

Methodism and the building of a college

Nick Mayhew-Smith shares a research project he led about the design of Southlands College

It would be a stretch for most Christians to accept that buildings can have a soul. It is certainly not a notion likely to cross the mind of many Methodists, John Wesley having no doubt that people rather than church structures are the site of God's activity. Yet there is a sense that something special and sacred might linger within the bricks and mortar of an edifice set aside for divine purpose. Indeed, the Methodist Church does have an order of service for the consecration of churches and a proud history of distinctive chapel architecture in high streets up and down the land.

It also has a university college to its name: Southlands, at the University of Roehampton. The college's foundations run deep into Methodism, originally a teacher training college for women established in 1872 in Battersea, south London. Southlands moved to its current site on Roehampton Lane in 1997 and the new building is now one of four colleges on the campus. It remains a unique and thriving example of Methodist higher education, its faith origins still actively shaping and guiding college life.

As a recent project funded by the Southlands Methodist Trust as part of the work of the Susanna Wesley Foundation has discovered, there are many subtle ways in which faith has

seeped into the structure of this building, even though it is mostly given to secular uses. What happened at Southlands has had a lasting effect on its community and stands as something of a testament to the enduring relevance of Methodist values in a fast-changing world. But it also offers a more general example of what happens when the high-minded values of believers and theologians meet the rather more concrete world of builders and architects. As ongoing restrictions around the coronavirus have starkly demonstrated, creating a healthy community is a complex and multi-faceted task.

Head of Southlands College Dr Christopher Stephens took up his post in 2011 and has no doubt that Methodism has had a lasting and positive effect on the buildings and the way people live and work in them. These authentic Methodist origins have, he believes, contributed towards a flourishing academic community: "John Wesley's comment abounds about planting a school in every place he preached is about social improvement: education makes people's lives better. It doesn't matter if they're Methodists or not, you want to make people's lives better, and in terms of education that is what mission is. So the focus at Southlands is on providing an environment which does

something unique in terms of higher education provision, but at the same time creates a community that any individual is going to feel comfortable and welcome in. It really fulfils the Methodist mission in education."

Reunited

The research project was led by the author of this article, Nick Mayhew-Smith, a journalist and academic specialising in Christian heritage. As part of this research the college reunited the original architect Richard Young and former college principal Mike Leigh on a return visit to the site in 2019. This was a rare opportunity to document the seminal moments in a major Methodist investment in education and what it has discovered could serve as a useful guide for a wide range of building and planning work. The college itself has a long history as a Methodist place of education since its foundation in the 19th century. It moved around London before accepting a generous ecumenical offer to build its current site on land owned by Digby Stuart College, at the time a Roman Catholic teacher training college. The move made sound institutional sense, since the two colleges had already merged into Roehampton Institute of Higher Education, which ultimately evolved into the University of Roehampton in 2004.

A Methodist view

At first sight walking around the Southlands complex it would be difficult to identify anything particularly Methodist about the place, assuming

one overlooks for a moment the prominently sited chapel. There are no statues of John Wesley gracing the college lawns and the main working and studying space is housed in what is called the Queen's Building. Although the three large accommodation blocks are named in honour of the Methodist heritage, two might test the knowledge of all but the most devout churchgoer: Aldersgate Court and Epworth Court, standing alongside their more overt neighbour Wesley Hall.

The decision to avoid too many explicit references to Methodism turns out to be one of the guiding principles for the design team, as senior partner at architectural firm Sheppard Robson, Richard Young, recalls: "There was no pressure and no guidance to make it more overtly Methodist. I think it might even have been the other way round, that people were keen that it was a Methodist college but wasn't shouting it, it is more self-effacing."

Spending a little longer on site and it quickly becomes apparent that this lack of superficial marks of faith belies a very deep set of ethical foundations. Mike Leigh, who collaborated with Richard Young on the architectural design, wanted to ensure that the college would give people a good opinion about Methodism through the simple fact that it was functional: "I vowed that there was no way I could say, 'I'm proud that you've come to a Methodist college' to people who had nothing to do with any Christian denomination if the showers didn't work, or if the rain was coming through

the ceiling. So the one thing I felt was really important was that people had to be comfortable in it. Every time the toilets went wrong or the showers didn't work or the heating wasn't warm enough, it went straight to the heart. And it was theologically going to my heart, rather than technically going to my heart."

Practicality and hospitality are therefore two of the Methodist values that have ensured the buildings were designed to withstand the test of time and the demands of intense use as a place to work and to live. Another key value is openness and it is that feature which has inspired the college's innovative reinvention of the traditional college courtyard or quad.

