

Basic Information

Title	General Secretary's Report.
Contact Name and Details	Martyn Atkins generalsecretary@methodistchurch.org.uk
Status of Paper	Final
Resolution	The Conference receives the report

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To present to the Conference a report relating to the roles of the General Secretary of the Methodist Church as outlined in Standing Order 300, drawing attention to particular themes and pieces of work.
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To outline further progress in relation to a focus on Methodism as a discipleship movement, and its mission • To make comments about the progress of the work of the Connexional Team and its strategic leadership • To draw attention to particular aspects of work undertaken as a senior representative of the Methodist Church • To urge the Connexion to be open and aware of new opportunities for mission and service in a post General Election context.
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	The General Secretary's report itself arises out of wide consultation and listening, such being natural and intrinsic elements of undertaking the type of Christian ministry required by the post.
Impact	None in formal terms; potential considerable impact in terms of continuing to shape the life of the Connexion around in light of a continuing commitment to be a discipleship movement committed to the mission of God.
Risk	A wide ranging number of risks involved in pursuing ... and not pursuing such priorities.

Discipleship

1. In my report to the Conference last year I encouraged and urged a particular emphasis across several years on Christian discipleship and indicated a very wide enthusiasm and ownership for this theme found throughout the Connexion. This year the enthusiasm for this seems to have further increased among us. My experience, arising from a good many visits to Local Churches, circuit and district meetings of various types, is that we aspire and prayerfully resolve to become better disciples of Christ individually and a better discipleship movement corporately. God's continuing presence with us challenges and empowers us to explore the nature and 'tone' of contemporary Methodist discipleship in the broad context of being one of many historic Christian Churches in an increasingly post-Christian environment: in other words, a distinctive identity that is meshed with common Christian purposes.
2. An understanding of discipleship as rooted in Christ and in Christ's community the Church, and which is life-long, encompasses the whole of life, and is world transforming through the leading and enabling of the Holy Spirit, articulates for many a helpful restating of our tradition, rooted as it is in personal and social holiness, and a broad evangelicalism shaped and toned by God's essential graciousness.
3. Our special emphasis upon seeking to become better Christian disciples and on making disciples will itself have points of particular focus over the next few years. The Conference last year agreed that, like other Christian groupings, we should celebrate 2011 as the *Year of the Bible*, and like many others, participate in the *Biblefresh* initiative. Therefore the particular focus for the coming year will be about discipleship in relation to the Christian scriptures. Some members of the Connexional Team will provide resources for and input to this theme, but it is anticipated that the *Year of the Bible* will become a focus for deepening Christian discipleship throughout the Connexion, expressed in diverse ways in many localities.
4. Our belief that God continues to use the Methodist Church to make Christian disciples has become a key theme enabling priorities to be identified and choices to be made by the Connexional Team and other connexional bodies, particularly in relation to the proportionately small amount available in the Connexional budget for discretionary expenditure. The adoption of the discipleship motif in this way is evident in a number of papers before the Conference this year.
5. It was decided that I should produce the text of a short book to promote the discipleship theme. *Discipleship and the people called Methodists* is a personal account rather than an official document of the Conference. Published by *Methodist Publishing* this is produced as a free resource designed to encourage and stimulate reflection and discussion of the discipleship theme in small groups and study groups.

Mission

6. Pursuing the contextual implications of *Mapping a Way Forward: regrouping for mission* remains a powerful commitment throughout the Connexion and is a profound expression of Methodism as a discipleship movement. As directed by the Conference in 2007, the Connexional Leaders Forum (CLF) monitors this mission initiative described by the previous General Secretary as 'vision meshed with reality'. Three developments are noted here.
7. First, this initiative is now written and spoken of as *Regrouping for mission*: the subtitle becoming the title. This acknowledges and marks that a sizeable proportion of our Connexion now regards itself to have undertaken the initial 'mapping' stage and is now more engaged with the reconfiguration and implementation stage arising from it.
8. Second, I wish to note the value and significance of a joint meeting of the CLF with the District Development Enablers (DDE's) in January 2010. This enabled progress to be assessed, different emphases and models of implementation to be shared and further plans to be made

in order to continue to work out the implications of a continuing connexional commitment to *Regrouping for mission*. It is vitally important that the five years of the provision of DDE's, approved by a previous Conference and as a cost to the central connexional budget, is used to provide the expertise and impetus which help facilitate missional mindsets and mechanisms throughout the Connexion which are normative and lasting.

9. Third, that initial thought and planning has begun in respect of applying the *Regrouping for mission* initiative at a District level. Provisional protocols have been drawn up and a pilot project in the Bolton and Rochdale District has been undertaken. The pilot project group will make report and recommendations to the Conference.

