

## Study 6

### A FINAL DISCUSSION - THE PRIORITIES AGAIN!

In the light of these stories of Peter and your reflections on them and church life today read through the *Priorities* once again (together with any you may have added during Study 1)

- From the Bible passages you have read what have you found most challenging in relation to the nature of the Church and its place in 21st century society? What have you learned in all this?
- Are there any of the *Priorities* that are more or less important than others? Why is this? What implications does this have for you and for your church?
- Are there any other *Priorities* that you would like to add to the list in the light of studying and discussing these Bible passages in Acts? What are the implications of this?
- How far in your opinion are the *Priorities* dependent on one another?
- What does this mean for the life of the whole Church and in particular the life of your church?
- What action would you recommend that your church takes over the next year to begin to implement the *Priorities*?
- To put this into practice, devise an action plan with a time scale and some short and medium term aims and objectives.

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The **Methodist** Church

# Priorities for The Methodist Church

*A Series of Bible Studies  
Encouraging Exploration,  
Discussion and Reflection*

The M:Guides are a series of study packs produced by the Methodist Church Training & Development Officers in the London, Nottingham & Derby and Lincoln & Grimsby Districts

M:Guides

## PRIORITIES FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH.

The Methodist Conference of 2004 adopted a number of *Priorities* which are meant to act as a focus and framework for all parts of the life and work of the Church. They build upon the *Our Calling* process which set out the core purpose of the Church. The *Priorities* are:

*In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:*

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church.

*As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:*

- 1) Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer
- 2) Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor – in Britain and worldwide
- 3) Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved
- 4) Encouraging fresh ways of being church
- 5) Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible

These short Bible studies set out to explore the *Priorities* and help you reflect on them in the light of your own experience.

### *Priority 4*

If you read on into chapter 11:1 – 18 you will discover something more of the struggle the early church had to come to terms with and the fresh way of being the Church that was a consequence of the story.

- Where did the boundary breaking initiative originate?
- What aspect of the story do you think Peter and other members of the early church would have struggled most to come to terms with?
- How would you describe the fresh way of being church that resulted from these events?
- What fresh ways of being church have you encountered?
- At what points have you struggled with them?
- What would be your dream of a fresh way of being church?

### *Priority 5*

- How far in your opinion did Peter have to learn to be people-centred? How was he helped to that point?
- What do you think the story suggests were the main obstacles that he had to overcome?
- Are there possible tensions between being God-centred and being people-centred?
- How might we best resolve it if there is?
- What are the main issues in church life today that you find prevent the Church from being more people-centered ... or God-centered ...?
- How can we best handle them?

- How should the Church respond to issues of military and other violence, particularly when they are claimed to be in support of justice?
- What ethical dilemmas might Cornelius have had to face?
- What issues of justice might the Christian in the armed forces or supporting a government's military action face today?

### *Priority 3*

- What do you think give Peter the confidence to speak to Cornelius and his household?
- How easy was it for him to take the step of receiving hospitality from a Gentile, and speak to a Gentile audience?
- What sort of difficulties might he be facing? What situations might be similar to that of Peter and Cornelius might we be facing in the Church today?
- What can we learn from the story about how they should be handled?
- What are the main differences in the speech Peter made to Cornelius from the one he made in Acts 4?
- Instead of quoting the Old Testament, what does Peter base his words on?
- Notice how the conversation develops between Peter and Cornelius, giving Peter the opportunity to speak about this faith – how important do you think 'dialogue' is in evangelism?
- What might be the problems with it?
- Peter was accompanied by some believers from Joppa – what does that have to suggest about evangelism?
- What method of evangelism would you recommend to the Church?
- What methods should be avoided?
- How far can the insights gained from this story be relevant for the evangelism of the Church today

## STUDY 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Priorities for The Methodist Church**

*The Priorities* have developed at a crucial time for the Methodist Church and indeed for many other Churches in this country. We live in a time that has seen churches decline numerically and when knowledge of the Christian faith has diminished. We live in a world revolutionized by technology. We have the experience of living in a global society where we meet members of the great faiths of the world every day. Cultural change is all around us.

