



'Facing the Task Unfinished, Pressing Forward with Christ'

Report on the 40th Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), 24 May - 1 June, 2021

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Background

The MCCA has 8 Districts and MCB relates to them all. These Districts are the Bahamas/Turks and Caicos Islands, Belize/Honduras, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Leeward Islands, Panama/Costa Rica and the South Caribbean District. The church therefore covers an area where many languages, including English, French, Spanish, Dutch, French Creole, Papiamentu, Guyami (the language of the Ngäbe-Buglé indigenous people of Panama) and more, are spoken. MCB has a historic relationship of over 200 years with the MCCA.

The Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas was inaugurated in 1967 at the Methodist Conference Centre, St John's, Antigua. Close ties are maintained with British Methodists through its Global Relationships team in London and both churches have a continuing interest in partnership and mission. There are strong and active relationships with the UMC and the United Church of Canada.

The church has always been involved in ecumenical activity and is a founding member of the Caribbean Conference of Churches. In recent months, the MCCA has been working in each of the eight Districts, facilitated by MCB partner All We Can to produce a 'Unified Strategic Direction', with clear District goals and plans in each of four areas of church life: 'Proclaiming the Gospel', 'Equipping God's people for witness and service', 'Transforming lives', and 'A Self-sustaining MCCA'. The adoption of this plan with structures for its implementation across the Districts was perhaps the most significant outcome of the Conference in 2021.

Context in 2021

This year has been one of great challenge for the Connexional MCCA. Challenges in different Districts have included natural disaster (especially volcanic eruption effecting St Vincent and other islands), political instability and the threat of kidnapping in Haiti, and the economic and social disruption of successive Covid 19 lockdowns, ongoing at the time of the Conference. The MCCA Connexion is in a very challenging financial position. And yet, there are green shoots of real hope and progress, and evidence of real and sacrificial Christian service under desperate circumstances.

This Fortieth Connexional Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and Americas took place entirely on the platform Zoom, hosted by Connexional President Bishop Everaldo Galbraith and the Leeward Islands District. With a time difference of five hours with London, MCB representatives were able to join the business for morning and afternoon sessions. MCB representatives were able to be present in the Ministerial Session and contribute to the Commission of the Conference on 'Mission, Evangelism, and Education,' and to lead Guided Prayer including a cheerful song from the worship band of Wesley Memorial Oxford.

Much of the Conference's representative session time was taken with the mechanics of church internal structure: this did not lend itself to engagement over the virtual platform, though the business was accomplished. It was hard to gauge engagement among representatives, and all felt the lack of

the usual side meetings, meals together, and accidental conversations, and the building up of fellowship. That said, the mood was one of tenacious and patient grace:

Representatives and leaders made heroic efforts to adapt Zoom for the work of conferring, not least Bishop Galbraith, Conference Secretary the Reverend Jacqueline Liddell and the technical wizard Rev Damien Hughes. As a complement to physical meeting, the Conference recognised that virtual platforms are clearly revolutionary, especially as they will permit meetings between the three-yearly Conference. The tribulations of Zoom might be lessened through adaptation and different engagement/voting protocols, though the quality of internet connectivity and access to reliable hardware for all will remain an issue, especially relevant to Haiti. And Zoom could not replicate the benefits of physical fellowship.

Daily devotions from each District as well as the Welcome Service, Flag Raising, Memorial Service, Conference Worship and Induction of the Vice President were livestreamed on a dedicated YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTcmkKaBhtyNcO6OaPF58Ow/featured>: these attracted thousands of views and lively participation in the chat, and remain available for viewing.

A combination of zoom and livestream also allowed a much wider than usual access (in the thousands) to webinars hosted by the MCCA Women, Youth/Young Adults, and Men. Despite real challenges with connectivity, these attracted significant numbers at time of broadcast, with numbers growing since – and energetic participation. These webinars are also available for viewing on the Conference YouTube channel as above, and showed a church working with great subtlety to understand the needs of its communities, and the culture changes taking place around and within it. So for instance, the MCCA Women's webinar 'Bridging the Gap,' allowed experts in different fields to reflect on the implications of intergenerational differences in modes of communication, work, leisure, and understanding of authority for church fellowship and church growth – much would be as relevant in British or other churches. Likewise the MCCA Men drew on local and international partners to encourage men to get out of the church building and into the street for service, evangelism, and witness. As has been recognised in previous Conferences, the MCCA Youth and Young Adults are increasingly organised across the Districts of the Connexion, and supporting one another. Commitments were made to support their continued development and to capitalise on the real energy and passion shown in the young adults' engagement.

Conference Snapshots and Business

Lasting impressions of our representatives have included:

- We see a Christian model of living in and enduring a crisis. Especially in Haiti, where ministerial stipends have not all been paid and fear of kidnapping of ministers for ransom is as big a problem as Covid.
- We see churches nonetheless taking new initiatives to worship, offer Bible study and Sunday school etc on line and often Circuitwide. In the words of Bishop Galbraith: "God has not left us to row our own boat, but provided new vision and energy." A further example, in Panama/Costa Rica, is that congregational giving went up rather than down under Covid restrictions.
- We see growing international unity and cross-cultural inclusion across the Caribbean, noted for example in the list of places across the region where ministers honoured in the Memorial Service had been stationed, and in the readings in Spanish and Dutch. This was refreshing, and also had parallel in growing MCCA attention to the need for legal recognition in each different country.

- We see the welcome and excitement for the Unified Strategic Plan, which clearly is much appreciated, and is a genuine gift from MCB, in that All We Can have facilitated a process resourced by the World Mission Fund.
- We see a laudable hunger for more conferring about the content of the USP, and a frustration that it was contained in the Mission, Evangelism, and Education Commission breakout room and not given a specific and early slot on the plenary Conference agenda.
- We heard powerful preaching and strong theological reflection: from brother Attwell, a young adult layman and software developer, expanding St Paul's list of the parts of the body of Christ to include musicians, dancers, videographers and technicians. From Rev. Raphael Dessieu of the Haiti District, "Dare not linger" - an inspiring sermon with texts from Nelson Mandela as well as Isaiah.
- We saw real grappling with problematic finances, Districts only contributed a third of their Connexional assessments last year. The superannuation fund is drawing down capital. There is still a significant debt to the University of the West Indies for ministerial training.

Conclusions

In the midst of a weary year, we nonetheless experienced true welcome and fellowship, via Whatsapp, Zoom, and YouTube. The MCCA has confidence in its leadership and a growing momentum for change, with real understanding of the financial and other challenges facing the church. It is a church in motion, if under great pressure. A desk at home in Britain is no substitute for physical attendance for understanding and support of the MCCA, though it was nonetheless a great privilege to be present to pray with, support, and uphold these partners in the Gospel.