The Connexional Team

10. A Connexional Team report is found elsewhere in the *Conference Agenda*, but I pay tribute here to my colleagues in the Connexional Team for a year of considerable progress towards embedding the principles and ways of working required by the Conference when, over several years, it approved resolutions relating to the processes of *Team Focus*. Through hard work, high competence and professionalism, and no small measure of vision, humility and good humour, large strides forward have been made. The presence of God and the encouragement of God's people have strengthened and challenged us. Some areas of the work of the Team are not as far advanced as we would like, or indeed as the Connexion ideally needs, and all areas of our work remain committed to a culture of continuous improvement. The leaders and managers of the Connexional Team will continue to work hard to ensure this occurs over the coming months.
11. It is vital that we continue to listen to and care for each other as the whole connexion continues to learn how to live and thrive in a post *Team Focus* context. It is a context in which much of the work of the connexion is undertaken in different ways and in different places in our structures than had long been the case. It is a context where a smaller Connexional Team, with a smaller capacity, but a big desire to serve God through service and leadership in our Church, continues to work out with others what is both necessary and possible. In this respect I signal to the Conference, as I have indicated to the Methodist Council as the employing body of Connexional Team lay staff, that I become increasingly concerned about the high workload carried by the Team, described recently by the Wellbeing Officer in the Team as unhealthy and unsustainable in the longer term.

The Strategic Leaders

12. The overall work and responsibilities of the General Secretary are shared with and often delegated to colleague strategic leaders. I am grateful to Christine Elliott, John Ellis and Mark Wakelin for together shaping a small team of energy, vision, leadership, and mutual support. Together with other senior members of the Connexional Team we have sought to provide good quality service, strategy and resources for the whole Connexion, particularly through our responsibilities to the Strategy and Resources Committee and its finance sub-committee, the Methodist Council and a number of other connexional groupings and committees.
13. The Conference resolution 62/2 in 2008, mirroring a resolution to the United Reformed Church General Assembly, directed that conversations between relevant bodies in our two Churches explore how we might work more closely together and use more efficiently our resources to increase our effectiveness in mission and outreach. The responsibility for this on behalf of Methodism was given to the strategic leaders. Regular meetings have taken place and continue, and a number of useful points of sharing and synergy are beginning to be identified and pursued. One visible demonstration of this process is a joint Methodist Council – URC Mission Council planned for October 2010.

Other Aspects of my work and ministry

14. As I reported last year, a degree of 'routine' work for the Connexion is undertaken by the General Secretary. For example:

- I have represented our Church in a number of ecumenical contexts, including regular meetings with the General Secretaries (or equivalent office-holders) of other denominations, and accompanying the President and Vice-President in a regular meeting with the Archbishops of our Covenant partner, the Church of England.
- With others I represent our Church at the European Methodist Council and continued to work productively with the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church in strengthening our relationship as two Methodist traditions operating in a global context of migration, movement and mission.
- I have made a number of press statements, and produced material, as appropriate, on behalf of The Methodist Church.
- I have led worship, preached and addressed conferences and conventions as my diary permits.
- I have undergone a 360° feedback process in relation to my roles and ministry, and have benefited from it in terms of encouragement and challenge.

Secretary of the Conference

15. The General Secretary of the Methodist Church is also the Secretary of the Conference (S0 300 (1)). In respect of this role I have sought to serve and support the President and Vice-President in their ministries, and offer input and guidance as appropriate. I am grateful to those colleagues who help me in this role and share a continuing growth of complex and challenging issues facing a 21st century Christian community in terms of legislation, governance, polity and discipline. I am particularly grateful for the collegiality and work of the President's Assistant, the Revd Gareth Powell, over this year, and delighted that he will be continuing to work in the Connexional Team as Head of Governance Support. I rejoice that the President has had such a wonderful year, inspiring and leading our Church, and rejoice also in his imminent return to the ministry of supporting the work of the Secretary of the Conference!

The wider context of our ministry and witness

16. I spoke in my Report last year of the economic downturn and the mixture of challenges and opportunities it offered to our Church. This year I indicate two issues relating to a harsh economic climate.

17. First, the Connexional budget presented to the Conference illustrates – possibly more starkly than any other in living memory – that we must now live within our means, which are themselves diminishing, particularly in very recent times in terms of poorer returns on investments. Our undesignated reserves are all but spent; and responsible financial discipleship now requires that we ensure that income and expenditure closely balance each other. The notion that money can be found from 'somewhere' if we really look hard (which has sometimes enabled us to postpone hard decisions, or produce new good ideas without carefully considering their longer term budgeting or sustainability), must be abandoned because it belongs to a time and situation in which we no longer live.

18. In terms of mission effectiveness, money is essentially neutral. It can, of course, enable those many things we want and choose to do as a movement of Christian disciples. But its scarcity can also enable those ministries of witness and service that we deem essential to be identified, owned and resourced with new focus and resolve, causing our commitment to greater giving to be revisited. My hope is that as we meet in the context of a difficult budget we will not miss the opportunities and challenges presented by this stimulus to sharper focus.

19. Second, I write this report in the weeks leading up to a General Election. By the time the Conference is in session a new government in Westminster will have been formed with consequences for the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. Irrespective of its political makeup it will lead the nations in which our Connexion exercises its ministry through challenging times, not least tackling the unprecedented levels of debt we have incurred. It seems inevitable that there will be many in our communities and wider society affected in a multitude of ways through significant changes to social, welfare and economic policies of stringency. In different but not altogether unlike contexts in the 1980's Christian and faith communities took a lead in acts of radical hospitality, social philanthropy, ministry alongside the poor, unemployed, homeless etc. I believe our Connexion will again be given ample opportunity to live out a gospel of grace and generosity in these coming months, and my hope and expectation is that we shall rise to this challenge as servants of the Servant Christ and so embody the good news of his gospel.

***** RESOLUTION**

2/1. The Conference received the Report.