

2. General Secretary's Report

These reflections arise from the immense privilege of serving as General Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of the Conference for the past 5 years. My intention in looking back is to demonstrate the momentum for change which must roll forward and gather pace into the future. In section 3 I attempt to place the major reports before this year's Conference in their larger context.

1 Where have we come from in the past few years? Is it too simplistic to suggest that the long period of preparation (going back to *Sharing in God's Mission* in 1985) which led to *Our Calling* (2000) and *Priorities for the Methodist Church* (2004) is now stimulating encouragement for significant changes in the Church's mission and ministry?

One way of interpreting the change of mood is this. The British Methodist Church, like the other classic Churches in Europe, found themselves in a difficult position in the latter part of the 20th century. A large number of political, social and cultural changes left the Churches increasingly marginalised from public awareness; numerically much smaller; and increasingly puzzled about the difficulty, in spite of all their efforts, to cut any ice with increasingly prosperous women and men who no longer needed to defer to the Church or even acknowledge its existence in order to make a success of their lives within their own, individually-crafted vision of success and happiness.

But the Methodist Church, like many sister Churches who are strongly rooted in the Christian past, has – by the grace of God – seen things begin to turn round. This is raw material for the praise of God. In God's graciousness, God is helping the Churches to refocus on their core purpose and to empower Christian disciples tentatively to speak with a measure of confidence of God and faith in the many everyday languages and dialects of our diverse, confusing and rapidly changing society.

Our Calling and the *Priorities* (Appendix 1) seemed to crystallise this 'turn around'. Consequently we can trace in our recent story ever greater confidence in embracing change, on the journey of discovery of what the Church needs to look like and do in order to be a fit agent for God's mission in 21st century society.

This is how I summarised the evidence in an address I gave to the London District synod in April:

1.1 The way we structure ourselves. Evidence: I have personally witnessed the long and painful struggle by which the former 7 Divisions became the Connexional Team in 1996 and how, since 2005, through the Team Focus process, the Connexional Team has been radically reconfigured to make it a more flexible, efficient and co-operative organism within the connexion, focussing on what it can uniquely and best do, and continuing to learn from its experience how to change in the service of the Church.

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There is a parallel set of processes now developing everywhere in the connexion through circuit reviews of a radical kind, bringing under the microscope of 21st century mission strategy our buildings, our circuit structures and our financial and human resources. The heading for this 5-year programme of connexion-wide circuit reviews: Mapping a Way Forward – Regrouping for Mission. At its culmination will be a review of our district structures. But already you [i.e. the London District] have blazed the trail in exploring new ways of being a District. Well done for that – and more of it, please!

1.2 The way we do things. The most radical assault on opaque and cumbersome bureaucracy in the Church is the review of Part 9 of CPD. This part of our discipline regulates all Methodist property developments and the use of Model Trust money. That root and branch review is now well under way, and its simplified, electronically-based, efficient consent-giving procedures are about to be trialled in this District and in the Nottingham & Derby District, before being rolled out connexionally as soon as possible.

1.3 Fundamental attitude. Through Our Calling and Priorities for the Methodist Church, I believe people are rediscovering some key issues about our identity as a Church:

- *that we are above all, a Church in mission;*
- *that our focus is therefore on engaging with the society around us and with people who do not belong to the Church;*
- *that we have to be innovative, creative and determined if we are to embed ourselves confidently in the secular and multi-faith world, and that precisely in those strange contexts learn to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to ordinary people going about their everyday lives, struggling with the ups and downs of their experience, their joys and sorrows, but having no intuitive sense at all that their lives are enveloped by the grace of God.*

So everyday discipleship is pivotal to our mission – in the workplace, in our families and neighbourhoods and in the groups and organisations where we take our leisure. Confident and meaningful witness in such settings, credibility of character, consistency of moral perspective – these constitute the vocation of a Church which sees itself again as primarily a lay movement supported by a few ordained people. (Wherever I turn in today's Church, I see lay people taking initiatives and energy for mission being released.)

