

27. General Secretary's report

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The General Secretary shall be the executive officer responsible for leading the mission and strategy of the Church. He or she shall play a part in the oversight and leadership of the Church, and in particular shall be responsible for developing strategic management and the Church's vision of unity, mission, evangelism and worship. To that end he or she shall be available for consultation in Districts and Circuits in order that insights may be shared and difficulties addressed...shall lead and direct the Connexional Leaders' Forum...shall work in conjunction with the President and Vice-President...

1. In this report, my last as the General Secretary, I draw upon these themes contained in Standing Order 300.
2. It has been an enormous privilege to work alongside so many Godly, competent and committed people, very many but not all of them Methodists, who have shared with me in the leading of the mission and strategy of the Church in recent years. *Commitment* is needed because, like many mature organisations, our processes leading to change are not always streamlined, and multiple partners and stakeholders are involved: so graceful resilience and patience are vital. *Competence* is needed because a good deal of the work of the Church is inherently nuanced, complex and complicated. And *Godliness* is critical because it rescues us from the subtle heresy that the Church is somehow 'ours' – whether to control or in terms of ultimately being *our* responsibility – and compels us to the truth that Christ is Lord of his Church and invites his followers to share humbly in breathtaking ministry with him.
3. My own ministry has been deepened and enriched by those who have embodied these key virtues over the years I have served as the General Secretary: Presidents, Vice-Presidents and other officers of the Conference; colleagues in the changing patterns of the Connexional Team, including life-saving administrators and support staff; the Connexional Leaders' Forum and Chairs of District; members of many committees and bodies including the SRC, the Methodist Council and the membership of this Conference. A wise mentor said to me long ago, "always surround yourself with people who are better than you are", and whether intentionally or providentially that is what has consistently occurred, and I am thankful to God that it is so.
4. The focus in recent years upon deepening discipleship and extending mission – *The Methodist Church: a discipleship movement shaped for mission* – attempts to re-present the basic elements of *Our Calling*, namely: evangelism, learning and caring, service and worship, while allowing for particular focus on one or other element at different times. These elements remain absolutely right, while noting that they are not fixed in terms of expression or form and therefore require constant reflection and consequential action in order for us to inhabit each of them in a contemporary and authentic way.
5. Earlier this year the Archbishop of Canterbury outlined three priorities which resonate both with *Our Calling* and with our emphasis on discipleship and mission. The priorities were prayer and the renewal of the religious life, reconciliation, and evangelism and witness. Archbishop Justin introduced these priorities in this way: "I want to start by saying just two simple sentences about the Church. First, the Church exists to worship God in Jesus Christ. Second, the Church exists to make new disciples of Jesus Christ. Everything else is decoration. Some of it may be very necessary, useful or wonderful decoration – but it is decoration." One of my few regrets is that I shall not, at least as the General Secretary, accompany Archbishop Justin in encouraging these

priorities, believing as I do that the vitality and fruitfulness of the whole Christian Church is key to our faithful participation in the mission of God in these times.

6. Like *Our Calling*, the *Priorities* of the Methodist Church also still serve us well, though may shortly benefit from refreshing. The Connexional Secretary helpfully comments in a recent resource, “the original intention was for us to use these statements to help decide those things that we must simply not ignore. They also offer us the chance to refocus our resources and energies away from some activities that have served their time.” Deciding what work or ministry we shall no longer do, or no longer do alone, or no longer do in the same way, is a constant issue. Our Methodist enthusiasm instinctively wants to put more on the plate than take it off and the maxim ‘do fewer things better’ is particularly challenging to us.
7. Gatherings related to the essential unity of the Church in Christ, and the proper, long-time commitment of the Methodist Church to be engaged in seeking Christian unity through formal and informal ecumenical activity have been a perennial factor of my work.
8. This past year, as each year, there have been meetings of the Archbishops of the Church of England, the President and Vice-President of the Conference, and senior officers of both Churches. These remain friendly and fruitful, and there is a genuine sense of expectancy about future developments relating to the *Covenant* between our Churches. A similar meeting regularly takes place between the General Secretary of the United Reformed Church, me, and a small number of staff, including ecumenical officers. Less formally, but significant in terms of information-sharing and mutual support and encouragement is the ‘General Secretaries’ meeting, attended by senior figures in several denominations, including the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.
9. As the General Secretary I have supported, attended or facilitated the attendance of Methodist representatives at events hosted by organisations that support and serve purposes which lie easily with the gospel of Christ, both in our own Methodist ‘family’ and beyond it. These include (to list but some) ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland); Action for Children; All We Can: Methodist Relief and Development; Christian Aid; Churches Together in Britain and Ireland; Churches Together in England; Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales); Hope; Methodist Homes; and the National Day of Prayer. Particularly significant for me this past year was standing alongside those of other faiths in petitioning the government about causes relating to refugees and migration.
10. A further day conference for those Methodists involved in conversations, explorations or projects with the Pioneer Network took place in October last year. Over 80 people attended an inspiring occasion, representing a several-fold increase in partnerships and plans in just one year.
11. One of the many joys of recent years has been deepening relationships and friendships with members of The United Methodist Church (TUMC). I have attended meetings of the Council of Bishops of TUMC since 2008 and this past year again met with some of the General Secretaries of Global Boards in order to develop further the work outlined in some detail elsewhere in the *Agenda* in the response to Notice of Motion 206 (2012). It was my deep privilege to preach at the recent Ecumenical Service in Berlin, when officers of many European Churches joined United Methodists from around the world. The Connexional Secretary, in line with his own job description, has also offered a full and energetic commitment to the Methodist World Family, and I am encouraged and affirmed that he will continue to liaise with members of the Council of Bishops and other leaders in TUMC.
12. As I make clear in the response to Notice of Motion 206 (2012) I believe that the European Methodist Council (EMC) is on the cusp of hugely fruitful partnerships in mission and service,

