

**Church History Experienced:  
A Tour of Great Britain and Ireland**  
by William D. Meyer\*

What I saw and experienced during an Ashland Theological Seminary church-history class and tour of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales will undoubtedly differ from what many others on the trip did. This is, quite understandably, because what I saw and experienced was filtered through my personal history and personal theological concerns.

Several general themes stood out to me at most of the church history sites during the visit from May 31, 2000, to June 17, 2000. One of the themes was establishment and whether it really works long term to the advantage of the church and to the glory of God. (My conclusion is that it generally does not.) Another theme is that of the relationship of the church to the larger social issues of the day and noting where the church failed and where the church succeeded. (Puritan intervention in Ireland under Oliver Cromwell is a dramatic example of the former. The Wesleyan campaign against slavery and the slave trade is an example of the latter.)

Nevertheless, most significant for me was reflecting on how I processed the intellectual and theological and personal challenge of complex historical situations and faith journeys different from my own. This theme is basically about tolerance and my own struggle not to react defensively and dismissively to the unfamiliar and the difficult.

**Establishment**

One of the standout impressions for me was the contrast between the early morning worship service at St. Paul's Cathedral in London and three later worship services at All Souls Church, where John Stott is the senior pastor.

Though St. Paul's was architecturally beautiful and is clearly a British national monument (Prime Minister Winston Churchill invested significant human resources to make sure that St. Paul's was saved during the German bombing of London in World War II.), the worship experience for me was somewhat deadening and frankly rather alienating.

Though I have no objection to highly liturgical worship, I noted with sadness that there were fewer than 50 people present for the early worship service. Even though some individuals at St. Paul's cared, the institution was clearly not oriented to the comfort and welcome of outsiders. After riding the subway from our hotel to St. Paul's, I wanted to find the men's bathroom 15 minutes before worship was to start. So I asked the man passing out prayer books at the back of the cathedral where to find it. He directed me outside the cathedral. After walking nearly all the way around the building, I still couldn't

find it. 10 minutes later, I returned for more directions. Then, after going outside again, I did find the building that contained the restrooms. But all the doors were locked.

So when I did return inside the cathedral, I was now late. The worship service had already begun, and I had to enter the quire awkwardly and sit somewhat uncomfortably with my family through the service.

The point being, I think, that St. Paul's is basically a national monument. And the established, institutional church there feels little need to exert itself to welcome the world and present the Gospel in a way that is accessible to those who are not already insiders and members of the club.

I still benefited from participating in the worship service and took communion (for the first time ever on my knees) that morning. But I am already a believer and went to worship despite the inconvenience.

The underlying assumption at St. Paul's seems to be that if the unchurched world wants the Gospel, it can come to the church and accommodate itself to the church's program. At the cathedral, there was no sense that I could detect of a need for the church to affirmatively reach out to the world.

Within the same Church of England establishment, however, the atmosphere at All Souls Church in London couldn't have been more different.

Taking the subway from St. Paul's, I arrived halfway through the morning's first worship service. Even at this early hour, I found only a handful of empty seats on the main floor. However, I was made to feel quite welcome. I was greeted multiple times by strangers, invited to have coffee after worship and was immediately made to feel that I was important to the crowded congregation and that my coming to visit was a significant event.

By contrast, no one greeted me in the tiny group at St. Paul's except the clergy and the man handing out prayer books, and he seemed to view his function at least partially as a gatekeeper, to keep casual tourists away from the quire during worship.

The congregational greeting I received at All Souls was very intentional. It was very clear that people of a variety of ages, of a variety of races, and of a variety of social and occupational classes had been chosen and asked to try to connect with every newcomer. The congregation was interracial, interethnic and international, reflecting very well the demographic makeup of the surrounding Westminster area. I sat next to an elderly Chinese man, who made sure I could follow the Scripture lesson in his Bible.

The second, later morning worship service was absolutely packed, with no open seats either on the floor or in the balcony. There was, however, an overflow room with closed circuit television in the basement. And when Stott himself preached in the evening, the situation was the same.

So it is possible even for congregations of established churches to effectively reach out to the public in a cosmopolitan, 21<sup>st</sup> century environment. But it means work, and it must be very intentional. It would appear to require a mindset similar to that at All Souls , where each member is urged to be a member of a small group and to be a part of some ministry of the church. All Souls very intentionally reaches out to the surrounding business community through noon-time programs and Bible studies and also tries to serve the university community.

