

# Reimagining Future Mission Together

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## Introduction

In the Acts of the Apostles God's people come from every nation on earth, and it is when they are all together in one place, praying and waiting, that the Holy Spirit falls upon them. At the All Partners' Consultation in London in 2009 we were like the disciples on the day of Pentecost, all together in one place awaiting the coming of the Spirit, to fill us, embolden us, root us in Jesus Christ, to reveal God's will to us, and in due course to send us out in the power of the Lord. Come, Holy Spirit!

In Acts 16, St Paul has a dream or vision of someone saying 'Come over and help us.' The All Partners' Consultation was set up because the British Methodist Church recognized that it needs the help of its partners to seek the will of God, the mind of Christ and the direction of the Holy Spirit, to find its way at this point in time, as a Church, and as part of the Methodist family in Christ.

## Simple statement of purpose

Let me state here, as simply as I can, what this Consultation was about. It was a gathering of our Methodist family, to reflect on our past, our present and our future together, particularly in relation to the British Methodist Church. We consulted together to try to help the British Methodist Church discern the will of God as to the best way forward as a Partner Church in this wonderful Methodist family of faith. We consulted in order to *reimagine future mission together*.

## Hope and context: This is where we've come from

The Consultation was held at a very special time. Three significant events provide the broader context for our deliberations:

### *Two hundred and fifty years of Methodism in the Caribbean*

Some of us have recently celebrated 250 years of witness and service in what we now call MCCA. The celebrations were wonderful but they served to remind us that in many places we are not a 'new' movement anymore, not only in the Caribbean but also in Great Britain and many other places in the world. We are now in a very different world from that of 250 years ago, when founding fathers and mothers in faith came among us, used of

God to invite us into God's family in Christ. What this might mean for us, in terms of our common discipleship, our structures and partnerships, was a key issue for discernment at the Consultation.

*The end of Overseas Districts/arrival of Autonomous Churches*

When *The Methodist Church The Gambia* came into being in 2009, it was the last former 'Overseas District' to become an autonomous Methodist Church, joining many others which took this step in recent decades.

As more and more Churches became autonomous, the Methodist Mission Society made real efforts to change the nature of the relationship of the British Church with the new autonomous Churches. The word 'partnership' became prominent in our mission vocabulary about this time, and we established the kinds of partnership relationships which were developed, changed and evolving still through the Methodist Missionary Society, the Methodist Church Overseas Division and the World Church Relationships Group right up to the present day.

We still use the language of partnership, though today our partnerships are not those of parents and children but of mature Christian people together to be disciples of Christ, bound together in Churches seeking to worship and serve God in a needy world. That is the understanding with which we in the British Methodist Church invited and approached the Consultation.

One of the most famous statements from the Edinburgh Conference 1910 came from Bishop Azariah from India, one of about 30 delegates from the then developing world, who said to the 1,100-strong audience of missionaries and Church leaders, 'You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask you for love. Give us friends.'

We still strive for that, and we testify that we have moved, and continue to want to move ever further from relationships of unequal power, or inequality, or mere dependence or mere functionality. Our desire is not only to be friends but to be a worldwide family of Christian sisters and brothers, engaged in the mission of God where we are – who are friends.

Like all families we take stock from time to time. When children arrive, we change. When our old ones die, we change. When our children marry and have children of their own, we change. Times of plenty and times of need change us.

Whatever else it does, the marking of the end of Overseas Districts, and the arrival of fully Autonomous Churches places the British Methodist Church, and the proud history of the Methodist Missionary Society as a

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crucial part of it, in a new world. How we shall ‘be’ together, and with each other, in this new world is one of the issues that the Consultation tried to discern.

### *Edinburgh 2010*

I was privileged to be one of the 300 or so representatives to the recent Edinburgh 2010 conference to mark 100 years since the historic Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, which is often said to mark the transition between the twilight of the classic missionary era and the early dawn of what became the Ecumenical Movement. Let me reflect on that Conference for a few moments, because the changes between Edinburgh 2010 and Edinburgh 1910 (though I wasn’t present at the original Conference!) seem to me to mirror changes in our Methodist family of Churches.