1.4 We have informally entered into a new ecumenism. This has many facets. I touch here only on a few of them.

- *Wherever you look in contemporary Methodism you see congregations (both traditional congregations and fresh expressions of Church) which are ever so much more diverse than just a generation ago. Obviously so in terms of ethnicity and nationality, and increasingly in the languages that are used. But also in the Christian backgrounds of people there. Few are born and bred Methodists; but for a variety of reasons, people have come together from many Christian traditions: Anglicans, Roman Catholics, URC, independent evangelical, Pentecostal; or from nothing in particular.*

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- *Our worship has been enriched by a far greater range of resources – from Taizé and Iona, from Pentecostalism, from the evangelical song-tradition and from words and music developed first in partner Churches all round the world.*
- *We are learning to revitalise long-established Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and to develop formal ecumenical relationships with a far lighter touch.*
- *In many places we are confidently making friendships with people of other faiths, learning from them and sharing with them, working together in support of better communities and taking action together for justice.*
- *In the midst of this more flexible and generous and broad-ranging ecumenism, we are also slowly rediscovering the strengths of our distinctive Methodist contributions to the Church catholic – our connexionalism; our emphasis on personal and social holiness; and our naturally good-humoured approach to life, to faith and to worship: we dislike pomposity; we like people to speak plain; we know what we believe when we sing it with gusto and pray it with fervour in everyday words.*

A reflection on this 'new ecumenism'. Much of the movement to greater diversity – and therefore greater vitality and confidence – has come about because of the extraordinary movement of peoples around the world in recent generations. Christian people coming to Britain from many parts of the world have helped to re-shape the Church. People of other faiths coming to Britain from many parts of the world have helped to re-shape our society and the agenda of the Church's mission.

In reality of course the situation in the Methodist Church as a whole is not as tidy as my preceding remarks may suggest. Some resist change. Some are frustrated by the slow pace of change. Others are cautious about the direction of change. Some are unclear about the authority for 'doing things differently'. Others are perplexed by the observation that, if so much ferment for change and innovation can be detected in local churches and Circuits, and if this is of God, how is it that – overall – the institution continues to decline. [See Section 55 of this Agenda].

In spite of this untidiness, I still believe that it is appropriate to spell out a bigger picture which clearly demonstrates a recent enthusiasm for appropriate change, in every part of the connexion, prompted by *Our Calling* and *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

2 Where have we got to in the processes of change? It is more than a list of particular changes that we need to note. The most straightforward summary of what God is doing among us is this: *a profound change is taking place in the culture of the Church*. 'Culture' is about what is taken for granted, what is intuitively known, the general expectations in an organisation of how things are intended to be done. It is not so much that the experiments, projects in mission, innovative developments in worship and mission and adventures of faith are items on someone's agenda, or stimulants for few people temperamentally inclined to favour them. Rather, they are becoming part of the life-blood of the Church of Jesus Christ as it seeks to discern and obey the wind of the Spirit in our modern

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world. When the culture changes in this way, leaders do not have to argue a case to win over intransigent, suspicious and cynical Church members; they have to inspire, focus and guide what everyone is thirsting to set going in the everyday life of the Christian movement. We are, I believe, getting somewhere near to that sort of change of culture in contemporary Methodism.

My only fear is that there is a small number of Church leaders (presbyters prominent among them) who were so bruised and demoralised by the dispiriting loss of nerve a generation ago that they remain deeply sceptical, holding people back in stead of encouraging them to move forward.

So let me attempt to illustrate the change of culture I am alluding to through alternative narratives about personal ministry (lay or ordained).

Story 1: a 'settled state' vision of vocation, developed on an apprenticeship model (i.e. the ways my predecessors have acted). In this vision I am clear about my calling. I need a settled environment, with shared expectations, in which my vocation and my distinctive contribution can be affirmed and can have maximum effect. Or if that cannot be achieved, the least I need is to stay put over a long period, practising my vocation with integrity, and allowing the Church to be reformed around me and to settle itself there.

Story 2: a 'fluid' vision of vocation. In this vision I have a provisional understanding of my calling. I seem never to be in any settled environment in which I might have the leisure to explore the possibilities of my distinctive ministry and to grasp its meaning more clearly. Instead, I find myself always in rapidly changing environments, with novel and unexpected demands being made on me day to day and week to week. In this context, however, I discover (with a clarity and depth beyond all expectations) who I am and what I can contribute – which supersedes what I thought were my personal boundaries and capacity – and what my vocation is becoming.

I recognise in myself not so much either Story 1 or Story 2, but both. However, over the past 48 years (i.e. since I first glimpsed some sense of personal vocation) the balance has shifted very significantly towards Story 2. This merits a bit of theological reflection.

A key theme is 'obedience'. There is a prudential obedience to be taken seriously (i.e. accepting and administering the discipline of the Church). But in the New Testament, the heart of the notion of obedience is linked closely to the notion of listening. The obedience of faith is like being at home and hearing the doorbell ring, going to the door (even though it means interrupting what was already an absorbing activity) and opening the door to – who knows what? It is about being flexible to whoever is on the doorstep, and responding to the challenge for which there has been no time to prepare and trusting oneself (through the Spirit of God within) to be a good neighbour to the unexpected visitor, without any clear idea where a welcome and a thoroughly serious response will lead.