The quad

A quadrangle in architectural terms refers to a courtyard that is enclosed on four sides by buildings. Richard and Mike visited a number of Oxbridge colleges when researching ideas for Southlands and were struck by the way in which the inner lawns added open space to the heart of these traditional buildings, yet also created a sense of enclosure, a protected space only visible to those privileged enough to gain entry. Ultimately the origins of such a configuration can be traced back to the mediaeval monastery, the inner sanctum of the cloister shutting out the secular world. That aspect was not felt to be in keeping with Methodist values of openness, connection and inclusion.

So the pair quickly decided that Southlands should also have a quad, but one that was deliberately left open. As you

approach the college entrance, this central lawn can be clearly seen through the gap between the Queen's Building and café/diner facilities. And the other three corners of the quad are entirely open to the sky.

Former assistant chaplain the Rev Ian Worsfold, a student at Southlands College who joined the chaplaincy staff at the time of the move to Roehampton, has an ingenious explanation for this open pattern. Comparing it to the cross and orb used as a symbol by the Methodist Church, he notes that it reflects a Christian theology that is highly connected to the wider world: "I remember the staff that the quad had been deliberately planned so that it was never enclosed. If you think of the Methodist cross and orb, there is that sense of it tapering out to the sides, as the arms of the cross and the edge of the orb meet. For me those two images sit quite well together." Ian is now co-ordinating chaplain at City, University of London, having found his vocation in chaplaincy at Southlands.

It is clear that the same words used to describe Methodist values also find traction when reflecting on the lived experience of entering and using the Southlands quad. Chaplain of Southlands at the time of the college's construction and Ian's former colleague the Rev Robert Jones sees engagement with the wider world as part of the Methodist remit: "When you are in the centre of the academy [the quad], you are constantly and visually aware of the world outside and anyone can come in and anyone can get out. This says we are an inclusive community with an articulate care for the world outside."

Residential

The quad also has both academic and residential sides. This mixed use of space offers the same favourable outlook to the student and the working member of staff in equal measure.

The chapel

If this intermingling of staff and student space hints at a degree of egalitarian thinking underpinning Southlands, the same might be said of the attractive chapel by the main entrance to the college. Its circular shape sets it apart from the linear designs of the rest of the complex and has an interesting statement to make about Methodist worship. Robert Jones says the main consequence of the shape is that



Underneath the canopy looking towards the quad; right: the Methodist chapel on the site.

everyone is welcomed equally into the congregation: "It is a symbol of community. If you sit in a church, what are you looking at generally? The back of people's heads. If you sit in a circle or a semi-circle - we sat in a horseshoe when we had all the chairs out - you could not possibly sit there and not see other people's faces."

It is an interesting exercise to compare the experiences of different chaplains during the lifespan of this chapel, and current incumbent the Rev Nicola Morrison is very reflective about the shape of the space she has inherited, which she has recently rechristened as The Well. Nicola is readily enthusiastic about taking the differences in her stride and thinking creatively about the possibilities to connect to other Christian traditions: "Methodism's liturgical history and worship styles are so varied and I think that is one of our great strengths and great weaknesses. I think the design of this chapel allows for that, and I think the round really lends an opportunity to embrace more of a Celtic spirituality side. I don't know why but I just feel the round space does that, perhaps because of the Celtic knots and all the imagery that goes with that."

Even so, the chapel's inclusive circular shape does beg the question whether any church service, particularly a sacramental one, can truly be conducted without any sense of hierarchy. As Nicola considers: "This is a funny thing for me as a worship leader, having it in the round. I still have thoughts and questions as to whether the Communion table should be in the middle. It actually works if you

have enough people to sit around it, but also the Communion table is really high, so there are subtle factors like that to bear in mind."

Startling

John Wesley is said to have favoured octagonal chapel buildings for the rather startling reason that there would be no dark corners in which the devil could hide. It is an interesting architectural principle, but one that the designers of Southlands cheerfully dismiss as any sort of inspiration for their own corner-free chapel. Rather, it turns out, the design bears witness to another great Methodist tradition entirely: music.

During the planning phase of the new college, Mike Leigh wrote to every Methodist school in the country asking for ideas and inspiration to help guide the design. The replies that he received were unanimous in suggesting the building should have an honoured place for music. This has been the college's Chapman Hall performance space and also inspired the design of the Methodist chapel, both praised to this day for their clear acoustics.

It is a decision that the current head of college, Dr Christopher Stephens, considers a thriving legacy that continues to shape college life: "Increasingly people are recognising the role of music and making music as part of the package of tools to support positive mental health. We readily see how the provision of musical activities can support people. It offers space for creativity, emotional outlet and for community, because there are choirs and various instrumen-

tal groups bringing people together."

