

### 37. The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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<b>Resolutions</b>	37/1. The Conference adopts the Report and commends it for study and reflection throughout the Connexion.

1. Whether or not Methodism was ‘born in song’ is open to some debate, but it was certainly born as a Connexion. The Wesleys’ strand of the wider eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival comprised those individuals, societies and preachers who were ‘in connexion with’ John Wesley. In its eighteenth-century usage, ‘connexion’ referred both to the circle of those connected to some person or group and to the relationship itself. It was used of politicians as well as religious bodies, and within the Revival, George Whitefield, Howell Harris and the Countess of Huntingdon, as well as John Wesley, had their ‘connexions’. This description of the Wesleys’ movement, retaining its distinctive eighteenth-century spelling, has endured for nearly three hundred years. ‘Connexionalism’ has been elaborated theologically, expressed in hymns and liturgies, justified in debate with advocates of other models of church order, and articulated in the constitution and polity of the Methodist Church. Implicitly and explicitly, it has also shaped, and been lived out in, the faith, practice and assumptions of generations of Methodist people. It is a way of being Christian which British Methodism shares with Methodist Churches in other parts of the world.
2. The present report was prompted by a sense that the connexional understanding of the Church was facing challenges in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Among the issues being raised were pressures on the discipline of stationing and a commitment to ministerial itinerancy, the difficulty of sustaining circuit structures with a shrinking volunteer base, the implications for denominational loyalties of stronger local ecumenical relationships, the consequences of increasing organisational diversity and theological, ethical and liturgical pluralism in Methodism, and the dismantling of the network of boards and committees linking Local Churches, Circuits and Districts to the Conference and the central agencies of the Church. In the consultations many referred to the practical congregationalism of local Methodist churches. The perception has grown that an independent, local and properly ecumenical Christian identity has come to matter far more to many Methodists than a connected and connexional denominational identity. It is feared, moreover, that grassroots Methodism sees ‘the Connexion’ as something other than itself: the Conference, the Connexional Team, ‘headquarters’ – a separate entity disconnected from Local Church and Circuit.
3. Responding to these perceptions, the 2013 Conference welcomed the consideration already being given by the Faith and Order Committee to issues of connexionalism in the twenty-first century. The Committee appointed a working party which has consulted with the Connexional Leaders’ Forum, the Connexional Ecumenical Officer,

people working in fresh expression/pioneer contexts, members of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network, and a sample of Local Churches, Circuit Meetings and Local Preachers' Meetings. Although the time available inevitably required the consultation to be representative rather than comprehensive, the Committee was encouraged to receive material from a wide range of groups and churches, and it believes that the responses and personal stories offered a snapshot of how people felt they belonged to the Methodist Church today. This report is based on the consultations and on reflection in the working party and the Faith and Order Committee, and it has been revised following debate in the 2015 Conference and an opportunity for connexion-wide consultation thereafter.

4. For Methodists connexionalism is not an abstract principle or a piece of historical baggage, but a way of being Christian. The overall conclusions of the working party's investigation were that connexionalism is still fundamental to how Methodists understand the Church, that questions and issues arise as to how the connexional principle is embodied and demonstrated, and that these issues are generally best worked through in the contexts in which they arise. To assist reflection and discussion, some questions are offered in Appendix 1 with the intention of encouraging individuals and groups to consider the bearing of the material on their own experience and circumstances. To assist the reader, the relevant sections of the Faith and Order report *Called to Love and Praise. The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice*, are reprinted in Appendix 2. This Statement, adopted by the Conference in 1999 after eight years of study and reflection, offers a considered and enduring understanding of the Church from a Methodist standpoint.
5. Although Methodists may readily use the language of connexionalism, implicit assumptions and definitions may often be left unstated. In *Called to Love and Praise*, the essence of connexionalism is identified and defined in terms of belonging, mutuality and interdependence. All Christians are essentially linked to one another; no Local Church is or can be an autonomous unit complete in itself. This understanding of the essence of the Church is grounded in the New Testament. It is vital for effective mission, and it is expressed in apt structures of oversight, balancing authority and subsidiarity. Where these insights have become part of the ethos of the Church, connexionalism is experienced in a way of life which assumes that all contribute to and receive from the life and mission of the whole Church.
6. The Conference considers that the principle of connexionalism remains fundamental to the Methodist people: to their self-identity, to their (sometimes unarticulated) experience, and to their understanding of church. Most of those who responded to the consultation expressed a personal sense of belonging to Methodism. For many this belonging was important, although expressed and experienced in many different ways. Methodists speak, for example, of the value of belonging to something larger than their Local Church, and many find this sense of belonging demonstrated week by week: through the preaching plan, as local preachers and presbyters travel around the Circuit; through use of the *Prayer Handbook*, the *Methodist Worship Book* and *Singing the Faith*; through working relationships with other Methodist communities. These practical expressions of connexionalism in belonging, mutuality and interdependence

