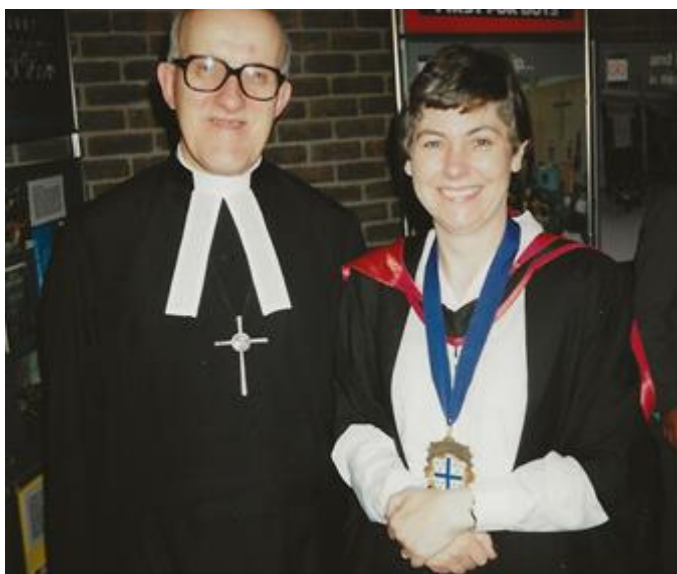


# Personal reflections on the 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality

It is now twenty eight years since Conference passed the Resolutions on Human Sexuality which set the Methodist Church on a pilgrimage of faith, where those with contradictory convictions are held together in the love and grace of God. Here, we ask a few of those who were in Derby for that Conference in 1993 to reflect on the experience of that debate and share their reflections.



## Revd Brian Beck was President of Conference in 1993

It fell to me to chair the Derby Conference in 1993, so my perspective on things is probably not normal! Susan Howdle, the Vice-President that year, played a vital part in preparation and support. Years later we wrote an extensive record of the day and what preceded and followed it, running to twenty pages, of which the Conference Office has a copy. Looking back now, certain things stand out.

First, there was very careful preparation. Some of the rules of debate were suspended to facilitate the debate, and the deadline for the submission of Notices of Motion was brought forward to ensure that everyone knew beforehand what they would have to vote on. Every resolution and every amendment was printed on a separate Order Paper, of a different colour, to reduce the possibility of confusion.

Second, it was a very orderly debate. The Agenda contained a range of resolutions, with alternatives, to choose from. In addition there were Notices of Motion, submitted in advance, from the floor. The proposed resolutions and amendments were arranged in order so that each laid the foundation for what followed. There were two initial speakers to outline opposing points of view. Later in the day the proposers of all resolutions and amendments were given an opportunity to say briefly why they

had proposed them. There were long queues in the aisles of those waiting to speak and one was invited in turn from each side to do so. No one overstepped the time limits. The debate, which lasted the whole day, began and ended with prayer. From the chair, and before and after the debate I was careful not to express any view which might be interpreted as taking sides.

Thirdly, it was very courteous. I can recall only two instances of what one might call 'ranting'. Only one speaker waved a Bible at us, though many others no doubt shared his point of view. When we came to the end of the day there was huge relief and gratitude to God. A feared demo by Stonewall from the gallery did not take place.

Fourthly, the next day a letter was mailed to every circuit setting out the decisions the Conference had taken.

Finally, a warning to the President-designate. Immediately after the close of the session a press conference was called for. Be prepared!

### **Mrs Susan Howdle was Vice-President of Conference in 1993**



The night before: the preparation was indeed daunting. There were the balanced alternative resolutions carefully prepared by the group led by Nigel Collinson. But now our task was to put the various Notices of Motion proposing amendments into a logical order so that dealing with one did not pre-empt the outcome on a later one. At about midnight we handed them over for printing to Brian Thornton and his Methodist Publishing House staff who spent the rest of the night exhausting every possible shade of paper (17, I think) – and themselves! Meanwhile I lay awake trying not to think of the scenario of Brian taking ill!

