

Saturday 2 October 2021: Almighty Love

My starting point for these reflections was a number of hymns that have special meaning and significance for me in my Christian journey. That most of these have become so over the ten years of Methodist Women in Britain's existence says much about how big a part MWiB plays in my life.

Charles Wesley's "Captain of Israel's host, and Guide" (StF 459) is by far the oldest of these hymns, and the one which appears first in my story. It was sung by the MWiB Connexional Forum to close the one-day meeting at which, to my amazement, I had been elected to become President. Talk of abiding beneath God's shadow, being protected by his love, meant so much then as I set off on a journey into the unknown.

Yet it is the words of the second verse which have meant more to me over the past 19 months, as we have lived through the covid pandemic. Like many others, when the first lockdown was imposed, I was shaken, frightened and anxious. What might happen to me and my family? What about those whose employment and earnings stopped overnight? Would the NHS be overwhelmed?



The last two lines sprang into my mind very early on "... as far from danger as from fear, while love, almighty love, is near." They reminded me, as I sang them to myself, that whatever the answers to my questions were to be, God is there for us, guiding us, protecting us, loving us. What relief that certainty brought to all my fears and worries.

Isaiah 40:31 (NIV) tells us that "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Whatever may be on your heart today, may you have that hope in the Lord, and know his love to be very near to you.

Let us pray for anyone in need of calm and reassurance, that they too may feel his love. The rainbow has become a much-loved symbol of hope, reassurance and gratitude since the pandemic began, and here is a recent favourite.

Saturday 9 October 2021: Let Us Serve Each Other

My starting point for these reflections was a number of hymns that have special meaning and significance for me in my Christian journey.

In preparation for my term as President, I needed to choose a theme on which to focus. “Brother, sister, let me serve you” (StF 611) had become very special to me over the preceding few years, as both my parents became unwell, moved into residential care together, and later died. We had time to talk, reflecting on their long and happy lives, so amongst the bleakness and sadness, there were special moments of intimacy and joy. (I chose the phrase “Pilgrims and Companions” from verse 2 as my theme.)

However, verse 3 says “I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear; I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.” I tried to do that for both my parents as they faced the end of their earthly lives, and I regard that as a great privilege and a final act of love and service I could give them.

I have now sung the hymn in many different times and places, finding new layers of meaning in it each time. One was that of actually realising what it means to “pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too”. One of the strengths of MWiB is that many women are willing to lead, and capable of leading, as officers in circuit, district and connexional roles.



But does that mean we sometimes lack the grace to let others help us? I know that is true for me, yet when I opened up to the service and support of my colleagues, when I let them be my servant too, the results of our combined efforts were so much the better for it.

Let us pray that we may have the grace to let others be our servants, and combine all our endeavours to bring company, light, empathy and harmony into situations where they are so needed.

Saturday 16 October 2021: Have you heard God's voice?

My starting point for these reflections was a number of hymns that have special meaning and significance for me in my Christian journey.

On only our 4th anniversary, at the Methodist Conference of 2015, MWiB was invited to lead



Tuesday morning prayers at Conference. This felt like a valued endorsement of our ongoing contribution to the life of the Methodist Church. Revd Steve Wild and Dr Jill Barber, the new President and Vice-President of Conference, had a series of 4 postcards of art works, used as a focus for their year in office. Anne Browse and I were to write prayers prompted by one of these cards, a portrait of Dinah Morris, a fictional character in “Adam Bede” by George Eliot. The hymn was also chosen for us, StF 662. I had sung it before, but it became extra special after that time.

Every line consists of a question, a challenge to us in our lives to respond to God's call, to serve even through difficulties, to subdue violence, to speak up for others, to share hospitality and our faith, to campaign for justice. Even the refrain consists of questions – “Will you walk the path that will cost you much and embrace the pain and sorrow? Will you trust in One who entrusts to you the disciples of tomorrow?”