The outreach of the church has obviously been very carefully thought through, and a lot of attention is paid to the needs of newcomers. Few assumptions are made about what people know about Christianity. Even during the fairly simple, low-church worship service itself, there are frequent explanations of what is being done and why. There is also an explicit welcome of guests, who are invited from the pulpit to consider attending one of the church's classes that discuss the claims of Christianity. Visitor comfort is also well attended to.

So, even within the established church, it is possible to successfully reach out and evangelize, but doing so requires giving up the comfortable establishment mindset that the world will come to the church and accommodate itself to it.

I really appreciated the architectural magnificence that Anglican establishment and the vast resources of the church-state collaboration had made possible in the construction and maintenance of the Church of England cathedrals. I lamented the vandalism of those cathedrals during the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan period, yet I also sympathized with the objections and aims of the Puritans. Though I certainly do not agree with the Puritans that the Mass is idolatry, much of the iconography and statuary that has accumulated in, upon and around the great cathedrals certainly seems to lean in that direction. At least this seems to have become so in some times and places in practice, if not actually so in theory and original intent.

When our group visited St. Andrews, Scotland, June 16, 2000, the ocean-side ruin of St. Andrew's Cathedral, the largest in Scotland before the Reformation, was a memorable sight. I was struck by how the Reformation and its "cleansings" of the churches and its attendant battles, vandalism, and looting of church properties had cost Scotland its largest and grandest church structure. Nevertheless, Scotland emerged with a freer and in many respects purer church, with a vigorous and fairly democratic faith, even if still established through coercive state power. Though the loss of the grand building was tragic, what was gained was of inestimably greater value. The Reformation in Scotland constructed the durable, democratic ecclesiastical framework that has allowed non-established churches organized on the Scots pattern to grow and thrive in

North America and other parts of the world.

So I and all Americans owe a profound debt to John Knox and the Scots reformers, even if disapproving of many of their methods and excesses. Knox might indeed be called one of the American founding fathers, along with England's later Puritan Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell,<sup>1</sup> so great was their ideological influence on the American experiment.

St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, where Knox preached, was one of the high points of the trip, especially my meeting an elderly Scots Presbyterian elder there who was full of faith and full of the significance of the place, which he explained to me at great and gracious length. For instance, he told me that in the Presbyterian view, the spare and fairly plain house of worship is not a cathedral at all. Instead, St. Giles' is simply the High Kirk of Scotland.

In England, the established church has, unfortunately, identified itself profoundly with the English political, military and imperial establishment. So the English cathedrals now seem to be almost more monuments to the glory of a faded monarchy and former empire than monuments to the glory of the unfailing Lord of Lords and his everlasting Kingdom. Almost all the Anglican cathedrals contained prominent military and political monuments. This seemed to me to be much more pronounced in England than in the cathedrals on the continent, where the church is largely disestablished or established in a much milder form. (My memory of one or two German cathedrals is that most of these types of relatively modern martial monuments have been removed, and for good reason.) Several of the English cathedrals we visited contained very prominent regimental chapels and prominently displayed faded British battle flags. At best, it was a mixed message.

The absolutely worst and most jarring example of this downside of Anglican establishment was in Ireland, where the Anglican church now has been disestablished for decades. Unfortunately for the Church of Ireland, its establishment mentality does not seem to have been dislodged, at least not if one looks at the monuments in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. (In defense of St. Patrick's, it must be pointed out that the pastoral staff there was quite welcoming and accessible during our visit and expressly invited my wife and others to attend Evensong, after which the president of Ireland would speak.

The Anglican Church of Ireland controls both of the great medieval cathedrals of Dublin, the capital of Ireland. The Catholic Church, to which the overwhelming majority of the people of the Republic of Ireland belong, has

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<sup>1</sup> "Oliver Cromwell is one of the most neglected figures in American history." Robert S. Paul, *The Lord Protector: Religion and Politics in the Life of Oliver Cromwell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 7a.

none.

In St. Patrick's Cathedral, the oppressive burden of Irish history and of English overlordship was at its heaviest. The entire left transept, just off the crossing at the center of the cathedral, was filled with rotting British battle flags, most of which were some version of the Union Jack. Their presence, there in the very center of the cathedral, visually assaulted every worshipper. (By contrast, some of the English cathedrals I visited that had such battle flags displayed generally had them in less profusion and in less prominent positions. Bronze military plaques, however, were ubiquitous.)