So to the long day of debate. My job was mainly to ensure that the appropriately coloured piece of paper was under Brian's nose, and to offer muttered support. My

lasting aural memory comes from its beginning. Brian had invited ordinands to lead the daily opening devotions that week and it fell to Novette Headley (then Thompson) to lead that day – the Conference raised the roof with her choice of hymn: “All hail the power of Jesu’s name”. My outstanding visual memory remains the two lines of people stretching to the back of the hall, waiting hours to speak – about 66 speeches in all. The queues didn’t form on ‘party lines’. Although it was vital that a balance of speakers be heard, that seemed to come about quite naturally – and indeed many speakers themselves were seeking to express a balanced view.

It was partly a long day also because the voting was by ballot, and the Conference needed to await the result of each count before proceeding to the next. My purely personal impression was that, although the atmosphere of the day was necessarily intense, those moments of pausing just possibly helped to give us all a periodic break in tension.

The end of the day: I finally had my moment to speak, intervening to move a point of order (it wasn’t!) to express the thanks of the Conference for the fine way that Brian had presided over the debate, and a well-deserved standing ovation followed.

What had we resolved? There were those in the Conference who sought to ask the Conference that week, and in subsequent years, to clarify the wording, but it consistently declined to do so. So, in the ensuing year, Brian and I as we travelled the Connexion firmly resisted any such requests. Interestingly, in some Districts it was a very live issue; in others it was never raised.

But whatever we had resolved, my overwhelming sense (then and now) is that it was enfolded in a day of prayer and genuine conferring, as we sought the Holy Spirit’s guidance to discern the way forward.

## **Revd John Cooke proposed a Notice of Motion that became Resolution 6**



*Resolution 6: Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church. Conference calls on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.*

Everyone who attended the Methodist Conference in 1993 in Derby knew that the Debate on Human Sexuality would be one of the most important and potentially explosive debates that would take place in recent Methodist history. The 'Methodist Recorder' headlined it as "*The Great Debate*". I travelled to the Conference with a sense of great anxiety, nervousness and yet excitement since I was to propose and speak to a Notice of Motion that was submitted for the day of the debate. Those of us who were members of the Methodist Caucus within LGCM (Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement) had organised and planned for this time. We sent every Conference representative a pack with a booklet we produced, '*One More Step*' and were encouraged to see many representatives wearing our pink badges with the statement 'I'm praying for an inclusive Church'.

The debate was programmed for the whole day. The mood of Conference was tense and I felt there was a lot of fear around. Bags were searched on entry, voting was by secret ballot, and long queues formed to speak at the tribune, some having to wait for five hours to reach the front.

The official resolutions posed two alternatives, one leaving the judgments on candidates for ministry, lay office and membership without giving explicit instructions in relation to a candidate's sexuality and the other declaring it would be inappropriate to accept those who intentionally engage in homosexual practice.

These resolutions however, were superseded by two notices of motion that eventually became Resolution 4 and 6. Resolution 4 was designed to prevent splitting the Church and thus avoid making a decision by reaffirming what was called the traditional teaching of the Church with the aphorism 'chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it' and that this affirmation be made clear to all candidates for ministry, office and membership. The Resolution I proposed, was initially designed to provide an affirming and positive statement which I hoped would get a respectable showing. However, I personally felt that the passing of Resolution 4 totally ignored and indeed ostracised gay and lesbian sexuality and was a recipe for continued hypocrisy and that my Resolution provided a crucial counterweight to what would have been a disaster. Members of Conference realised this, and to my eternal relief, it was passed by a majority of a hundred. There was an audible gasp in the Conference Hall when the vote was announced. What had we decided?

At the end of that day there was much uncertainty and confusion about the meaning and consequences of these two very different Resolutions. There was a later attempt to 'clarify' the Conference decisions to declare that the motion celebrating the presence of gay men and lesbians in the Church must be understood as requiring celibacy. In the end Conference decided not to vote on that motion, and so these resolutions stood with their ambiguity and mixed interpretations, but also a sense of relief that the debate had ended peaceably for the time being.

There was however a continuing sequel to the 1993 debates three years later at the Blackpool Conference of 1996. It was the fourth successive Conference that human sexuality had been debated. The atmosphere had darkened. Two ministers had pursued a discipline charge against a gay minister who had publicly 'come out' as living with his partner. In response we had organised a support group 'Sustaining Six' referencing Resolution 6. The charge was debated in a closed session of the Conference and tensions ran high and spilled out. The President of Conference warned the Church to draw back from the chasm and called for a time of quiet and a moratorium on any attempts to change the Sexuality Resolutions in any direction. It could be argued that this prevented a possible split in the Church, but I believe it had a considerable cost, in that the Church stood silently on the side-lines and took little or no part in the profound changes that were taking place in society beginning with the protections for sexual minorities and then legal status for same-sex relationships with Civil Partnerships and subsequently Marriage. However, I do acknowledge, in the spirit of Resolution 6, the Methodist Church to its credit did proceed with the pastoral and pragmatic decision to allow its ministers, officers and members to contract Civil Partnerships and civil Marriages.

Looking back on twenty-eight years ago, the Derby Conference seems to belong to another age, and the Church is now left struggling to respond to the new realities of our varied sexual lives. Resolution 6 was never actually designed to become one of the governing statements of the Methodist Church, but despite that I think it has stood the test on time. It is very gratifying that a new generation of activists with intelligence, passion and energy have emerged from the torpor and I take some personal pleasure that the title '*Dignity & Worth*' was taken from a phrase used long ago in Resolution 6!

*Revd John Cooke*

*Supernumerary and Associate Minister at Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London*

### **Revd Martin Turner, an evangelical perspective**



For those on the evangelical wing of Methodism, the Derby Conference was not an easy time. Many of us felt that our ministry, and therefore our stipend and home,

might need to be sacrificed. The debate was long and somewhat complicated to follow, with many amendments coming from the floor. Alongside work on the Conference floor there were many unseen smaller meetings, both sorting out strategy for one side of the debate or the other, or, crucially, meeting across the divide to try to find a way to take a united Methodism forward. The idea which came up time and again was that of pilgrimage, but many of us were not too happy to be on that pilgrimage, for we felt that those using this language were very clear in their minds as to exactly where this pilgrimage should be leading. The abuse some of us received from those disagreeing with our point of view was sharp and hurtful, as was the somewhat triumphalist attitude of some after the debate, seemingly unaware of the deep hurt felt by many others. Those of us in evangelical leadership were also strongly criticised by fellow evangelicals who felt betrayed by what they saw as our weak attempts at conciliation, I for one felt a bit like the filling in a sandwich!!

The outcome was in truth a fudge, each "side" claiming a measure of success, sadly Methodism lost some good people through it.

Derby was for me the low point of the Methodist debate upon human sexuality. Many have since shifted in their viewpoint, others not. The key in going forward has been personal friendships across divisions, an acknowledgment that all views are held in sincerity, plus the key affirmation that we are one in Christ.

## **Revd David Deeks**

I became General Secretary of the Division of Social Responsibility in September 1992. So the 1993 Conference was my first as an Officer of the Conference (and indeed as a member). I was thoroughly un-schooled in the culture of the Conference, and nervous about how to fulfil my responsibilities. But everything (I do not exaggerate: I mean 'everything') about the Conference, from beginning to end, was subservient to the debate on Human Sexuality. On the day the atmosphere in the Conference hall was electric. The public gallery was full. The press and media were out in force. The tension was tangible. Two contradictory and apparently irreconcilable convictions were set to divide the Church irreparably. Some, in both 'camps', wanted a showdown, so that their 'truth' prevailed - at the cost of many leaving the Church for conscience' sake. Some wanted above all to hold the Methodist Church together. But how? And for how long? And at what cost, if many walked away in frustration or despair?

In my mind the most important thing of all was that Brian Beck was presiding (with Susan Howdle so ably assisting). Brian and I had worked very closely together for four years, as the staff of Wesley House, Cambridge, before Brian became Secretary of the Conference. He was unrivalled in theological acumen, breadth of pastoral sympathy, knowledge of Methodist procedures, and understanding of Methodist history and its ethos. Brian's presence gave me confidence that the day would end well, in spite of the ambition of some and the fears of many. When the now famous Resolutions were adopted, and Brian had declared from the chair that new doctrine had been made that day, I was profoundly aware of the Spirit's presence, guiding and directing the Church. The Pilgrimage of Faith could now continue creatively.