Edinburgh 2010 was in many respects a great Conference. As with most Conferences, the informal conversations, and those over meals, getting to know each other better, are every bit as significant as formal keynote speeches.

It was very moving to note the sheer variety of Christians at Edinburgh: about 70 nations and about 70 denominations, all sessions either in French, Spanish or English – a taste of heaven! Indeed, Dana Roberts, an American Methodist academic, used that image from the last chapters of Revelation to describe the gathering, a multitude from every nation on earth, singing praises to God and worshipping Christ, the Lamb of God.

It was moving, too, to remember that the 1910 Conference adopted as its motto a phrase from its chief architect, Methodist layman John Mott: ‘The evangelization of the world in this generation’. And it was in this zeal that the mainly white, western mission agencies continued to go all over the world. Yes, they made mistakes, as we do (though we do not yet know in full the mistakes we are making any more than they did). Yes, they were sometimes colonial rather than Christian. Yes, they did not always manage to distinguish between Christianity and the cultural vessel in which they had experienced it, and exported both as indivisible. But the mission movement cannot be simply dismissed on these grounds. Those missionaries, rightly honoured by our Churches, did what many western Christians now find difficult, that is, they offered Christ in a way that many rejoiced to receive him.

So, for me seeing Christians gathered from every continent on the planet was suddenly, like an insight or vision, to see the fulfilment of that bold motto. In 1910 most mission activity was white, western and male, as was Methodist mission activity. Today, Christianity is a multicoloured,

multicultural world faith. It has been planted and taken root and grown fruit in virtually every people group on earth, and Methodists are a part of it, making clear the truth of Lamin Sanneh's claim that the genius of Christianity is its translatability. Praise God!

Not only that, many of the white western/northern Churches have declined in size, fervency and passion during that century, whereas many Churches from around the world have gone from strength to strength. I met one bishop from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. We talked and shared about our Churches. 'How many Methodist members are there in the UK?' he asked. 'Just under 300,000,' I replied, 'how many in your Church?' 'About two and a half million,' he replied, then added, 'and that's just in my Conference!'

Edinburgh 2010 had Christians belonging to traditions not found at the 1910 Conference. There were Catholic and Orthodox Christians there, as well as Pentecostals who, of course, were only just coming into being in a classic sense when the 1910 Conference took place. Pentecostal Christians have changed the world in the last 100 years, and they have changed and continue to change the Methodist world. We have noted that some of us here became Autonomous Churches in recent decades, and that some of us have 'official' Methodist connections going back 250 years. But not all came to be at this Consultation that way. Churches that had *not* been Overseas Districts – some of the Churches in Latin America, in Asia, in the Pacific and Europe – became friends and joined our family, to the benefit of us all.

In particular, these newer friends and family bring two precious gifts many of us in the British Methodist Church feel we need more fully. The first is the sheer joy and passion of a Methodist Christian, an exuberance and zeal about belonging to Christ and being filled with the Spirit for which many of us long.

The second is the rejoicing in the Wesleyan tradition, in embracing those traditional and core practices and convictions that make for a contemporary personal and social holiness, and making them our own once again.

And the last thing to note here is that our global Methodist family – both older and newer – does not fall neatly within the old boundaries of those Churches founded by the British Methodist tradition and those of the United Methodist tradition as it once did. There remain parts of the Methodist world where these traditions remain apart, but there are many places where those old distinctions are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the face of the global nature of our world, and the common needs of humanity. The British Methodist Church is actively seeking ever better

and stronger relationships with United Methodist Churches in a variety of ways, through formal concordats, and through informal commitments to work together as members of the global and growing Methodist family in a changing world.

## **This is where we are today**

I need now to turn more precisely to where we are as a British Methodist Church, and I do this in two ways: first, in a broad generic way, and then more precisely in relation to the Consultation.

In a general way, discipleship is a major theme for us. In recent years British Methodism asked God about its calling and discerned it was called to a life of worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism. It then prioritized certain aspects of these, such as ‘supporting action for justice, particularly among the more deprived and poor – in Britain and world-wide’, and ‘developing confidence in evangelism’. Then, in 2007, British Methodism began a continuing process of considering how to reshape itself in terms of mission and these priorities. Lastly, in 2009, a gathering of British Methodists focused on Holiness and Risk and their relationship. Today, arising from this thinking, we gather these themes together under a focus on discipleship. We believe that Methodism is a discipleship movement, committed to deepening discipleship and disciple-making, and we are currently reflecting on what that means for us.

