

Tribute

In this, my first report as General Secretary, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, David Deeks. The Methodist Church owes him and his colleagues a great debt of gratitude and it is because of his work and theirs that we are able to move forward into the immediate future with hope and courage in so many respects.

Continuity and Change

I have joined the Connexional Team at a point of both continuity and change in our Church.

Flexible continuity is provided by *Our Calling, Priorities for the Methodist Church*, and *Mapping a Way Forward: Regrouping for Mission*, all of which continue to guide and shape our life, our commitments and our aspirations as a Church, locally, regionally and Connexionally. Continuing change is marked by the formal end of the *Team Focus* process (though many of its ramifications are still being worked out) and by the fact that a 'new' Team, differently configured and smaller is now, somewhat later than was hoped for, in place and I am personally thrilled to be among so many competent and committed colleagues. (The Report of the Connexional Team is found elsewhere in the *Agenda* of the Conference.) Throughout the Connexion too there are many new roles being undertaken and new structures and networks bedding in.

Continuing to discern God's will for our Church

It is in this context of continuity and change that I and my immediate

colleagues have, together and with others, sought to discern God's will for our Church at this time in our life. Through wide conversation, formally and informally, in many varied places and forums including the Strategy and Resources Committee, the Connexional Leaders' Forum, the Methodist Council, the inspirational gathering titled *Holiness & Risk*, the meeting of many past Presidents and Vice-Presidents, District Synods, Circuit staff meetings and chats over meal tables we have sought to discern together what God is saying to us, where God may be leading us and what God might want of us.

What has emerged is a significant level of agreement, set in the context of a broad Connexion with diverse (but not mutually nullifying) convictions. I list a few of the interrelated, challenging but ultimately hope-filled themes which have emerged through this process of consultation and conversation.

- ∞ We share a desire to be bolder and more courageous about being Methodist disciples in today's challenging contexts. As one person at *Holiness & Risk* put it, 'let's give up apologising for being Methodists!'
- ∞ We hold that the bolder witness we seek must be characterized by grace and humility rather than arrogance, and that this will arise from a greater acknowledged reliance upon and confidence in the love of God in Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit.
- ∞ We are increasingly ready to take 'Godly' and 'holy' risks, and give

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permission to each other to do so. This will inevitably involve some failure, which, in the context of the proper accountability of being Methodists must be permitted as a necessary part of Godly risk-taking.

- ∞ We are increasingly ready to 'remember our roots' and live more comfortably in them, allowing ourselves to let some things die while at the same time identifying and keeping the jewels or seeds of our tradition, and so 'remembering our future' as well as our past.
- ∞ We are willing to engage with the challenge of seeking a new narrative, those stories that articulate who we are and what we seek to be, and thereby increasingly shape our life as Methodist Christians. This story must not be 'mere spin' or ignore the challenges facing us – which are deep and real – but neither are we content to define ourselves predominantly in terms of decline, and a wistful appeal to a golden past.
- ∞ There is a general awareness and grateful acceptance that God is not finished with us yet, but as a consequence of this, continuing change and openness to change lie before us.
- ∞ We recognise that the struggle to change our own Church culture further away from despair and increasingly towards God-given hope, and from often purposeless, goalless processes towards purposeful Kingdom thinking is going to be long and tough, but we are resolved to continue to engage in that struggle, believing it to be necessary and possible.
- ∞ We recognise the need to create 'space' of various kinds in which listening to God and each other can take place, for our common benefit and renewal.
- ∞ We are a story-rich Church and want to encourage each other to be ready storytellers. Not just the many good stories but also the stories of struggle and hurt, in order that the unfolding story of God's faithfulness and leading, and the cost of discipleship is known among us more deeply.
- ∞ We are a people of hope rather than (mere) optimism, and we take seriously what it means to be hope-full Christian people at this time.
- ∞ We continue to believe that although God has a future for our own Church, God's Kingdom purposes are joyfully shared with other Christians, and ultimately such purposes are more significant than our own survival.
- ∞ Though under severe challenges and questioning, we are not yet ready to give up being 'in Connexion' with each other, and resolve to continue seeking out new and vital ways in which this interrelation of our life as disciples of Christ is worked out.
- ∞ We are clear that we are part of a world-wide Church, and desire still to

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live on a 'big map' in relation to our witness and sharing in the gospel, both within the 'Methodist family' and beyond it.

