

The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas Connexional Council May 2007

Report of visit by Rev. Christopher Blake

Introduction

The Connexional Council of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and Americas (MCCA) met in the Medallion Hall Hotel, Kingston, Jamaica from 21st to 29th May 2007. I was very privileged to be invited to attend this special meeting of the Connexional Council which included a celebration of 40 years of Autonomy for the MCCA. This was my first visit to the Caribbean but I was accompanied by my wife Joy who was born in Jamaica and lived there for the first eight years of her life. We were able to spend a week in Jamaica in advance of the Connexional Council meeting in order to visit the areas where her father, Rev Eric Renouf, had served as a mission partner 50 years previously. My reflections below will focus on the meeting of the Connexional Council but will also include a mention our visits to Montego Bay and Savanna-la-Mar.

The Connexional Council

The MCCA Conference meets triennially and last met in Antigua in May 2006. Between Conferences, the Connexional Council meets twice year to continue to oversee the work of the Connexion throughout the eight Districts of the MCCA. The Conference is composed of 44 members while the Connexional Conference has a membership of just half that number. The 22 members are composed of two representatives from each District (The District President plus one lay representative) plus the District Officers (Connexional President, Connexional Vice President, Connexional Secretary, Treasurer of Conference Funds, Immediate Past Vice President and the Secretary of the Commission on Ministry).

The Conference began with the traditional flag raising ceremony with a national anthem from each District being sung by all present. This took place at Saxthorpe Methodist Church In Kingston and was followed by an opening service which included words of greeting from church and civic representatives.





A number of special events took place during the week to mark the fact that this was a special Connexional gathering celebrating the 40 years of Autonomy. One of these was the Anniversary lecture given by a Rev William Wilberforce Watty, a past President of the MCCA. In his powerful lecture he described the involvement of the Methodist movement in the years after the abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. Emancipation did not come for another 30 years and in a telling phrase Rev Watty spoke of how the abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 was good news for Africa but was not instant good news for the

slaves of the Caribbean. The supply of new slaves from across the Atlantic was stopped but those who were already slaves were still traded between plantations and between the islands.

The focus of the Anniversary celebrations was the special service held in Coke Memorial Church in downtown Kingston. This well attended service was broadcast throughout the Caribbean on a number of cable channels and was available to view globally through a Christian website. It the service the Connexional President, Rev, Dr George Mulrain gave a powerful address on the need to look ahead to the challenges of the future as well as to look back with thankfulness to the past.



I was privileged to be able to bring greetings from the British Methodist Church to the MCCA on the occasion of their special Anniversary. I was able to bring formal greetings from our President, Vice President and Connexional Team as well as to mention briefly the fact that I was there with my wife who had been born in Jamaica. In the photograph I am wearing the special Anniversary badge produced for the celebrations.

The final ceremonial event of the Council was a reception hosted by the Jamaican Prime Minister, the Honourable Portia Simpson Miller. In her address to the representatives and other guests the Prime Minister spoke of her own Christian Faith and offered challenge to the church to address the social needs of Jamaica and the other countries of the region.

The business meetings of the Council were held in the Medallion Hall Hotel in a context of structured but relaxed conversation. Most of the programme involved plenary sessions although at times the Council divided into its two commissions on Ministry and Resources. In the evenings the Council met in its Ministerial Session to consider matters of stationing and ministerial discipline. Each day began with devotions led by representatives from the different Districts.



Reflecting on my opportunity to observe the work of the MCCA Connexional Council, it is clear that the Connexion has much to celebrate as it looks back over 40 years but also that it has a number of challenges as it looks to the future.

Not the least of these challenges is the significant diversity seen throughout the area covered by the MCCA. This diversity is seen in terms of the various languages spoken throughout the Connexion and also the variation in financial resources available to the various Districts. These two factors were clearly issues which influenced a number of the debates and decisions of the Council. One example of this is the plans for a new hymn book. Currently the Methodist Hymn Book is in widespread use. I had been prepared for this fact by my wife Joy but I might otherwise have been surprised by the fact that the hymnody used was heavily focused in the hymns of Wesley and of the Victorian period. Relatively few contemporary hymns were used – although two specially written hymns were included in the celebration service at Coke Memorial Church. The introduction of a new hymn book which aims to include both “the best of the past” with a selection of contemporary Caribbean music would seem to be an important project which might help the churches of the MCCA develop a style more reflective of local culture and music. However this will not be an easy task if the book is to reflect the various languages and styles of the various Districts of the Connexion.

Another challenge is seen in the need of the MCCA to free itself of traditions which may perhaps limit its ability to respond to the opportunities of contact with the world of the 21st Century. In some ways the Council meeting reflected what one might see as a Caribbean style with an emphasis on informal and verbal interaction with little reference for previous minutes or records of decisions. At other times, however, the Council acted in a way which seemed over reliant on set agendas with a series of set formal questions which were worked through in order. This way of working has been largely abandoned in British Methodism and it may well be that a way of working less tied to the formal structure of standing orders and fixed agendas might help the Council to focus on the significant mission issues that surround it today. This may seem to be a critical statement – but only in the sense that the same criticism could be made of British Methodism!

The Connexional President, Rev Dr George Mulrain, the Vice President Mrs Brenda Armstrong and the Connexional Secretary Rev Otto Wade form an excellent team with much to offer the MCCA. As in British Methodism there is a tendency for the Council members to rely on the way things have been done in the past and a tendency for the voices encouraging change to be sidelined by voices seeking to keep things as they have been for some time. Encouragingly there are a number of younger members of the Connexional Council who seem to be able and willing to offer support to the Connexional President as he seeks to enable the MCCA to serve the present age in an effective, positive and creative way.

Personal Pilgrimage

In addition to my attendance at the MCCA Connexional Council, our visit to Jamaica allowed my wife and I to visit the Western part of the island where she was born and where she had lived as a child. We were tremendously helped in the practicalities of the arrangements by Rev. Tom Quenet and Ms Paula Garcia from the World Church Office and by Rev Michael Llewellyn (Montego Bay) Rev Robert Pierre (Savanna-la-Mar) and Rev Jeanty Maurose (Mount Ward). With the help and advice we received, we were able to locate a relaxing holiday base in Montego Bay (flying in to Montego Bay airport on Joy's 50th Birthday) and from that base to make two visits to Savanna-la-Mar and the surrounding area.



At Savanna-la-Mar we were able to visit the manse in which Joy had lived, to meet several elderly members in their own homes and to gather at the church for a wonderful Jamaican feast prepared by the members. The photograph shows the time of sharing after the meal when various people spoke of their memories of Joy and of her family. There was even a birthday cake for her with a candle to blow out as she "made a wish". Her response was to say "My wish has already come true!"

On the Sunday I was invited to preach at the united Aldersgate Sunday service for the Savanna-la-Mar and Lucea Circuits. The service was at the St Patrick's Church in the community of Truro which was an amazing link with our home in Truro in Cornwall. At the service in Truro and in our visit to Savanna-la Mar we met many people who remembered Joy and her family and who offered us both a gracious and generous welcome.



This visit of Jamaica has been for both Joy and myself an amazing experience. We want to thank all involved both here and in the Caribbean for making it possible.