I turn now to ‘where we are’ in relation to themes dealing more precisely with the Consultation. Within our Methodist Christian family there are quite different relationships. No single type of relationship works well for each of us. Broad principles about our continuing relationships and partnerships are very useful to us all but too tightly-defined or too inflexible principles will probably be unhelpful. For example, it is unlikely that the British Methodist Church’s relationship with Equatorial Guinea will be the same as that with the Church of South India or the UMC, or that, for the benefit of all concerned, it should be.

One reason why one type of relationship will not work well with us all, all the time, is the sheer variety of factors that affect our partnerships at any one time – natural disasters such as the Haiti earthquake or civil war in Sierra Leone, affect the long-term priorities; but political issues and sometimes religious and cultural issues also affect both mission and relationships. We in the British Methodist Church want to have the capacity to adapt quickly, but we have not infinite resources to do everything we want, and I suspect we are not alone in that.

Our relationships are changing fast in a fast-changing world. As we have been noting mission activity used to be mainly ‘from here to there’ – our Partner Church’s country being the ‘there’ – but now the movement and migration of peoples present many challenges and opportunities, and mission is now increasingly ‘from everywhere to everywhere’.

One consequence is that the sharing of resources – of people and money and time and learning – is now a two-way street. Hong Kong has for many years sent money to the UK specifically for the ongoing mission to, and ministry amongst, Chinese-speaking Christians in the UK. And in Britain the number of Chinese-speaking Christians belonging to Methodism is growing fast. In Britain as in many other places, the Methodist Church is enriched by ‘fellowships’ of Christians from Zimbabwe, Ghana, Korea, Fiji and many other places – all of which were instigated by our Partners. More such ‘fellowships’ are surely coming. It was sadly noted at Edinburgh 2010 that most British white people assume that black people must not be Christian, whereas the reality is that black people in Britain are more likely to be Christian than white people. Our world is changing.

So we seek to know how we best relate and live together in this context of potential and challenge. To change old ways for new ways is part of the changing context in which we prayerfully discern our way forward.

God sets prophets in the world and among his people. They set forth what God wants, which is the right way. They don’t just point out the good way from the bad, but when there appear to be several potentially good ways in which we should travel, they declare the right way to go. As we gather together, we are expecting the Holy Spirit to enable prophetic voices to arise among us. So we tune our ears for the voice of God, speaking through each other in these days.

Prophecy deals with reality, and speaks into it. Our reality in the British Methodist Church, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is not what it was. It is too easy to simply say it is worse than it once was, but it is most certainly different from what it was.

As I have indicated earlier, the British Methodist Church is smaller than it was. In the time some of the Partner Churches have grown, sometimes quickly and considerably, we have declined in numbers. Some of our Partner Churches are young and energetic; British Methodists tend to be older if not old, and we have great difficulty working out how to present the gospel of Christ to younger adults in a way that makes sense to them, or that they find attractive and appealing.

We do not yet live in a society which actively persecutes us, as some of our Partners do, but we do live in a society where more and more people

ignore Christianity and say they have no need of faith or religion – or Christ. Our God is the missing God, who is not missed by many people. The West/North does not think that religion is important. Some in our Partner Churches are so good at sharing their faith, presenting the challenge of becoming Christ's disciples with enthusiasm and confidence. Many Methodists in Britain have forgotten how to do this, or lack the confidence to do it.

Many of our Partner Church members have to live with the consequences of our greed, our consumerism; they are affected by a globalism that has more to do with our way of life being imposed on them than theirs upon ours.

We find it hard to explain what we need from others. But we want to repent, to learn, and resolve to live in God's world today in a responsible way. Compared with many in the world we remain materially rich, but compared with many of our Partners, we are significantly poor. Our poverty is in terms of compassion and hospitality, and community cohesion. We are poor through the inefficient use of scarce resources, poor at recycling, poor because we need so many things in order to feel rich, poor because we depend on the natural resources of other countries, poor in terms of how we deal with each other, poor in our reliance on the gospel as Good News for all creation and every creature in it.