and would greatly benefit from further resource were it agreed by its members: an issue being discussed at the next meeting of the EMC in September. My own hope would be that if a request for grant funding came from the EMC it should be taken very seriously indeed, not least as part of the work of re-visioning mission currently being undertaken by the World Church Relationships Team – which will no doubt be brought to a future Conference. Members of the Conference will be able to hear potentially exciting prospects at the World Church workshop.

13. The work of the World Methodist Council continues, and I commend the latest report by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission, 'Into all the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches.'
14. Interest in and commitment to fresh expressions of church permeates many of the relationships outlined above. They have figured prominently in conversations with the Church of England, the URC and the Pioneer Network, and increasingly in conversations with other Methodist conferences and churches - not least in Scandinavia, other parts of Europe, and in the United States. Our continuing commitment to fresh expressions of church, pioneering, mixed economies/ecologies of ecclesial communities is exactly right, and it is humbling that members of our Connexion are being sought out by others seeking to learn from our successes and failures. Of course, as interest in fresh expressions of church grows we too have more and more learning on which to draw to our benefit. Fresh expressions of church are a good expression of our commitment to ecumenism, *Our Calling*, discipleship and mission.
15. This year the Connexional Leaders' Forum (CLF) has largely focused on themes arising from work by United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase. Bishop Schnase visited in January, speaking at both centres of our Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network: Cliff College and The Queen's Foundation. His input to the CLF largely related to his book, '7 Levers: missional strategies for leading conferences', which itself arose from a major report commissioned by North American Methodism in response to steep decline in membership etc, and Schnase's own attempts to refresh his home Conference in Missouri. The CLF considered the '7 levers' with insight and energy (ie the importance of intentional strategies for, 1. starting new churches, 2. clergy peer learning, 3. congregational intervention, 4. cultivating clergy excellence, 5. aligning budgets and resources, 6. creating technically elegant governance systems, and 7. reconfiguring conference sessions).
16. Arising from this input, and involving prayer, discernment and 'translation' the CLF has focussed on two key themes: the accountability and flourishing of our ministers, and the fruitfulness and growth of our churches. Further work on these themes is now being undertaken by four small working groups of CLF members. Particularly they are focusing on the culture, processes and practice of our Church, and what might be needed to bring about the kind of societies we believe God is calling us to form, and the nature of support needed for leaders of those societies. The meeting of the CLF later this year will continue to explore these themes and how they might help our Connexion.
17. The work of the General Secretary is found in many places in the *Agendas* of both the Conference and Council, alongside this report. For example, the report of the working group on Fellowship Groups, arising from my report last year, brings resolutions to the Conference. Other pieces of work such as 'Releasing Property for God's Mission' have been subject to considerable work, but require continuing work and a report will come to a future Conference. A workshop designed to share progress, ideas and elicit guidance about 'property and mission' takes place at this Conference. Work on 'Resourcing Leadership' arising from Notice of Motion 206 (2014) also continues.
18. The General Secretary leads the Connexional Team and in recent years a short overview of the work of the Team has figured in this report, though oversight of the Team and its workplan is

given by the Council and the SRC, and a good deal of the work of the Team is made clear in various reports to the Conference. Consequently I offer here a short summary, with the invitation to approach my senior colleagues with any particular queries you might have: Martin Ashford (Mission and Advocacy), Jude Levermore (Discipleship and Ministries), Nick Moore (Support Services), Gareth Powell (in his role as head of what is currently the Governance Support cluster), and Doug Swanney, the Connexional Secretary.

Support Services Cluster

19. Team members in Development and Personnel have, as each year, supported the work of stationing matching, candidating and transfers. This year particularly they have worked alongside the Grading and Remuneration Sub Committee, and updated a number of employment policies of the Council. The Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Adviser has supported the establishment of the EDI Committee and the operation of the final year of the stakeholder forums and their transition to open network, and supported the work of the Marriage and Relationships task group. The Wellbeing Adviser has led on the 'Positive Working Together' work coming to the Conference. The Grants team has worked with the Connexional Grants Committee to review its criteria for mission and ministry in Britain grants and has developed an online applications process due to go live later this year. The new property handbook is now available online as a resource for all those involved in maintaining and redeveloping church, circuit and district properties. The Finance Office has again produced the consolidated accounts and connexional central services budget. Continuing progress on upgrading IT infrastructure has been made. The Past Cases Review has generated a significant amount of extra casework that has been taken forward by the safeguarding team. The move to a new way of joint working on safeguarding with the Church of England and implemented a new Joint Safeguarding Working Group has also been the work of Team staff.

