

**A sermon preached by the Revd the Lord Leslie Griffiths at the funeral of
GEORGE LOVELL at Lidgett Park Methodist Church Leeds,
on 18th October 2018**

George was ordained into the Methodist Ministry at the 1960 Liverpool Conference. His twinkling star shone as best it could in a sky where the brightest heavenly bodies were those who, astonishingly, brought his past, and his present, and his future together in perfect alignment.

The past first.

Harold Roberts, Principal of the Richmond Theological College, was the preacher that day. George had had a tough time in the three years he'd spent there and didn't have much good to say of one or two of his tutors. But he had huge respect for Roberts and took so much pleasure from the way he had teased the precious metal of academic learning out of the common ore of George's intellectual beginnings.

So much for the past. And the present?

That Conference designated Maldwyn Edwards to be its next President. Maldwyn was the Chairman of the Cardiff and Swansea District in which George was at that time stationed. His admiration for the scholarly and oratorical skills of Doctor Edwards (as well as his pastoral care) was fulsome.

And so to the one who was to be the star of George's future.

The then-current President of Conference and the leader of that ordination service, was none other than Ted Rogers whose deep interest in (and knowledge of) sociology, politics and economics, fascinated George. Ted would one day play a leading part in the setting up of AVEC - one of George's real champions.

What a constellation these three men were standing as they had done, were doing or would do, at every critical point in George's life.

Across the years, so many people have had reason to thank God for the enlightened ministry of George Lovell. So it's baffling how such a person could have been so overwhelmed by a self-doubt that nagged away at him through much of his life. He seems so earnest to be of little importance. We can read all

this in a 1300-page document which he's posted on the internet, a narrative that attempts to analyse the key developments in his life. I say 'analysed', but I might have added "reflect, configure, define, conjecture, systematise, and project" – for George loved a concatenation of verbs which, together, might cover all his bases. This document is presented as an 'auto-ethnographical' exercise. Read it for yourselves. George suffered from what he himself called 'an inner compulsion to write'. This may have been his way of dealing with his self-doubt. It's more than a simple autobiography. It attempts to set out that part of him that wanted to do it against the other part of him that didn't. It resembles a classic piece of co-consultancy, where each side of George needs to listen hard to what the other side is saying.

As I thumbed through this document, I kept on wanting to shout out NO! No George! You were massive. Your influence has been profound. The direction of the lives of so many of us is clearly attributable to your wisdom, your patience, your gospel-driven efforts to help us discern the path of our Christian discipleship. You gave us so much self-understanding, tools for the job, a belief in non-directive ways of working. Who cares about whether you were beset by the difficulties of your working class upbringing? Who gives a monkey about your difficulties with English grammar, something you so often referred to? Who cares anymore about the way things might have turned out had you done things differently? Your twinkling star became one of the brightest lights in the firmament for so many of us.

I know I should have declared a conflict of interest long before this. George came into my life when I was just 16, I was about to enter the Sixth Form. He brought me into church membership – some time before I found faith. I attended the smallest of the four churches he served. The Burry Port chapel, he wrote, is "an unpretentious, crudely-furnished, lovingly-kept building on an island, set amidst a large, abandoned railway siding in a derelict port".

I was still a teenager, an undergraduate by now, when I took a summer holiday job at St David's Hospital in Carmarthen, 15 miles from Burry Port, and the town where George and Molly, with Janice and John (just born) lived. I cycled to and from hospital at the beginning and end of the week and stayed through the weekdays at the Manse. I'd never known my father, and George soon came to occupy that role. St David's was a Mental Hospital and, after days spent with some very disturbed patients, I needed the intimacy of the Lovell home. It was that summer (1961), that bonded me to George and Molly

and prepared the ground within me where soon the seeds of faith would take root.

My gratitude was obvious from the beginning. George kept a letter I wrote to him in 1962, just before the Lovell family left our land flowing with milk and honey for the flesh pots of London. I had just submitted to the claims of faith. This is what I wrote 56 years ago:

Dear Mr Lovell

You are leaving us to do God's work elsewhere...your influence will be felt for many years. Your life will bear its impress upon my poor efforts for as long as I live – for never mind how many great men I shall meet; you must be to me someone sent by God to open my eyes. For giving me sight and fitting me to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Best wishes to Mrs Lovell and love to the Children.

We watched George's evolving ministry with fascination. His PhD, the 10 Churches Project, all that happened at Parchmore, AVEC. His "inner compulsion to write" saw books, articles, reviews, and discussion papers flow from his pen, a cataract of verbal wisdom pounding down like molten lava from a volcano in full eruption. The 10-day course came into being and George's renown spread into the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. The precious partnership with Catherine Widdecombe, present here today, was a lovely fruit of this development. It was obvious that George had developed a tool for the church's mission, centred at the very interface between Church and Society, which struck a chord with so many practitioners at that time.

He did important work with religious communities, with Church leaders, in tricky political and social situations. He brought his skills to bear in Ireland and Zimbabwe; I was privileged to be part of his team as we worked in consecutive years in Ghana and Sierra Leone and Nigeria. It was a privilege to be so close to George when he was working. And I never truly understood how he extracted from complicated conversations, some of them charged with heavy emotion, often full of unresolved tensions or misunderstandings or worse – how he drew from such situations drawings, diagrams, that somehow illustrated and revealed the inner workings and dynamics of those sessions we'd attended together. To my untutored eye those diagrams resembled a plate of spaghetti,

or the London tube map; for him they were like the circuit boards he must have used in his engineering days.

George had the supreme gift of listening, really listening, to those he met or worked with. And the even more precious gift of getting people, even people who had issues with each other, to listen to one another. He seemed able to see into the heart of a problem: "Blessed are the eyes that could see as he saw! ...many prophets and Kings longed to see as he saw but failed, to hear what he heard without ever managing to do so."

That scriptural note, a word of Jesus, has been quoted by Nadine Wilkinson, the minister of the Parchmore church in the Croydon circuit, the church where I now live, where the congregation has been spending the last 6 months celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Parchmore Project. They've been invoking George's name as they re-energise themselves for the next chapter in the story, begun with him. A short film was in the process of being made in the very moment when we heard the news of George's death. It will now be dedicated to his memory. Listen to what Nadine Wilkinson had to say.

In the same week that we shared the news of Georges death, we were also able to celebrate how others have gathered around the new Community Connect/Food Stop which is being delivered by Parchmore. It was our plan to let George know of this new development in the 50th year in response to the need here, most of all because we wanted him to know that Parchmore was still responding to its community as he had envisaged. A fully funded council worker, even in these days of local authority cuts, is to be based with us to enable us to reach out to the poorest of the poor with practical help.

And now he's gone. So much to be sad about. So much to thank God for. The good men do lives after them. So say we when we think of George's life. It was well put by the poet Byron:

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast;
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself must rest.

God bless you George. May you rest in peace.