The whole hymn challenges us to act, speak, pray in a way that MWiB does too, through our many campaigns for justice. The final refrain turns the questions around positively.

Let us affirm, as that refrain does, that “**We will** walk the path that will cost us much, and embrace the pain and sorrow. **We will** trust in One who entrusts to us the disciples of tomorrow.” Reflect on where you might challenge yourself to go that bit further this week in serving God.

Saturday 23 October 2021: The Lord's my Shepherd

My starting point for these reflections was a number of hymns that have special meaning and significance for me in my Christian journey.

That two hymns in StF and a Psalm (NIV) should start with the exact same phrase – the Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want – surely tells us that the message, though simple, is profound. I could recite the whole of Psalm 23 from my Church of England primary school, and grew up singing the Scottish Psalter version of the hymn. However, it is the modern hymn, by Stuart Townend (StF 481) which I love to sing now. Like its predecessor, it is often sung at funeral services; I first sang it at that for a dear local preacher friend, and many of us sang it at the funeral of Julie Hulme.

This year's Chelsea Flower Show included the Bible Society's Psalm 23 garden – beautiful greenery, slowly moving waters, subdued shades of flower – which the designer describes as a restorative psalm, one of solace and encouragement. You can read and watch more about this at the RHS website.



The words of the hymn's refrain, set to a beautiful harmonised tune, speak to me so powerfully.

“And I will trust in you alone, and I will trust in you alone, for your endless mercy follows me, your goodness will lead me home.”

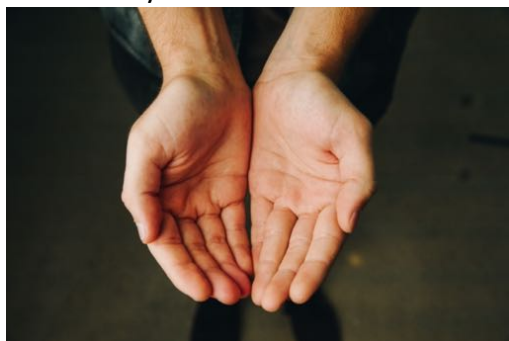
This has been a comfort to me again and again, during the lonely and worrying times we experienced in 2020, and at other times of personal difficulty. God loves us and cares for us in this earthly life, and will lead us into the house of the Lord when it is over. Pray for anyone known to you, maybe even for yourself, if they or you have lost that great trust, that it may be restored to them.

Saturday 30 October 2021: Let Love be Real

My starting point for these reflections was a number of hymns that have special meaning and significance for me in my Christian journey.

The last of these is StF 615, “Let love be real, in giving and receiving”. I am not quite sure just **when** it was, but I clearly recall **where and how** I first heard this. It was in an MWiB Task Group meeting in Methodist Church House, Alison Judd introduced us to it, and we sang it quietly and prayerfully together, 5 or 6 of us seated round a table, holding hands.

As someone who in my earlier life was subject, to a degree, to coercive control in a relationship, I was moved to tears by some of the phrases used. Verse 3 says “Let love be real, with no manipulation, no secret wish to harness or control”. Sadly, many women in this country and around the world do not experience this real love, but the opposite. MWiB



and Women’s Network before it, have raised awareness within the church of the issue of domestic violence, of the sexual assaults which often accompany the trafficking of women and girls, and of the ongoing manipulation and control experienced by women and girls in India, particularly but not only amongst the Dalits.

Yet we only have to look at the murders this year in London of two innocent young women, Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa, at the hands of strangers, to see that violence against women continues and is close to home. Sometimes it seems to me that with grooming and the pressures of social media, we have gone significantly backwards in this country since I was in my 20s and 30s.

Like the Thursdays in Black movement, let us pray for an end to rape and violence against women and girls. And that they might all experience the love referred to in verse 2 – “Let love be real, not grasping or confining, that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free; that helps us face the risk of truly living, and makes us brave to be what we might be.”