#### **Questions:**

- What do you consider have been the most significant changes that you have experienced personally?
- In your experience, how has the Church responded to meet those changes?
- What might still remain to be done?

The *Priorities* set out to help us find ways of meeting the challenges of church life today. They are challenging and disturbing. But we need them if we are to remain faithful to our Lord and if we are to bring His good news to today's world in a relevant way.

#### **Questions:**

- As you read through the *Priorities* were there any points at which you felt strongly in agreement, or disagreed, or felt they did not go far enough, or perhaps did not see what they were getting at?
- Are there other ones you think should have been included?
- Why is this?

## STUDY 5

### The Bible Study Passages

The Bible passages chosen for to help explore the *Priorities* are from the Acts of the Apostles. They are both stories of Peter. There are a number of reasons why these passages are especially suitable.

- They come at a moment in the life of the Church when it was still a small group struggling to understand what God was calling it to be and to do and how to live out that calling in a complex and often intimidating world.
- Peter, the leader of the early church was a man of humble origins (see Acts 4:13), living originally in Galilee, which would have given him some awareness of the different cultures and religions of the Roman Empire. No doubt like many of his contemporaries and many of us he would have struggled to make sense of the complicated religious world and puzzled over what God was doing.
- Peter is a favourite character in the Gospels. As we read the stories about him we see aspects of ourselves reflected in him. We admire and also tremble at his impetuosity, or the strength of his friendship, or the experience of dreadful failure and of forgiveness. His capacity to make mistakes and to do his best to learn from them is a mark of his ordinariness and his greatness. Such qualities it seems are what God can use in the service of the Church.
- The determination Peter showed to find a way to serve his Lord faithfully and to follow the command 'feed my sheep' shows someone we can identify with as we face those same challenges in our different situation today.

### Acts 10:1 – 48

Read the passage through.

#### *Priority 1*

- At what points in the story does the 'hour of prayer' or moments of prayer shape the action?
- How important does this suggest that prayer is in the development of the life of the church?
- How far do you find prayer is as important as this story suggests? How might we respond?
- People often struggle with prayer, why might this be do you think?
- There are many different ways of praying, which ones work best for you?
- Which ones do you find most difficult?
- What are the points at which God-centred worship appear in this story?
- Peter seems almost taken by surprise by the events and the possible moment of worship. Does worship need surprising moments if it is to be God-centred?
- How can we ensure that our worship is God-centred, particularly when faced with a more routine experience than that of Peter and Cornelius?
- How important is the place of the Spirit in worship?
- At what points would you see the Spirit at work in the worship of your church today?
- What would make worship ideal for you?

#### *Priority 2*

It is interesting that Cornelius is not only a Gentile, but an officer in the Imperial army, part of the occupying power. There are no real signs of tension because of this in the story, although in the early church Christians would eventually resist military service and the oaths of allegiance to the Emperor it involved. History shows how structures of violence and oppression are both established and resisted by force.

## STUDY 4

In this passage we find one of the great stories of the early church. When Peter and Cornelius met they were both dramatically changed as the huge cultural and religious divide that separated Jew and Gentile was crossed. This is one of the most significant stories of all for the Church as it seeks to understand its mission today. It is one of two stories that finds Peter in Joppa. The first is another miracle story, a very intimate one, but every bit as powerful as the first one we looked at. Dorcas is raised from the dead!

### Acts 9:36 – 43

Read the passage through

#### Priority 5

Dorcas is also known as Tabitha, two different languages, one meaning - a clear sign of a world of different languages and cultures.

- Do you have any experience of people known by different names to different people?
- What might this suggest about their relationships and world they live in?
- What sorts of sensitivities might we need to exercise?
- How important do you feel it is to be called by the name you like?
- How far would you agree this is part of being people centred?  
(For further thoughts on the importance of names for evangelism and mission see 'Tell Us Our Names' by C.S. Song – Orbis 1984)

#### Priority 2

- What does the character and actions of Dorcas show about what it meant to *belong* amongst the first believers?
- Make a list of all those you can think of in your church involved in any ways in good works and charity, particularly those that would count as supporting community development and justice.
- How far is it important that the Church as a whole, rather than individual members be involved in such activity?
- What might your local church's role be in working for this priority?