complement the theological and historical exposition of the connexional principle in *Called to Love and Praise*.

7. The Conference believes, further, that the sense of 'being connected' speaks powerfully and persuasively to the multiple connectivity of the modern world. The World Wide Web and plethora of social media offer new and fruitful ways of forming connections, and people experience and inhabit numerous communities, both face-to-face and virtual. The Church has an opportunity to encourage and model authentic connexion, grounded in a wide range of relationships. Whilst celebrating the gift of modern technology, the Church also recognises the potential harm of the contemporary social experience which can be fragile, elusive or even abusive. Connexionalism therefore has pastoral, evangelistic and apologetic resonance in a world craving genuine and meaningful relationships, and it offers a hopeful alternative to a society which can seem individualistic and consumer focused.
8. At the time of writing this report, many are wrestling with social and political questions in relation to issues of human identity and belonging; seeking to work out how we live together as members of diverse communities with sometimes competing needs, values and priorities. As relationships and ways of living together are being renegotiated, many are drawn to developing a deeper sense of their own community and giving full attention to these relationships and needs. In this context, the Methodist Church faces similar challenges and has the opportunity to reflect on what its own patterns of relating reveal about the nature of relationships rooted, through Jesus, in the love of God. Connexionalism challenges us to a broader understanding of belonging, inviting us to see our experience of being church as reaching beyond those whom we meet week by week, to other Methodists elsewhere, offering the opportunity of increased connection with other people and the world. Such connection deepens our experience of God and enriches our witness.
9. Relationship is at the heart of connexionalism. Methodist structures and practice seek to express and witness to "a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God" (*Called to Love and Praise*, §4.6.1). Sometimes they do so imperfectly. Sometimes relationships within the Church feel fragile or disconnected. In feedback from the consultation, it was not uncommon for a sense of belonging to wider Methodism to be affirmed alongside an expression of a sense of disconnectedness from the Circuit, District, or the Conference. Methodists reflected that being connected involved hard work: sometimes expectations of support were not met; sometimes churches failed to look beyond themselves to see how they might support and encourage others; sometimes it was simply not possible for a church to give sufficient time and attention to the variety of relationships that it had a commitment to. Being in relationship is profoundly challenging.
10. The challenge is compounded because contemporary society tends towards a dominant culture in which personal choice and the rights of the individual are emphasised over commitment to others, and in which people often have multiple connections and are involved in many different communities. Within the Methodist Church in Britain there are multiple narratives of what it means to belong. The

increasingly diverse nature of our Connexion was acknowledged in the *General Secretary's Report* to the 2014 Conference (*Conference Agenda 2014*, 28). The richness of the variety of gifts, the breadth of theologies, and the diversity of faith experiences enrich the Church, and further make manifest and encourage deeper understanding of the generous love of God. Yet an important tension was highlighted in the 2013 *Larger Than Circuit* report: "The very proper focus on the contextual nature of mission and ministry brings with it challenges – not least the risk of personality-driven or exclusively local agendas – and there is a continuing need to hold that in tension with connexionalism. There is a difference between recognising and celebrating our diversity and fragmenting our Connexion" (*Conference Agenda 2013*, 110). How we belong together and celebrate our diversity is a continuing question for the whole Church and for each particular context.