Designing the chapel presented other challenges to the original team, whose decision to place it by the entrance brought its own complexities, standing as it does on the threshold between Southlands and Digby Stuart colleges. Mike Leigh and Richard Young have slightly different memories on the decision-making process that led to this configuration. Mike insisting that it had to stand at the entrance as an "exclamation mark" as to the college's Methodist origins. Richard on the other hand feels it unlikely the chapel was placed first on the masterplan, but concedes that it did need careful positioning, rather than being just another room inside the Queen's Building.

It is certainly in a prominent position and its understated elegance and curved walls offer a welcome interface with the neighbouring Roman Catholic college buildings, without trying to compete with them. This Methodist presence is, in every sense, an embodiment of good neighbourliness.

Building community

When it comes to the resident community of Southlands College, there is an interesting narrative thread connecting the initial aspirations at planning stage through to the living and breathing experience of student life today. It was intentional from the very start to create small units of flats with a common shared space, up to eight bedrooms connected to a communal kitchen in order to help foster closer relationships and meet the social needs of students. At a time of coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions, looking after the health and cohesion of a stu-



dent community has never been more important, a factor that sheds light on the original plans to create small living units.

Christopher Stephens credits the design of the accommodation units in harmony with the wider design of the entire college as helping to foster a positive community: "Students who live at Southlands are very passionate about living here and I've always found that intriguing. Why be so passionate about it? I think there is a sense that the configuration of the building is such that it encourages people to form social networks quite quickly. The self-contained units are ones where people know what is going on, where people perhaps look after one another a bit more."

The common model for academic halls of residence - a long, draughty corridor with bedrooms in serried ranks - was rejected in favour of a more collegiate approach, placing students' wellbeing at the forefront of decision making. Richard Young is clear that this was a conscious decision: "The accommodation was designed as flats because we had a very good discussion about the social necessities for students. There had been a lot written at the time - and there's a lot more of that now - about students feeling isolated. So you might say that student flats are a small version of the college: you are part of a college but you are also part of a flat."

Key to the success of the architectural ambition was the introduction of flat reps, originally second- or third-year students who took responsibility for ensuring that new arrivals had someone to guide

them. Assistant chaplain at the time Ian Worsfold credits Robert Jones for fine-tuning the selection and training of flat reps, making the most of the buildings' potential: "They were usually older students, so they were looking after a group of freshers maybe, or a mix of students. They had the pastoral role, they looked out for them and referred any potential concerns, instantly creating community."

Intentions

There does seem to be an instructive harmony between the architectural intentions and the everyday reality, an elision of form and function that reflects well on the Methodist values underpinning the college. It is important in any successful building to ensure that the users have continuing agency in shaping and refining their environment, that they feel able to make the space their own. More than 20 years after the building was finished and the first residents moved in, it is enlightening to hear how current students experience college life.

Shaad Chellapermal, a student resident in Southlands for three years and college president in his final year (2016-17), describes how quickly the buildings and the community made him feel at home: "There is always a sense that the flats are very small, seven or eight maximum... All our doors would be open all the time in the flat, so when anyone made a cup of tea they would ask if anyone else wanted one too. It's really important to have that flat life where you create those bonds with those people. The whole community set-up worked perfectly."

A lasting legacy

As this research has discovered, a Methodist design ethos has had a surprisingly long-lasting effect on the college community, something that is true perhaps of all noteworthy architecture. As Winston Churchill once said: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." By creating an opportunity to explore the Methodist influence on a multi-million pound planning, design and building, the Susanna Wesley Foundation has brought to light some interesting questions, seeking to define what Methodist values and heritage look like when they are embodied in the form of a building.

As Christopher Stephens concludes, a faith heritage and particularly a set of Methodist values can help to enrich a community's life, even one given over to a secular function: "You don't need to sacrifice anything else important in order to work your values into the design of a building, it can also be a perfectly functional and sensible educational building. I suppose the witness of Southlands is to ask people who are going to build something: 'Why not start by asking what your values are, how do you want to speak of those? What might that mean in practice in terms of how you want people to be in those spaces?' Make that your first conversation and then think about the bricks and mortar later." For further information and alumni news see the website southlands.methodisttrust.org.uk (email southlands.college@roehampton.ac.uk); Facebook: [SouthlandsCollegeUR](https://www.facebook.com/SouthlandsCollegeUR). Nick Mayhew-Smith is an associate of the Susanna Wesley Foundation, University of Roehampton.



The chapel window. Photograph: Katie Miller; right: looking towards the college entrance.