## Questions

- Which is your favourite story about Peter?
- What is it that appeals to you particularly?
- How far and for what reasons do you think that his experience might have relevance for us today?

At the start of the Acts of the Apostles Peter is the main character. In the first few chapters we see the disciples move from the sense of failure that led them to abandon Jesus on the cross, through the extraordinary moments of the discovery of his resurrection, to a recognition that they had been specially called to carry on the mission that God had intended for them and for the salvation of the world. That was a lot to learn! The early stories give a sense of their struggles to do so. They worked it all out step by step.

## A Problem

It would have been convenient to have had an easy decision at this point about how to construct this study! A section dedicated to each *Priority* in turn would have been ideal. However the Bible and the *Priorities* do not work like that. Stories interweave and themes develop from and depend on one another.

The approach that has been taken is to remain true to the stories as they develop and to discuss the *Priorities* as they occur. This will show how closely they work together.

In a short study like this there is only time to look at a selection of the stories. The ones that have been chosen are:

- Chapters 3: 1-26 and 4: 1-37  
The healing of the crippled beggar and its consequences
- Chapters 9: 36-43 and 10: 1-48  
Peter in Joppa and Caesarea and the meeting with Cornelius and its consequences

You might like to read these passages together at this point to finish Study 1.

## STUDY 2

### Acts 3:1 – 26:

Read the whole chapter through.

- **Acts 3:1 – 10**

In this fascinating and lovely story of a miracle of transformation, the questions will focus on the nature and impact of that transformation. Questions about ‘can or did miracles happen?’ will not be dealt with here. In the memory of the early church, however it happened, a life was transformed and the consequences of that transformation shaped the disciples understanding of what God was doing and wanted them to do.

#### *Priority 1*

- At which points in this story do you find the themes of God-centred worship and prayer?
- What impact did the healed man have on the worship in the temple at the hour of prayer?
- How far might the worship have been more or less God-centred as a result?
- How important to you and in what ways is a regular ‘hour of prayer’ in seeking God’s will?
- In today’s complex lifestyles what are the factors that make such regular worship or prayer times difficult?
- How can the Church best respond?
- What implications might this have for discovering ‘fresh ways of being church’?

#### *Priority 2*

The crippled man would no doubt have counted as amongst the ‘deprived and poor’. He was certainly amazed and delighted to experience the liberation of healing! People brought him to the Temple to the place where he could find help – can you think of other New Testament stories where people acted in the same way?

- What model might that offer for the church in its response to those in need?

#### *Priority 4*

- At what points can you see fresh ways of being church emerging, and in what ways?
- What do you think was at the root of these changes for the disciples?

#### *Priority 5*

- In what ways can you see developing in this passage a culture that is people-centred and flexible?
- How far and at what points does the Church today need to become more people-centred and flexible and what does this mean in practice in your context?
- How difficult are the any changes likely to be?
- In your opinion, within the passage how well did they do ?

(If you read on into Chapter 5 you will find that it was not all plain sailing!)

## Acts 4:12

This is one of the most discussed verses in the Bible today where Christians are living amongst those of other faiths.

*(For a full discussion see 'Listening to People of Other Faiths', by Claire Disbery, B.R.F. 2004.)*

One way of understanding the verse is to interpret it as simply appropriate to the context in which it was spoken. However all Bible passages challenge us to think about their application as we look to them for guidance in the situations we face today.

- How helpful or unhelpful do you find this verse in shaping our attitudes to people of other faiths?
- What is your experience of discussing faith with people of other religions?
- What lessons might we have to learn from them?
- What consequences does that experience have for the way the Church might handle evangelism?
- In such a complex area where not everybody agrees that answers are black and white, how do you think we should understand evangelism and how should we go about it?
- Someone once said 'friends and family are the hardest to evangelize'. How far do you agree?
- Why might this be so?
- What might be the consequences for the way we go about evangelism as individuals and as a church?

## Acts 4: 23 – 37

Read the passage through.

Here is a snapshot of life in the earliest church.

- What was the impact of the experiences of Peter and John on their friends?
- What place does worship and prayer have in this story?

Many of us have experience of beggars on the streets today.