- ∞ We are equally clear that although we are a relatively small Church, we have a responsibility to continue to be engaged with our society at every possible level as we are able, and to speak prophetically, affirming and challenging as appropriate, with and to those who shape our lives and the life of our nations and the wider world.
- ∞ Very many of us feel called to an engaged, 'hands on' spirituality, desirous of transforming the world rather than separating from it, its needs and challenges.
- ∞ We are convicted that we are, at a deep level, a church of lay and ordained Christians, encouraging and enabling each other to whole life discipleship, and that our structures and fellowship must be increasingly reshaped to facilitate such discipleship.
- ∞ Indeed this commitment to discipleship - making disciples of Christ, nurturing disciples - who desire and work to transform the world led by the Holy Spirit is a key theme for our Church.

The commitment of Methodism to such themes as these has already been demonstrated to me in many ways over this year, and it lies with all of us, not least to the Connexional Team, to encourage each other to inhabit them. Such themes

as these have already begun to be the creative and flexible guide by which the Team measures what we choose to do within the constraints of time and resources available to us as part of working out the *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

Economic Downturn

I am deeply aware of the many and diverse effects of the economic downturn upon every aspect of our lives. We will all know those adversely affected by the 'credit crunch', in our families and in our churches. Our Church is already affected by these developments, and that is evident in various items in our *Agenda* which potentially affect every Local Church, Circuit and District in our Connexion. I treasure our commitment to each other, and seek as we all do to honour that commitment, and encourage each other to develop ministries which effectively engage those whose lives are most affected by these challenging times.

Formal Duties

In terms of my formal duties, together with my colleagues, Christine Elliott, John Ellis and Mark Wakelin, I have convened and led the Connexional Leaders' Forum, and am deeply grateful for their prayers, understanding and support during this initial period of my own ministry in this appointment, and that of the Connexional Team I lead. I am confident of building even better relationships of trust and vision in the future. The task of enabling the work of the Methodist Council and the Strategy and Resources Committee has been a

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team effort, and I thank all those who have enabled considerable and significant work in governance, management and leadership in our Church to be undertaken with flair and care.

I have met regularly with those responsible for my appraisal and development in ministry, and thank Ken Wales and John Bell for their clarity, challenge and support.

I have had the privilege of representing the Connexion in a variety of contexts:

- ∞ Attending and addressing the General Conference of the Methodist Church in Germany and sharing in the re-appointment of The Revd Rosemarie Wenner as its Bishop.
- ∞ Participating in the European Methodist Council, particularly relating to the forming of a new Constitution.
- ∞ Attending a meeting of the Bishops of the United Methodist Church from around the world, and addressing the meeting.
- ∞ Leading a development day for Salvation Army Officers in training.
- ∞ Meeting, with others, with the Archbishops and other representatives of the Church of England, for conversation about our continuing Covenantal relationships.
- ∞ Leading Bible Studies at the ECG gathering in Llandudno, Methodists being the large majority of the 1500 people present.
- ∞ Participating fully in the life of the 'General Secretaries Group' and developing relationships of trust and friendship with colleagues in The United Reformed Church, The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Church of England, The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, The Free Church Council and The Salvation Army.
- ∞ Meeting with members of Government, leaders of other Faith Groups and officers of various organisations so as to embody a Methodist commitment to participating in all processes which seek for peace, justice, social cohesion and the renewal of our society and our planet.

Secretary of the Conference

Though not technically part of this report my responsibilities as Secretary of the Conference cannot be separated from those of General Secretary without a good deal of artificiality. Holding together the different but vitally important demands of the two roles – General Secretary and Secretary of the Conference – so that neither is disregarded and both are undertaken with the required level of care, competence and strategic leadership is a constant challenge. In a time of seeming increasing 'litigiousness' and a discernible rise in those involved in 'formal processes' in respect of our Church, I am particularly grateful for the collegialship, experience and wisdom of Ken Howcroft, the Assistant Secretary of the Conference and David Gamble, who temporarily leaves his role in the Team to become our President. I am also thankful that Gareth Powell is serving

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as President's Assistant and already offering significant input into complex pastoral and constitutional issues.

I thank the Conference for the opportunity to serve Christ and Methodism through this privileged, challenging ministry.

*****RESOLUTION**

2/1. The Conference received the Report.