Discipleship and Ministries Cluster

20. Church and Community Team members supported the Youth President and large numbers of committed volunteers in the delivery and development of *3Generate 2014* (the Methodist Children and Youth Assembly). This event and its processes enable the church to be in conversation and to hear the voice of children and young people from across the Connexion. Places for the 11-18 age stream sold out in 4 days and plans to increase its capacity and reach are well underway for *3Generate2015* in November. Both centres of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network have benefited from large capital investment projects. Facilities at Cliff College have been upgraded with a new accommodation block and teaching space recently completed. The Connexion has also purchased a large property close to The Queen's Foundation for the accommodation of the increased numbers of Methodist student ministers and their families. A Mental Health Matters conference has been developed in response to requests from local Circuits to respond to this increasing need. Work continues on the development of a new programme for the initial training of Local Preachers and Worship Leaders ('Worship: Leading and Preaching'). A PowerPoint presentation from the Ministry Development Team with information on the structure, assessment and aims of the new course was developed earlier this year and can be easily accessed. The course is being piloted with facilitation from the DMLN staff in North Cumbria; the Sheffield Circuit - centred around the university chaplaincy; the Birmingham Circuit - an inner city context; the East of England - an e-learning pilot; East Central - a regional pilot using a model previously developed; and in London - a Worship Leader pilot centred around Hinde Street Methodist Church. DMLN staff have also worked on proposals to the Ministries Committee outlining a connexional framework for Local Ministry Development. This will be vital not just for existing patterns of ministry in the Church, but for future patterns. New patterns of mission and ministry are emerging which need to be honoured and supported. The new framework seeks to encourage the development of a permissive but accountable culture within which a range of lay ministries focusing on the life of a Local Church and

complementing existing structures of authorised lay and ordained ministries can flourish. As in each year, courses and training for superintendent ministers have been provided, and work with schools and education issues continues.

Mission and Advocacy Cluster

21. A highlight of the year for the Publishing team was the launch of *the connexion* magazine, designed (as the editorial of the first issue said) “to keep you, the Methodist people, in touch with what’s happening in your Church”. Watch out for Issue 3 in September. The writers and designers within the Publishing team have a hand in producing many of the resources used within the Church, the new training materials for Local Preachers and Worship Leaders being just one example. Most projects require close collaboration, exemplified by the *Time to Rethink Benefit Sanctions* report issued earlier this year. Researched and written by the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT), in which we work with ecumenical partners, it was then polished by Publishing before being sent out through all media (including a very active Twitter campaign) by the Communications and Campaigns team. Widely covered, the report has had a significant impact both within and without the churches involved in it. Almost at the same time, JPIT also delivered General Election resources and an outstanding one-day conference on the theme “Love your Neighbour: Think, Pray, Vote”, with the Archbishop of Canterbury as keynote speaker. We have a new Heritage Handbook and what is now a whole suite of websites for those wanting to share information on their family’s or community’s Methodist past, and we rejoiced with the trustees of the New Room in Bristol as they secured a major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Horsefair project that will transform a place that holds a key place in our collective history. The World Church Relationships team continues to maintain links with our partner churches around the world. An important collaboration this year was TUMC Global Consultation, ‘Living and Acting as a Global Church in an Age of Migration’. WCR also hosted Juan Alberto Cardona Marin, a Colombian SALT student on the Corrymeela peace and reconciliation programme, who will take lessons from Northern Ireland back to a country and people deeply affected by four decades of internal conflict. We have responded to the dreadful outbreak of Ebola in West Africa with three emergency grants to the Church in Sierra Leone, followed by a pioneering partnership with *All We Can: Methodist Relief and Development* to channel funds raised by them to further support the work on the ground. Here, as in so many areas of our work, partnerships of one sort or another are a key feature of our work.
22. I pay tribute to all the members of the Connexional Team, and I have been proud to lead it over recent years. With the changes adopted by the 2014 Conference, Doug Swanney as the Connexional Secretary will, under the direction of the Secretary of the Conference, become the leader of the Connexional Team. It is in good hands and will, I am sure, continue to resource, serve and bless the Connexion. As the post of General Secretary comes to an end, and my colleague Gareth Powell takes up the role of the Secretary of the Conference, the Conference remains in good hands, and I wish him well in this significant role in the life of our Church.
23. I am grateful to God for the privilege of serving in this role these last years. Like all Christian ministry it has been for me a role which our ‘covenant prayer’ gives such poignant expression.

*Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. **Yet** the power to do all these things is given us in Christ, who strengthens us.*

I pay testimony to the power of the **Yet** and thank you all for your patience, grace and kindnesses.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

27/1. The Conference received the Report.

27/2. The Conference welcomed the possibility of new partnerships in mission and service overseen by the European Methodist Council and directed the Methodist Council to explore, in conjunction with the Connexional Grants Committee, what level of resource can be made available to enable the development of such work.