice; broader acceptance of complexity in what is truth and power and a move from being the reliever of the effects of injustice to challenging the sources of injustice and a greater resolve to become self-disinterested for sake of prophetic action. In the case of the “Church at the Margins” strategy, it was found that there was a confusion between Kingdom focussed mission and church building mission. While evangelisation is an integral missiological component, there needs to be greater clarity on the motivations behind the strategy. Finally, there are clear signs of a prophetic spirit within the *Open Letter to the Methodist Church* which demonstrated the elements of the prophetic methodology.

While limited to evaluating the espoused prophetic missiology in a narrow range of reports to the Conference, there will be value in extending this research to be broader in scope and to consider the prophetic potential of the inhabited theology of local Methodist Churches. In addition, the conditions caused by Covid-19 and global Black Lives Matter demonstrations prevalent during the preparation of this paper suggest that consideration of broader theological methodologies such as black liberation, feminist and womanist theologies would be beneficial for the wider church.

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