I am also intrigued by the Biblical narrative of God's presence with God's people in the wilderness, after the escape from Egypt. God directs when and where the Tent of God's Presence is pitched and for how long; and when the Tent has to be folded up and the journey into the unknown must continue (Numbers 9: 15-23).

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No one should underestimate the turmoil in the Church, and the price to be paid, in going through this cultural change. Some of my dearest friends, faced with the pressures of Story 2, have literally disintegrated or given up in despair or have cried out for firm guidelines or clear boundaries, for directives or directions. And to them God has been silent. Nothing has persuaded them that God's love, though completely hidden, yet upholds and sustains them. So faith has withered.

There are parallel narratives to be told about some local churches.

3 What are the next steps on the journey of change? The Conference's Agenda points us in some fascinating directions. Obvious highlights are these:

3.1 The beginnings of a renewed ecumenical vision for the whole Church [**one of the Conference workshops; and sections 37 and 38 of the Agenda**], to be articulated in 12 months' time. This will not only shape new relationships and partnerships, but also invigorate our traditional close relationships – with the United Reformed Church, for example [**Agenda, section 62**]. And our ongoing commitment, within the Covenant, to the Church of England. At this Conference, as simultaneously at the General Synod of the Church of England, a proposal comes about a second phase of five years for the Joint Implementation Commission [**Agenda, section 46**].

(May I make a parting plea in respect of our relationships with the Church of England? I hear time and again: 'The Covenant has made no discernible difference here'. [In other places, of course, a very different story is being told; and we are not yet good enough at communicating with one another about our diverse experiences and contexts]. My appeal to Methodists is to moan less and instead to take the initiative everywhere to open up new possibilities. Where it is necessary, may the spirit of confidence, hospitality and generosity, radiating from us, transform the hearts and minds of colleagues – in the Methodist Church and in the Church of England! Or may we give them just the opportunity they long for to express a latent desire for close co-operation and the development of deep and Church-changing friendship. This is classic Methodism: to be restrained by no one, least of all by representatives of much larger organisations than the British Methodist Church, in winning co-operation, in kindling a desire for shared prayer and mutual enjoyment, by the sheer warmth of our love and the generosity and spontaneity of our unpretentious hospitality. And all this for the sake of our shared mission.)

3.2 Fresh ways of being Church – developing apace and becoming embedded into our everyday expectations of our overall mission strategy [**Agenda, section 54**] – alongside the updating of worship, ministry and mission in traditional churches. In particular, at this Conference, we note a commitment to continue our collaboration with the Church of England in the work of the organisation *Fresh Expressions* [**Agenda, section 38**].

3.3 We launch the reconfigured Connexional Team [**Agenda, sections 37 and 39**]. An extraordinary amount of energy has been devoted to the review of the Team in order to get it as good as it can be at this stage. I am personally grateful to Team members (especially my closest colleagues) and large numbers of friends in the wider Church and in sister organisations who have contributed to this demanding process. There is immense potential in the Team that is about to be

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born. But there are bound to be teething problems after such a thoroughgoing review of the Team's life. And it will be as difficult to meet everyone's expectations in the future as it has been in the past 12 years. But there is deep commitment to change in the leadership of the new Team. And if the Church will prayerfully co-operate with the Team and walk patiently alongside them, wonderful opportunities will emerge for the larger changes still gathering pace in the wider Church.

3.4 The Stationing Review [**Agenda, section 48**]: a wide range of recommendations here to achieve the careful deployment of well-trained ministers to serve mission-shaped Circuits and Districts, flexibly, imaginatively and within available resources. And all this to be developed coherently with:

- (a) the ongoing process of *Mapping a Way Forward: Re-grouping for Mission*, now to be additionally resourced by the appointment of District Development Enablers;
- (b) the inauguration of a new vision for training and development for all God's people – through *Extending Discipleship, Exploring Vocation*; high quality training opportunities delivered through regional training networks, supplemented by newly appointed Training Officers; and the advent of Annual Development Review [**Agenda, section 42**].
- (c) the introduction of Pioneer Ministers, which is to be developed through an important project [**Agenda, section 37**].

3.5 The beginning of a Youth Participation Strategy, to be carefully monitored, as it takes its first steps in 2008/9 and then rolls forward throughout the connexion in following years, in order to learn what has to change in the Church's culture to enable young people and children to participate ever more fully and effectively in the Christian movement [**Agenda, section 21**].