11. Relationships are sustained, and a sense of belonging strengthened, through time, attention and commitment. Those who had a greater level of engagement within Circuits, Districts, or with the Conference (and particularly those who had held roles in these contexts) felt a greater sense of belonging to them. Intentional and effective communication, shared experiences, tangible expressions of support and encouragement, and the sharing of stories were identified as helpful means of increasing awareness of the wider Connexion and strengthening connexional identity.
12. Connexionalism makes a serious ecclesiological statement, and it is a significant Methodist contribution to ecumenical dialogue. Responding to the inter-church process 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims' in the 1980s, the Methodist Church gave as examples of its 'connexional character' "a national structure embracing England, Scotland, Wales, Shetland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, under the ultimate authority of the Methodist Conference, and regulated by a common form of church order", "the Standing Orders of the Conference" that "regulate administration in every sphere of the church's life, local and national", the ordained ministry, membership being of the whole Church (which involves transfer when members remove from one locality to another) and "a system of grant support, and (in property matters) report and building consent" that "ensures that the strong can help the weak and that wider resources and experience can be made available to the smallest congregation" (*Not Strangers But Pilgrims: A Methodist Response*, 1986). A generation later, many of these examples would be endorsed, and others added. In a series of formal and informal dialogues with the Church of England, the United Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the connexional nature of the Church has been affirmed not only by Methodists, but also by ecumenical partners, while recognising that the vocabulary and structural expression of connexionalism vary across the different Christian traditions. The Conference considers that it may be worth exploring with ecumenical partners whether and how the Methodist experience and practice of connexionalism might contribute to reflecting on their own forms of synodical and conciliar governance.
13. Connexionalism has a strong missionary dynamic, enabling the effective deployment of resources in the service of God's mission, and challenging parochial attitudes and assumptions. Feedback from Venture FX Pioneers demonstrated this, underlining that this work was made possible by the initiative, support and funding of the wider body.

Pioneers spoke appreciatively of their sense of belonging to something that was bigger and wider than their local context, helping them to feel located and rooted. For some, being part of the Methodist Church gave their work wider credibility and provided structures of support in demanding situations. Pioneers saw themselves as not just local people engaged in mission with the unchurched but as somehow representing the wider Church in doing so, and reflecting Methodism's charism of generous hospitality and concern for those on the margins of church or society.

14. Contemporary challenges to connexionalism are often long-standing issues in modern dress, for example, matters of subsidiarity, friction between 'centre' and 'circumference', suspicion of the other, failures in communication, and genuine differences over which relationships to prioritise. The application of fundamental principles in specific situations may lead different people to different conclusions. There is, therefore, a continuing educative task in raising awareness and deepening understanding of the connexional principle and encouraging Methodist people to reflect on how it is expressed and enacted in their own context.
15. Given the affirmations above, some contemporary situations raise particular issues in the application of the connexional principle.
  - 15.1. The Methodist Church in Great Britain rejoices in the presence of 'Fellowship Groups' based on ethnicity and/or language. In recognising this diversity, the Conference wishes to celebrate the enriching role that such Fellowships play as part of the Connexion. It realises the importance of 'belonging' and the strength of Methodist identity, and acknowledges the practical challenge of appropriate integration. The Conference believes that it will be necessary for each individual Fellowship Group to discern the appropriate forum within the connexional framework for mutual learning and sharing to take place. It is also important for Fellowship Groups to move beyond an understanding of merely belonging to the realisation of becoming, with all other strands of the Connexion, a full part of what God needs from the Methodist Church in the twenty-first century.
  - 15.2. Methodism also rejoices in the increasing range of fresh expressions of church and recognises the need to embrace different ways of being church within our structures. It is vital to enable and support those working in new ways, to maintain the principles of connexionalism which facilitate a sense of belonging, accountability and interdependence.
16. The Conference has been greatly encouraged by the affirmation of connexionalism and by the evidence of the effective application of the connexional principle demonstrated in the responses to this consultation. In embracing the persistent and dynamic tension between the local and the wider community, the connexional principle prompts us to face the challenges and hard work of living in relationship with others. Where isolation, individualism and suspicion impair relationships, such a witness to other ways of being can offer life-giving possibilities. In emphasising relationships of mutuality and interdependence, the connexional principle helps us to reveal something of the love and nature of God. Although working out the practical implications of being a connexional Church in the twenty-first century is challenging (as it was in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the Conference is

confident that the Methodist people have the resources and the determination to undertake this task. Above all, we affirm our confidence in God, who calls us into connexion, and sustains us in relationship.