In the quire at St. Patrick's, each of the stalls was topped with a sword and a tasseled helmet of the Knights of St. Patrick, a now defunct British order of chivalry, created by the British monarchy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reward Irishmen who promoted British imperial interests. This was also very bad symbolism for today's Ireland.

On the walls, large bronze imperial war monuments were everywhere. The combined effect of all this was to suggest that this building was not singularly dedicated to the glory of God, but to the glory of the Anglican ascendant class and Britain's imperial adventures.

Especially jarring for me, as I sat almost under the cathedral crossing during Evensong, was the arrangement of the Good Samaritan stained glass window opposite me on the right wall of the nave. It was a magnificent window, effectively telling the story of reaching out to mercifully serve an enemy against whom one has real grievances. But the effect was largely cancelled out by the equally prominent bronze regimental plaque beneath. It extolled the heroic deeds of the Irish Hussars during Britain's nakedly imperialistic Boer War, a war of aggression mercilessly waged against a neighbor with whom the British had no real grievance. The real issue was the diamonds that had regrettably been discovered in the neighbor's back yard and not in their own.

The Church of Ireland has had nearly a century to find the right moment and method to get rid of those monstrous, moldering monuments (maybe packing them all off to the basement or bequeathing them to some museum somewhere "for proper care"), but it has failed to do so. (When I commented to our Irish bus driver about the cathedral's inertia against cleaning up in the eight decades since Irish independence, he commented sourly that the Anglophile monuments likely would still be there 1,000 years from now.)

The general effect was to symbolically proclaim that thoughtful Irish patriots need not apply (even if actually seeking an alternative to the Catholic Church) and that the Church of Ireland does not wish to play any significant role in the life of modern Ireland. Or at least it does not wish to play any role among Irish people who do not identify with the now deposed ascendant class.

How tragic.

How tragic for Ireland, and for the Church of Ireland, which really could by now be playing a significant prophetic, redemptive and constructive role.

This example is the extreme downside of establishment, and of establishment habits even after being disestablished. When the church makes its bed with the state, sometimes it must continue to lie in it, accepting not only the advantages of the arrangement but also the disadvantages, long after the liaison has been terminated.

### Social Issues

When the president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, appeared at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Sunday, June 11, 2000, for her Millennium speech, she revealed how irrelevant the now disestablished Church of Ireland has allowed itself to become. Properly functioning, one would expect the church to be effectively proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to the larger society. Even if it had to share the limelight with the Catholic Church and other confessions, it could still function prophetically and incarnationally as at least part of the conscience of the nation. One would also expect that by intentionally living and symbolizing the Good News, the church of Jesus could and would give hope and vision to the larger society and the state. It would demonstrate in practical, human terms that there is a way out -- a salvation, if you will, through Jesus Christ -- for both people and societies trapped in intractable human problems.

Instead, this cathedral's sclerotic and unashamedly imperialistic self-identification apparently presented such a political problem to President McAleese that she dared not enter until the last "Amen" of the Evensong service had been spoken.

Then it fell to the head of state, in a startling role reversal, to call upon the church to wake itself up and actually preach and actually be the Gospel. She challenged the church "to preach the Good News of the Spirit ... and be known by the way we love one another. ... We have been prisoners of [our] history ... an arsenal which we ransack for weapons to confirm our sense of victimhood and to identify the enemy."<sup>2</sup>

She also called upon Ireland "to remember the past differently, more generously.

"The past, when used well ... can be used to make us kinder ... We

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<sup>2</sup> Gene McKenna and Niamh Hooper, "President hits out at our culture of sleaze," *Irish Independent* (June 12, 2000) 1.

know what it is to be alienated, to be undervalued” and can be champions of the poor abroad.

Nevertheless, the Church of Ireland seems especially to be a prisoner of its history, especially of its former establishment. And all the churches of Ireland -- Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian -- at crucial historical junctures have failed to preach the Gospel of Jesus to love neighbor as ourselves. All the churches of Ireland at crucial historical junctures have failed to live the Gospel of Jesus and incarnate his Good News to the larger society. Cromwell’s bloody devastation of Ireland – especially the inexcusable massacres at Drogheda and Wexford -- in the name of the Protestant, Puritan Commonwealth is a spectacular historical example of this, as are today’s anti-Catholic rantings of the Presbyterian extremists of Northern Ireland. (None of this, of course, is meant to exonerate any other guilty party in the troubles in Ireland.)

