

# **OXFORD TALES: Reports Of Recent Pilgrims**

## **British Methodism As I Saw It**

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A casual visitor to the British Isles would not have the opportunity of observing Methodism in the same manner as would a delegate to the Ecumenical Methodist Conference at Oxford, England. This session was held for a ten-day period beginning August 28, 1951, with about 1,000 delegates and visitors present from all over the world. It proved to be a meeting of great interest from many angles. It afforded a splendid opportunity for the writer to observe British Methodism.

The churches are interesting. In the minds of the British there is a division between churches and chapels. One Methodist preacher guide told us that in Bristol there was a church which held to all the traditions and majored on ritual and fine music. When we passed another church building in another part of town, he stated that this was, in reality, a Wesley chapel rather than a church, and explained that the music there did not hold to traditional standards, but catered to young people and a popular style of singing. When asked about the attendance in the two churches, however, he indicated that it was very sparse in the church, but that the chapel was full each Sunday.

The British ministry is divided into two groups—the ordained ministers and the lay ministers. There are many more lay ministers than ordained. When inquiry was made about the preachers wearing clerical garb, the explanation was that this was the only way to distinguish between the ordained minister and the lay minister, and that it was customary for the ordained man to wear his clerical garb at all times, especially when attending any type of church service. The lay minister is held in high regard, and there is no reflection on his ministry by the ordained men. Usually there are a number of lay ministers who assist the pastor in holding the services on the various circuits. The churches are usually organized on the circuit basis, sometimes one superintendent pastor having as many as 25 or 30 churches under his direction. In one case, a

circuit has 29 chapels which are served by two ordained ministers and three lay ministers. Arrangements are made so that a service is held in each church at least once every Sunday.

British ministers receive a uniform salary. At the present time it is 400 pounds, which in American money is \$1120. In addition to this, they have a parsonage. In the cities and largest circuits, the superintendent pastor is granted an additional allowance to help take care of his transportation expenses. This is really a very meager living, and British ministers are comparatively poor with opportunity to enjoy very few of the luxuries of life.

The laymen are given more definite responsibility in the churches than is ordinarily found in this country. The stewards seem to have more authority and take greater initiative in looking after matters of the church, including such things as taking the offerings, seating the people, and providing for entertainment and transportation.

Most of the churches follow the style initiated by John Wesley with the pulpit in the center and with very few evidences of ritualistic furniture. Explanation was made by one pastor to the effect that British Methodism lays emphasis upon consecrated personality rather than upon consecrated furniture. The pulpit in the center is always a reminder that preaching is more essential than ritual. This, of course, grows out of the revolt from the church of England which always has the divided pulpit. The writer observed, however, that most of the churches have an altar back of the pulpit which resembles the high altar in the churches of England.

One of the most striking things about British Methodist churches is that most of them seem to have been built to house from one-fourth to one-half more people than they have members. One British preacher, who had been in America preaching for the summer, stated that he was astonished to find that a church of 1,200 had built an auditorium costing \$200,000 which seated only 800. He stated that in England this would have been reversed. A church having 800 members would have built an auditorium to seat 1,200 so that the unsaved and friends of other denominations might visit their church. Inquiry about church attendance in England, however, indicated that on the average the attendance relative to membership was somewhat higher than in America, but this applied usually to the evening service rather than to the Sunday morning hours of worship.