In all these things we need the help of our Partner Churches. The Church they sometimes honourably still refer to as their parent is old and tired, and in need of their wisdom, passion and prophecy. The British Methodist Church is dying and being resurrected in different ways, and at the same time. Like Ezekiel we cry out to our Partner Churches: 'Come prophesy to these bones, because they want to live again!' Come over and help us!

The British Methodist Church is asset rich but cash poor, at least by comparison with its past. We still have several thousand properties, but very little in the bank to spend in proportion to what all that property is worth. In recent years the numbers of staff who do paid work for the Church at a national level has been cut by between a quarter and a third. Consequently, a typically western – or older British Methodist way of dealing with things, 'Just put more money in it' – is increasingly less an option, without we see a marked rise in giving among Methodists in this country. Such increased generosity is encouraged, but we are not yet in a position to know where the future lies: we will have to live by faith, like many of our Partners do.

So in these days, while it cannot be said that we are the 'poor relation' in financial terms, as there is still in the British Methodist Church consider-

able sums of money, compared with many members of our family, we are not as rich as we once were.

Consequently the reality is that the volunteer programme of the British Methodist Church finished last year. Our scholarship programme is becoming more limited, even though we all know that going physically to live with Partner Churches is transformative at many levels. Should we focus on this programme and maximize the transformative outworking of it, and if so at what cost to other schemes or projects? Is it time to stop sending Mission Partners and only receive them? Should we have more exchanges, or fewer? Should we be moving towards more short-term placements or fewer?

Yet we desire to use and share what we have, wisely and properly. So we ask our partners to help us. What new models of partnership and sharing, and receiving gifts, are appropriate in such a new environment? What is the wise and proper way to use what resources we have – our people, our knowledge, our finances – within our family of faith, as we face the future?

### **Concluding comments/affirmations**

In conclusion I want to signal the mood and tone of the British Methodist Church at the Consultation.

First, the Consultation testified to our faith in God, the victory of Christ and the accompanying of the Holy Spirit. We believe that in asking God to draw near, and help us discern God's way, God will answer that prayer.

Second, it asserted our belief that the past, present and future belong to God. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever! We are proud of our past and grateful for the present, but recognize that we need help so that we can locate ourselves more deeply in God's designs and purposes as the future unfolds.

Third, it demonstrated our belief that humility before God is the beginning of genuinely mutual and affirming relationships. Scripture says, 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but with sober judgement.' We do have ideas about our future as a Mission Society, and as a Church. We have done work on that. But rather than just present them as 'work done' the Church wants humbly to test them with its Partners. We are not yet sure 'what should be done' or 'what should be done first'. The Consultation was our means of joining together humbly to listen as well as to speak.

Fourth, the Consultation was an affirmation of our continuing conviction that God raised up Methodism as a movement, a mission-minded move-

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ment, a discipleship movement, a disciple-making movement. Therefore, to lose the perspective of mission, personal and social holiness, evangelism, care for all that God has made, standing against injustice and living on a global map is to lose who we are, to lose our memory, and to lose our reason for being under God. We hope and believe that the Consultation helped us refocus us upon these key themes.

Fifth, the consultation proved that we are a gift to each other. Any remaining paternalism must be left behind once and for all. We must speak the truth in love while striving, as is right for brothers and sisters in Christ, to understand the places in which we live and the forces that shape our lives, and consequently our Christian witness and mission.

Sixth and lastly, I often introduce British Methodists to a short prayer I first heard in Cuba some years ago. It was the prayer in my heart as we met in Consultation: 'Lord, prepare us for death . . . or renew us!' But, O Lord, we long for renewal of faith and purpose!

The all-partners Consultation enabled us to begin to forge a renewed mission strategy, rooted in listening, discerning, praying and studying. By the grace of God we discovered that 'The Spirit is with us.'

Thanks be to God! Amen.

### **NOTE**

1 Martyn Atkins is the General Secretary of the British Methodist Church.