



# Methodist Women in Britain



A women's movement that combines spirituality and social action in a global context is the vision for a new organisation, Methodist Women in Britain, to be launched at the Southport Conference in July 2011.

Bringing together Women's Network and the British Unit of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, but also going beyond both existing organisations, Methodist Women in Britain will be committed to generating creative space for new women's groups and individuals from diverse backgrounds.

"At a time when the Methodist Church is focusing on discipleship, Women's Network and the World Federation have a common agenda," says the Connexional Women's Network President, Gillian Pengelly, "Women's Network has an ethos of encouraging, enabling and equipping women, while the WFMUCW is prioritizing the empowerment of women as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000."

"In British Methodism, the issue is how best to empower ordinary women who are still under-represented in the decision-making, policy-setting circles of the Church," says the President of the British Unit, Kathleen Pearson, "But in many developing countries, raising the worth of women is a matter of life and death. This is not just about how men think about women, but also about how women see themselves, whether they feel able to make their contribution and whether that is valued appropriately by Church and society. The World Federation is one of the non-governmental organisations consulted by the UN and we want the MDGs made a reality. We hope that the new movement will challenge Methodist women and train them for leadership as well as service."

Of all the names suggested for the new organisation, "Methodist Women in Britain" gained the greatest level of support. "It is direct, straightforward and shows where our roots are," says the Rev Julie Hulme, Women's Network's President-designate. "We'll be running our own affairs, but very much part of the Methodist Church."

It is intended that the new organisation will work ecumenically wherever possible, reflecting the World Federation, which includes women from several united or uniting churches, such as Australia, Canada and India. "We are part of an international Christian women's movement in which some countries are further down the ecumenical road than ourselves," says Julie Hulme, "And we have a long history of support for the Women's World Day of Prayer. So we want to affirm Christian women who are working and praying together at every level."

The decision to form the new organisation was taken by the Women's Network Connexional Committee, including the three British Unit World Federation officers, at a meeting in London in January. It follows a period of self-questioning and consultation within the movement, precipitated by the Connexional Team Focus process which removed the Connexional Women's Network office and the posts which went with it.

However, Gillian Pengelly believes that "the constituency is now eager to move on. We want to do things, not just talk about what we might do." A Draft Foundation Document has



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been written “to give shape to the vision,” and nominations are being sought for the first President of the new organisation and for three other executive officers. But, “Nothing is set in stone. We are still listening, and will welcome feedback. The Foundation Document will remain a work in progress until it is ratified by the first meeting of the Methodist Women in Britain Forum.”

The Forum is proposed as the governing body of the new organisation, with active representation from each District so that the movement can be owned by the grassroots, but work will also be done through a new website, where women will be able to share ideas, comments and prayers without ever attending meetings. “We want to inspire our existing activists but also offer a much broader menu, to include women who have never belonged to a traditional women’s group,” says Jill Baker, unit correspondent for the British Unit. “We want the leadership of the new movement to reflect more closely our diversity as Methodist women, and we need to remain flexible, ready to adapt our ways of working as Methodism re-shapes itself for mission.”

After three years of discussion, Connexional officers are delighted to be looking outward once more. “Women’s Network brings to the table a track record of significant work on domestic violence, human trafficking and other social issues. In the new organisation that work will be set in a global context,” says Kathleen Pearson. “The rights we enjoy – to clean water, adequate nutrition, health care, good housing, access to education, decent pay and personal safety – are still a dream for many of our sisters around the world. We want to stand with them in their struggle.”

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