**\*\*\*RESOLUTION**

**37/1. The Conference adopted the Report and commended it for study and reflection throughout the Connexion.**

## **Appendix 1**

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. Does the understanding of connexionalism outlined in paragraph 5 ring true to your experience of the Church?
2. How is connexionalism expressed and experienced in your Local Church?
3. Where do people look for meaningful relationships today? Do they find them in the Church?
4. What is your experience of belonging to wider Methodism?
5. Do you see (and experience) the diversity of modern Methodism as a strength? Or a weakness? Or both?
6. What specific things could you do to strengthen mutuality and interdependence in the Church?
7. In reflecting on the deployment of resources, how does the use of your buildings, finances and people reflect and express the connexional principle?
8. What resources do you need to understand better what it means to be a connexional Church?

## **Appendix 2**

### ***Called to Love and Praise (1999) §§ 4.6.1-4.6.6***

#### **4.6 The Connexional Principle**

- 4.6.1 The connexional principle, as we have seen, has been intrinsic to Methodism since its origins. Although this principle has not always come to expression in a complete or balanced way in Methodist structures and practice, it enshrines a vital truth about the nature of the Church. It witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God himself. Whether the word 'connexion' is retained or not, the principle is fundamental.
- 4.6.2 How is this 'connexional principle' effected? First, at all levels of the Church, the structures of fellowship, consultation, government and oversight express the interdependence of all churches, and help to point up, at all levels, necessary priorities in mission and service. Second, alongside this, as the natural corollary of connexionalism, local churches, Circuits and Districts exercise the greatest possible degree of autonomy. This is necessary if they are to express their own cultural identity and to respond to local calls of mission and service in an appropriate way. But their dependence on the larger whole is also necessary for their own continuing vitality and well-being. Such local autonomy may also need to be limited from time to time in the light of the needs of the whole Church.

- 4.6.3 If we ask how this complementarity of connexionalism and local autonomy are to be justified theologically, the answer lies in the way in which the New Testament speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ, (Ephesians 4.12 referring to the whole Church, 1 Corinthians 12.12-27 to the local church). Every organ or limb has its own distinctive function, but belongs to a living whole. Similarly, neither individual Christians nor individual churches function effectively in isolation, but are dependent on a larger whole. And what is true of individual Christians and churches is true also of regional and national Churches. The Church of Christ is an interdependent whole, because ultimately there is 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Ephesians 4.5-6).
- 4.6.4 The connexional principle, as we have already observed, was integral to Methodism from its beginning. Wesley's preachers were itinerant; that is, they were available to be sent wherever they were most needed. The stationing of presbyteral ministers today by Conference is an acknowledgement that the ministry as a whole is at the disposal of the entire connexion, and not just a part of it. More generally, the Methodist sense of 'belonging', at its best, derives from a consciousness that all Christians are related at all levels of the Church to each other. Thus the unbroken link of Christians serving overseas with those at home was expressed in lines such as 'Inseparably joined in heart, the friends of Jesus are'. Many others of Wesley's hymns testify to this deep sense of mutual interdependence.
- 4.6.5 The essence of connexionalism is implied in the practice of the apostolic Church. From the earliest days the apostles travelled, and with other Christians conferred regularly on matters of common concern in mission. Both the needs and the virtues of particular churches were commended to others, and examples held up for imitation. Sectarianism was condemned because it destroyed *koinonia*, and individual churches were reminded of the foundation in Christ of their local *koinonia* within the universal: 'All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's' (1 Corinthians 3.23). Such teaching points to the privilege and duty of each local church to adhere to, to draw from and to contribute to the riches of life in Christ.
- 4.6.6 The Methodist understanding of authority and Church government derive from the character of Methodism as a 'connexional' Church. The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. Insofar as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. In terms of the contemporary missionary strategy of the Church, authority is vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities. Within the structures of decision-making the Church gives a special place to those who are its ordained representative persons; it also listens, where relevant, with especial attentiveness both to ordained persons and to laypersons who serve it with special expertise, but it is ultimately the whole people of God, who, through the relevant decision-making bodies, express their affirmation, or otherwise, of the strategies placed before them.