3.6 The ways in which we engage with one another [**Agenda, sections 50 and 18**], honouring ever greater diversity, becoming ever more sensitive to the complex identities we bring to one another and to the life of the Church and working together in disciplined and accountable ways to eliminate discrimination, to overcome prejudice and to act justly. Methodists have never been afraid to encourage one another to be a disciplined people. There are rules to be kept and laws to comply with if we are to limit the hurts we may inflict on one another. Not only are we challenged in this regard in respect of 'Equalities and Diversity' but also in adhering to the highest standards of confidentiality and trust in the ministry of pastoral care.

Some general reflections on these many steps in the continuing journey of change towards an ever deeper reformation of culture in the Church.

- (1) It remains incumbent on the Church 'to underpin everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer' (*Priorities*). And, I would add, the skilful, rigorous, critical and well-informed 'searching of the scriptures'. It is God who is changing us as and when God wills.

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- (2) There is a serious challenge to all Church leaders (lay and ordained) to grasp clearly the larger story of systemic change that is gathering pace in the Church, under the imperative of God calling us to share in God's mission. Church leaders must also seek to discern the connections between the many Agenda items before the Conference this year and the bigger vision of change to which they add momentum, i.e. the transfiguring of the very heart of the Church. And every member of the Conference is invited to share consistently, confidently and persistently in communicating 'how things fit together' and 'what it all adds up to' on every possible occasion, in local churches, Circuits and Districts. We need to help one another to 'see the big picture', to enthuse God's people about what God is doing among us and to attend to the fears, the confusions, the indifference and even the hostility of brothers and sisters who have not yet grasped the vision or have not been given the opportunity to do so.
- (3) The refreshment of the Church is all about more effective, transformational engagement with the world in which we live. Yes, the acid test of that is the commitment we make to local and everyday contexts in which we find ourselves – 'being a good neighbour to people in need and challenging injustice'. But our proud tradition is also and always to the wider issues of public policy [**Agenda, sections 19 and 62**], and to political, social and economic debates; and indeed to global concerns about poverty, warfare, oppression and disease. 'Central to Christian ministry is effective Christian presence to the desperate in their extremity' (John Riches). An echo here of John Wesley's dictum: 'Go not to those who need you but to those who need you most'?
- (4) That emphasis eliminates from the Church-in-process-of-radical-transformation any hint of triumphalism, power-seeking or anxiety about size and social influence. Becoming an authentic Church is more about integrity of values and single-minded commitment to a clear purpose than about size. And certainly, sharing in God's mission entails radical humility: it is as disciples of the Crucified One that we do our 'learning and caring', serve the world, witness to the one God and call women and men to join with us in following Jesus Christ.

Our worship embodies and signifies all this, or should do so. And strangely, some of the most pertinent 'reminders' are in fact easily overlooked. The holy communion, for example. In a recent edition of *The Tablet*, Daniel McCarthy wrote: 'The gifts brought up in procession, in the early Church, were intended for the poor, and from what was given to the poor a loaf and some wine were reserved for the prayer of thanksgiving to God. The gifts of bread and wine, then, are representative of our self-gift to neighbour, over which we offer our thanksgiving for God's self-gift to us in Christ.'

4 Sustaining a culture of change. I presume to conclude by straining to glimpse now the longer-term challenges to the Church as it is being reshaped for its 21st century mission. Am I looking 20-30 years ahead?

The study of history reveals many Churches and societies which have enjoyed periods of extraordinary creative energy and have had an almost magnetic

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attractiveness for people searching for meaning and freedom in their lives; only for what promised so much to collapse catastrophically or to ossify into something lumpen and bureaucratic. The medium to long term challenge for the Methodist Church is therefore *sustainability and development*.

My instinct is that we shall need to keep in one hand all the wisdom we can cull from organisational theory about sustaining and refreshing healthy communities; and in our other hand the Biblical narratives of the wilderness wanderings between the Exodus and the entry into the Promised Land. What realism – and hope – are embedded in that scriptural text: it merits prolonged reflection. And God's presence is to be discerned in both these resources and in the interplay between them.

So, some key gifts that God will grant us to sustain the journey towards becoming a fit tool for 21st century obedience.

4.1 Leadership, at every level of the Church, lay and ordained. Leadership is about advocating a vision consistently over a long period, but also about allowing the vision constantly to be renewed and clarified by welcoming perspectives from changing circumstances and from many voices. Leaders, like the Church itself, need a spirituality of radical humility. Otherwise they become like Balaam (Numbers 22), who could not see God's angel in his path, though his donkey did. And at the least, leaders should attend with great care to the insights of children and young people (Mark 10: 13-16) and of the marginalised.

