

3Generate

Aidan Childs enjoyed a Methodist Youth Assembly gathering

I am happy to call myself a Quaker, less happy to call myself a Christian. So, as I arrived as a participant at '3Generate', the Methodist Youth Assembly, I was not sure what to expect. One of the sessions that Friday evening was my first experience of worship in the Methodist Church.

Everyone spread out around the wooden hall, some sitting on beanbags, others standing, laughing, chatting. Although the atmosphere was warm, there seemed to be something isolating and dissipated about this form of worship. There was no circle, no sense, for me, that we were doing something together.

A worship leader invited us to stand and sing. It was strange to read words off a screen as part of worship. Looking around the room, I could not access the kind of spiritual ecstasy that many, dusting their hands in the air to the smooth modern songs of praise, were obviously experiencing. I missed the breadth and subtlety of a Quaker meeting. I was very welcomed, but it still felt strange to admit that, at this stage, I was not completely comfortable with the word 'God'.

Young Methodists from around Britain, from the ages of eight up to around twenty-five, were there with invited representatives from the youth movements of other denominations. I came as a representative of Junior Yearly Meeting, feeling in many ways an outsider.

Later, in the worship session, the Methodist Youth president gave a sermon. This involved us shouting out the names of Bible characters who were 'called' by God. We then discussed the story of Samuel and Eli, then Noah, then Jesus. This reliance on a single book, the Bible, seemed narrow. I did not, and still don't fully, understand it.

Yet, one of the most restful experiences I had at 3Generate was to take part in a Bible study workshop. In a small circle of chairs in a softly lit room, a man introduced himself and spoke about an extract from Mark's Gospel. We explored the extract through talking, looking at works of art and listening to a story. We looked at an African painting of the feeding of the five thousand, and a beautiful Aboriginal picture of Christ carrying the cross. For these people, a faith based on the Bible was just as alive, and just as real, as my convictions were for me. There was an incredible power when, after closing prayer, we broke the session by all saying together, 'Amen'.

Throughout the weekend, many people spoke about Holy Communion, when it 'worked' and when it didn't. At first, these discussions seemed very strange, perhaps a little like nonsense. On Sunday morning, though, the discussions did not feel like nonsense. The president of the Methodist Conference came to break the bread and divide the wine from a chalice, while worshippers queued to receive communion from helpers stationed around the hall. It was special to witness, as some began to cry, hug and sing. The songs that had sounded cheap on the first night now sounded real and moving as they shifted keys.

During the ceremony someone came and prayed for me. A few days before I might have said that this ceremony, with its rituals, songs and emotions, was misguided. I would certainly not say that now. The young Methodists clearly saw the world differently to me. Perhaps, I wondered, we even saw a different world. But is that a bad thing? I left 3Generate much less sure that I could ever talk about an objective 'truth' that could make me right, and others wrong. Do I believe in God? What is my opinion about the Bible, or of ritual? The most valuable lesson of the weekend was that I do not know.

Aidan is a member of Devon Area Meeting (Okehampton).