From many points of view nothing much changed that day. From one crucial perspective, however, everything changed. By God's grace the Methodist Church could show the wider Christian community and the secular world that a truly human engagement with the mystery we are to ourselves is possible, with all our differences, that enhances mutual reverence and transcends sectarian conflicts. In other words, we discovered afresh what it means truly to be 'Church'.

## **Revd Paul Smith**



On at least two occasions before 1993 working parties had worked hard to bring their reflections on Human Sexuality before the Conference, but on each occasion they had failed to take the Conference with them. So as '93 approached there was a growing sense that this was the year when decisions would be made. Those who felt strongly both ways tried to ensure that they had as many supporters there as possible. A whole day was reserved for the debate and everyone knew the stakes were very high. It was tense and many of us felt nervous at both the debate and the possible outcomes.

But the Methodist Church does have a way of handling difficult issues well, and so it proved. All those who wanted to speak were given the opportunity and the business proceeded as Wesley would have said 'decently and in order'. There was frank and open debate, but no bitterness or rancour. As well as the resolutions brought by the working party there were a whole raft of notices of motion which members of Conference had brought; but the Conference was guided step by step until the work was done.

The two most contentious resolutions were 4 and 6; the former affirming the traditional teaching of the Church as celibacy for all outside marriage and fidelity within it and the latter affirming the ministry of lesbians and gay men. Both got through. Like many others I could not understand then, and I cannot understand now, how two resolutions which apparently contradict each other were both approved, but that is what happened.

Following the decision many who held a conservative position were broken and confused. What would they tell their people back home? I saw grown men weep. The situation was made worse the following morning when I learned that my friends had been taunted by those who took a progressive position and said that they had won. There was a lot of healing to be done in the ensuing years, but I'm afraid with some the scars still remain.

With hindsight I think the most damaging thing about all this is that it did not heal the divisions, it deepened them. We spoke of winners and losers. We rejoiced if we got 51% of the vote and cared little about the 49% who were just as sincere but saw things differently. That was true on both sides of this debate. There was far more talking than listening.

We've come a long way since then, but the issue still divides Christians; not only in Methodism but throughout the world. But if there's one thing I have learned it is that there are no winners and losers in this. I see little hope if we continue to think in those terms. We need to find a way of living together, being church together, without trying to get the other person to see things our way. Maybe this is the moment of opportunity when the Methodist people can demonstrate to a broken and divided world that it is possible to love those who see things differently, to respect those with whom we disagree, to listen intently and to speak cautiously, to be reconciled to one another, as God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus.

## **Revd Peter Barber**

I went to the 1993 Conference with considerable anxiety and fear. Partly because I was still carrying the personal scars and hurts of what happened in my first circuit appointment when discussing the 1979 report to Conference on marriage and sexuality. That report caused the vast majority of two of my seven churches to leave Methodism and set up an independent church. I carried to the 1993 Conference the deep pain of a General Church Meeting when over 50 members of the 70 regular worshippers stood up and left and I remained there with about 8 people. I could still picture the farmer with tears running down his face as his sons and their families left and he remained.

The sets of proposals in the 1993 agenda seemed to offer two routes, either of which, if adopted, I feared would lead to major division within the Methodist Church. I sensed in the Conference a mixture of deep anxiety and fear as well as hope and longing. In the end the deep pastoral and theological wisdom of the President of the Conference, Revd Dr Brian Beck, along with the careful work of others, enabled the Conference to agree a set of new resolutions. These offered room for an ongoing journey which the vast majority of people in the Conference, and in the wider Connexion could live with. We committed ourselves to a pilgrimage of faith.

For me personally that meant a more intentional engagement with the question of human sexuality within the providence of God. Scripture, theology, prayer, people's stories and experiences have led me from a place of uncertainty in relation to my understanding of LGBT+ people and faith to one of hope. To a place where I look



forward to a time when I could do more than advocate a truly inclusive way of being church, but also officiate, mark and celebrate commitments between two people irrespective of how they self-identify. I have been grateful for those who have helped me in a deepening scriptural and theological understanding. This has proved for me an exciting spiritual journey and deepened my faith and experience of God. My main regret is that it took so long and that still we haven't yet reached a point where we are a truly inclusive church, which I believe would be a fuller representation of the God who has called me to be a follower of Christ.