- How do you feel about them and usually deal with them?
- In your opinion how far do they count as the 'most deprived and poor' in the world today?
- Who would you say are the most deprived and poor?
- Peter and John helped the man in the context of worship. What lessons might we have to learn from their example?
- In what ways do you think we can be most effective in implementing the second *Priority*?
- Read the following passage and reflect upon what it says.

*"In John, Chapter 5, Jesus healed a man who had been sick for 38 years. He was lying near a pool of water. When the waters of the pool were stirred, they carried therapeutic powers. This was not a superstition but something a man had witnessed who had been lying by the side of the pool for decades. He was sick. The treatment was free and within his sights. Yet he could not get to it. Why? He explained to Jesus that his problem was that he did not have anyone who could put him into the water when it was stirred. No one cared for him.*

*Jesus asked him to pick up his mat and walk. He did. And it was a Sabbath. In Israel you could forget whether it was Tuesday or Thursday, but no one ever forgot that it was Sabbath. Their society was so well organised that in no time the Jewish authorities (vs, 10) knew that this little, unknown man had dared to break the Sabbath rule; he had picked up his bed and was walking. An on-the-spot inquiry began. How efficient. But that was precisely the problem. An establishment which didn't care for a man for 38 years was so prompt in caring for its own stupid rules. The sick man had complained to Jesus that his problem was not that he was sick or that treatment was not available. His problem was that the society had no compassion.*

*It was not by mistake that Jesus asked him to take up his bed and walk on a Sabbath. Jesus asked him to challenge this inhuman society by a deliberate act of defiance of its rule. God had provided the stirred-up pool of water for the healing of this man. It was the social pool of a stagnant, selfish society that needed to be stirred up for the healing of men like him.*

## STUDY 3

*This was precisely what Jesus did. He not only healed the man; he asked him to break the Sabbath rule, which led to an attempt by the establishment at Jesus' life*

*(John 5:18) "Truth and Social Reform Vishal Mangalwadi published by Spire (1989)*

- What are your reactions to this passage and what might the consequences be for the Church?

Someone said 'the worst poverty is being forgotten'?

- What do you think they might have meant?
- Who are the poor we are in danger of forgetting or simply not noticing?
- What might the Church do about that?

In his play *'The Gold Crowned Jesus'* the Korean poet Kim Chi Ha describes the busy heart of a great city where a magnificent statue of Jesus dominates the square. People rush by everyday. Only the homeless and destitute linger at the statue's feet and pay it any real attention. As they gaze at the stone eyes they sense great pain and in a moment of insight somehow connect the pain with the beautiful golden crown. One of them climbs up and removes the crown – and the miracle happens, the statue begins to come to life and Jesus speaks: 'I have been closed up in this stone for a long, long time...because you have come close to me I can speak now. My power alone is not enough, people like you must help liberate me ... only those, poor and suffering like yourself who seek to help the poor can give me life again. You removed the gold crown from my head and so freed my lips to speak.'

But a passer-by spots the crown being removed, calls the police, the crown is placed back on Jesus' head. The statue returns once again to stone. ('The Gold Crowned Jesus, by Kim Chi Ha, Orbis 1978)

- What might the message of the play suggest about new ways of being church and a culture that is people-centered and flexible?

**Acts 3:11– 26** Peter's act of generosity has unforeseen consequences!

Read the passage through

### *Priority 3*

- From where do you think Peter's confidence to speak of God and faith has come?
- What lessons might there be here for our evangelism?
- How natural do you find it to talk about your faith and to whom?
- What are the reasons for this?
- What would make it easier or more difficult for you?

Peter was in a situation where he did not have much choice about speaking, he was faced with questions and needed to offer an explanation.

- What might that suggest about the ways we set out to be evangelists?

Peter tells the story of Jesus, and backs it up with words and stories from the Old Testament.

- How far would this have made sense to the people he was speaking to in the story?
- In today's world what stories, words, experiences or resources might the Church use to help people make sense of the story of Jesus?

**Acts 4:1 – 22** Peter and John are on trial.

Read the passage through.

- How well do you think the authorities handle this situation?
- What are the main problems they face?
- How far do you think there might be lessons in this for the way we live as a church today?