Moving my reflections outside of Ireland and outside of the established church and some of its failures, I must also confess being inspired, frankly moved to tears, standing at John Wesley’s tomb in London. I was listening to the account of Wesley’s deathbed charge to William Wilberforce to continue the very difficult agitation against the powerful and entrenched forces in England that profited from slavery and the slave trade. This was a clear and inspiring example of the unestablished church doing exactly what it must to live the Gospel. This was after the established Anglican church had thrown away its opportunity a century earlier to fairly easily condemn and therefore probably end North American slavery.

### **Tolerance**

As I contemplated Ireland’s troubles, I found my thinking becoming increasingly intolerant and even cynical. I was feeling the internal tug to retreat into black-and-white, reductive, dismissive thinking, rather than grapple, in a godly and humane way, with complex realities that resist such simplistic thinking.

It is, of course, easy to arrogantly take shots at specks in the eye of other cultures, other churches and other people and ignore the planks in ones own. I acknowledge this, even while I acknowledge that to some degree I still do it.

Some of this, I realize, is rooted in cynical, cultic intellectual habits that die hard for me. President McAleese recognized the danger of this kind of thinking as well. “Cynicism builds nothing up. ... It drains energy and leaches acid into hope.”

<sup>3</sup> I recognized that some of the failures of the historic church were based upon exactly the same cynicism that I sometimes see in myself. Rather than stay committed to the ethical, theological and intellectual heavy lifting of an authentically lived Christianity, historic figures such as Oliver Cromwell and John Knox reached instead for black-and-white slogans, for the doable, for the winnable, even where they contradicted the ethics, theology and logic of Christianity. Sometimes, I too feel the tug in myself to reach for the easy, the simple, the winnable,

President McAleese, who went out of her way to quote Presbyterians and Methodists, called upon all of Ireland's believers to live authentic lives of faith.

Another of the unexpected benefits of the trip was seeing myself interacting with the other people on the trip, many of whom were fascinating and inspiring people, and seeing myself respond to the inevitable interpersonal stresses that occur on any group venture. There were some very interesting interactions involving me and others. Some were successes, some were failures of sorts, but mostly they were just interesting and somewhat unexpected human interactions. So I was prompted to reflect on effectiveness of my efforts and others' to authentically live the Gospel each day. There were more than a few notes to myself in my journal to mind the gap between my intentions and my actual performance in my daily human interactions.

So the lessons were both personal and historical – but mostly they kept working back to personal, even when looking at very significant historical events where the church and its leaders had failed to live and proclaim the Gospel effectively.

Yet just as I recoiled from the failures of others, I kept seeing many of the same qualities in myself that led to those failures in others. This wasn't supposed to happen. The trip was supposed to be much more sterile and clean.

I was supposed to be able to keep the lessons at a distance, in other people's lives, in another culture and certainly in the domain of the cognitive, not the domain of the emotional or the relational.

Then again, maybe it was supposed to happen this way. Maybe some of the lessons were supposed to be rather up close and personal. The largest lessons of the trip are introspective. They have to do with watching myself and others grapple with the Gospel imperatives to respond in a Christ-like way to the concrete challenges of life as we actually live it every day. There is, after all, no other way to live life. It must be lived historically, in a concrete time, place, culture and situation. Every day.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The cultural and historic distance experienced on the trip was both an asset and a liability. In looking at another culture or at another time, distance often allows an outsider to see much more clearly than an insider what the gross problems are and the large picture of what is going on. Nevertheless, the same distance also often prevents outsiders from understanding the details: the subtle problems, nuances and complications that make the problems so difficult in the actual history lived by the insider. The experience of cultural and historical distance also prompted me to further introspection. What are the larger lessons here? How does this situation compare to mine? What is the application for me? How am I doing with the sorts of issues that troubled another culture and another time? What could I be doing differently and be doing better?

In the end, most of this seemed to boil down to President McAleese's challenge to the Church of Ireland, and, indeed, to all believers: Authentically proclaim the Good News and authentically live the Good News of Jesus so as to give redeeming hope and vision to our troubled world.

May it be so. Even in the church. Even in my life.