Leadership is also about patience and encouragement; and taking a step forward with courage, especially in the face of rebellion, criticism and moaning. (Back to the story of Israel in the wilderness!) Of course, leaders can be wrong. Leaders can fail to explain and communicate. But they remain guardians of the vision which the gospel gives the Church through the Spirit: they must share that vision whether or not people want to hear it, and do everything in their power to help people to be inspired by that vision and to grasp God's contemporary call on the disciples of Jesus. The Church loses out if it were to be said of its leaders what Andrew Marr writes of many Prime Ministers in the 20th century: 'Good people, acting honourably, failed to lead well.' [For a review of the contribution of connexional leaders, see **Agenda, section 32.**]

4.2 Combining the visionary and the practical: like an architect who creates a mixture of space and design that enraptures a visitor; but must also produce a building which is useful and functional. Effective leaders of the Church do need to be able to manage change and attend to detail. What is critical is the balance between the visionary and the messy, time-consuming, process-driven realities of sustainable change. Danger comes when the latter becomes all-absorbing, as it too easily does. Or when leaders are not released to lead, but are overly occupied with maintaining (to a high standard, even) that which must disappear or come under major review.

4.3 Managing the speed and volume of change. Setting a good speed of change is a complex judgement to make. Whatever is determined as an effective pace of change will be controversial – criticised alike by those who want less and those who want something much faster.

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Leaders need the openness of mind constantly to listen to these pressures, from the conservative to the radical - not in an attitude of stubbornness, but with a flexible approach that actually allows modification to agreed programmes of change but do not threaten an agreed overarching strategy.

Events, however, almost always overtake well-laid plans, so that the temptation is enormous to halt change or slow it down, or to add yet more change to a well-planned development project, thus running the risk of things getting out of control.

I was fascinated to read recently about the pressures that had to be negotiated at the birth of the American republic, in the run-up to the Declaration of Independence. The popular pressure for radical change had been stirred up by Thomas Paine's rhetoric, that 'we have it in our power to begin the world over again. The birthday of a new world is at hand.' Between them, the leaders of the movement (Adams and Jefferson, for example) made the decision to go for a slow evolution, precisely to avoid a chaotic revolution and political instability; and thus secured an enduring constitutional republic.

4.4 All the above reflections come back to the huge significance of good governance in sustaining change, especially cultural change, over a very long period (through all the ups and downs of unpredictable events and particular crises). For us, in the Methodist Church, that brings us to the role of the Conference.

It is the Conference which exercises oversight of everything in the connexion. The Conference

- sets a strategy for mission and ministry;
- leads by example in discerning the will of God by calling on the leading of the Holy Spirit and enabling all its members to confer prayerfully, effectively and in well-informed ways;
- holds every part of the connexion to account for its delivery of what it can uniquely and best contribute to the overall work of the Church;
- establishes the norms of personal value and appropriate behaviour which constitute an abiding ethos, plus the disciplinary procedures to be invoked when its rules are breached;
- encourages good communications throughout our complex organisation;
- checks that resources are fairly distributed around the connexion and used well according to mission priorities; and
- authorises leaders to lead, within the overarching vision of God's kingdom.

So some of the Conference's time needs to be spent in self-evaluation and on the adjustment of its procedures, so that it can be a more effective and efficient vehicle in the purposes of God and in governing the Church. Would it not be a good idea for the Conference formally to appoint a group with the specific task of ensuring the transfer of best practice from one Conference to the next? At the moment this happens almost accidentally - through the Business Committees and informally through an *ad hoc* gathering of the Conference 'secretariat'. It could be more systematic and it could draw on the experience and evaluation of all its members, not just a few.

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***RESOLUTION

2/1. The Conference receives the Report.

Appendix 1

Our Calling and Priorities for the Methodist Church

The purpose of the Methodist Church is 'to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission' (Conference 1996).

Since Conference 2000 the *Our Calling* process has provided four interconnected themes within which local churches and Circuits may review their life in fulfilment of this purpose. The themes also help them to make plans or set targets to develop their worship and mission. Thus the church exists to

Increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love (worship).

Help people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care (learning and caring).

Be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice (service).

Make more followers of Jesus Christ (evangelism).

The *Our Calling* process has released many hopes and dreams for the whole Church, and identified some fundamental challenges for Christian presence and mission in 21st century Britain. The Conference of 2004 resolved to harness the energy and imagination of districts, connexional bodies, churches and Circuits in response to these hopes, dreams and challenges. It therefore approved the following *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world;

and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church

As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:

Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer

Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide

Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Encouraging fresh ways of being Church

Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible