



CONTEMPORARY METHODISM

A discipleship movement shaped for mission



A summary of the General
Secretary's Report to the
Methodist Conference 2011

The **Methodist** Church 

A clear direction for the Church “to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission” - Martyn Atkins, General Secretary

Methodism started as a movement; a movement that, in obedience to God, wanted to make a difference in the world within communities and the lives of individuals. We still share that same purpose today. So it is important for us to regain something of that sense of movement as we seek, through words and deeds, to share the love of God. We want to be a Church that helps people become ‘Disciples of Christ’; disciples who share God’s longing for a world healed and made whole.



Since 2008, my colleagues and I have met with and listened to as many Methodist bodies, groups, partners and individuals as possible. And this is what we have heard: that Methodism desires to be, and increasingly is, as it was when it started, a movement of people passionate about sharing God’s love. The ways the Methodist people do this have changed out of all recognition since John Wesley’s day, but we remain, at heart I believe, a **discipleship movement shaped for mission**.

The more my colleagues and I have thought about this, the more overwhelmed we have been by God’s gracious love for us and for the Church we serve. We respond to that love with service in love and with a growing sense of worship and praise. The report, the many conversations about it, and this shorter version all flow from our desire to respond lovingly and obediently to God’s love.



A growing sense of direction

The Methodist Church does a lot of other things well. We own a great deal of property. We have considerable investments in our pension funds. We run schools. We helped found, and are still proud to be associated with, leading charities such as MHA, Action for Children, Christian Aid and MRDF. We are still part of the lives of over half a million people, and part of a worldwide movement of over 70 million. We are at least one large charity and a growing number of smaller ones. We are governed in part by an Act of Parliament. We are an employer, a trainer, a publisher and much, much more. Knowing how much good God does through us and for us, gives us confidence as we seek a focus for all our work; the sense of a discipleship movement shaped for mission.



Being shaped is not always comfortable: it means stopping doing some things so that we can do other good things better. Change is exciting and challenging, but also uncomfortable and unsettling and we need the gracious community of the Methodist family to explore the opportunities we, as a Church, face.

- How can our Church, both locally and connexionally, continue to shape its life together in faithful obedience to God, for the sake of the world?
- What does it mean to be a *connexional* movement of Christian disciples shaped for mission? And how does this influence the way resources are used?
- What is the practical impact of the annual Covenant service where we say that we are no longer our own, but in trust joyfully yield all things to God?

The opportunity – a clearer vision of what might be

My report as General Secretary sets out what I see as the clear direction God has mapped for the Methodist Church. It draws together a number of ideas and initiatives (such as those in the rest of this leaflet) and sets out opportunities that the people called Methodists all have. In particular, the report raises questions for districts and circuits. This is not a Connexional Team idea – it comes from listening to the whole Connexion, and our partners in Britain and around the world. We have listened in love, been challenged, supported, criticised and renewed, and the report expresses what has been said to us as well as by us. It is rooted in *Our Calling* and other Conference decisions of the past, to set a clear path for the future.

A sense of direction of travel makes lots of things clearer, but it also means that the Church can only go in that direction. Following this course means not exploring other paths, even though those might be useful or interesting. One of the opportunities the Team now faces is to do less – to ask itself: “what activities are we going to stop, so that we have time and resources to help the whole Connexion follow this path?”

The Conference has approved the ‘direction of travel’ outlined in the report. What will it mean to take this seriously in terms of our life in local churches, circuits and districts?



It is also good to have an idea of what going in this direction will look like; to keep talking and listening to each other and to God. I believe that because God is with us and guiding us we can go in this direction, and if we do, we will become a more vibrant, confident Methodist people playing a fuller part in God’s mission in Britain and with partners around the world.

Discipleship themes

One example of how the Connexional Team will continue to support local churches in this journey will be to take advantage of various ecumenical opportunities on the way: such as this year’s the *Year of the Bible*, and then *More than Gold* in 2012, followed by a partnership with *Hope Together*. The Team will offer support, where it is wanted, for local churches to be involved in these initiatives. We hope that these developing themes will give the Church a growing sense of movement and confidence, as rhythms of spiritual discipline, building on each other, will help us grow as disciples, and give us ways of maintaining a momentum on this journey.

From 2011 onwards the discipleship themes will grow as:

SCRIPTURAL

being transformed into agents of change (2 Timothy 3:16)

GRACEFUL

paying attention to the means of grace (Hebrews 12:1-2a)

RECONCILING

building the peace of Christ in a broken world
(Ephesians 2:14)

HOPEFUL

engaging in kingdom-living lifestyles (Luke 4:18-21)

CONFIDENT

telling our stories in contemporary culture (1 Peter 3:15)



Six approaches to change

The report outlines a number of things that the Connexional Team has been doing and will be doing in the future. They provide a backdrop to some specific suggestions of how the whole Church might allow Godly change to happen.

Each of these has its own opportunities, and poses different questions for the whole Connexion. But they are all linked, and need to be discussed with an eye on the whole.

WORSHIP – rediscovering our “wonder, love and praise” at the heart of our longing to transform the Church and world



EVANGELISM – putting a disproportionate amount of resources into a less healthy area of our Church’s life

FRUITFUL FIELD – consolidation of our resources bringing more coherence to our learning programmes, aiming at excellence to raise leadership capacity within the local church with an emphasis on lay ministry

CHURCH BUILDINGS – regarding our property resources as God’s, entrusted to us for God’s mission and purposes. Have we too many? Do we need to own them all? Are they all fit for purpose today?

GOVERNANCE – creating more flexible, more responsive and more permissive rules, regulations and governance

PARTNERSHIPS – ecumenical, worldwide and the Methodist family

Making a difference

The General Secretary’s report has been discussed with many individuals, local meetings and governance bodies. Its ideas are rooted in our past understanding of the Church’s identity and purposes, but with a renewed emphasis on discipleship and the vision of the Church as a movement.



The leadership of the Church (including Conference) has a clear sense of where God wants us to go and to be: a **movement** that is more dynamic, flexible, and responsive; a **discipleship movement** that longs for ‘whole life, lifelong and world transforming’ followers of Jesus; a **discipleship movement shaped for mission** that wants to reach out in grateful response to God’s grace and share faith through loving word and deed. This is what we think the Church should be about. And we believe – passionately, excitedly – that when we do all this we will start to see a healthier, more confident, more fruitful Methodist Church, more obedient to God and God’s mission.

The story of the Methodist Church is your story, and we want to help these stories to be shared. Our confidence in the future is based in our knowledge of God’s grace revealed already in amazing accounts of what is happening across Methodism, and we will see more.



The approaches to change we propose are rooted in our worship, in our partnerships, in more strategic approaches to the use of our rich resources, in a clearer focus on learning for the whole Church, in a greater flexibility in our rules and in a refreshed and revived approach to evangelism.

Responses

This is a lot to take in. The whole General Secretary's report can be read in 30 minutes, and it is bursting with ideas, vision and God's love for us. You can find it in volume 1 of the Conference Agenda. Ask someone who went to the Conference for a copy. Alternatively you can read it on the Methodist Church website (www.methodist.org.uk/2011gsreport).

You can help us by discussing the questions below, or any others arising from the full report, at your district synods, circuit meetings and church councils.

You can respond in any of these ways:

- by email to generalsecretary@methodistchurch.org.uk
 - in writing to Martyn Atkins, General Secretary, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR
 - online at www.methodist.org.uk/2011gsreportfeedback
- 1) How can we become an even better discipleship movement shaped for mission?
 - 2) How do you think the Church will be different when we all take this path? What might it look like?
 - 3) What approaches to change do you think would be helpful? And what do you think are the resources most necessary to enact further change in our Church?
 - 4) What do we need to stop doing locally or nationally?
 - 5) What help might you need, and how might you help others?
 - 6) What could be the best roles for the Conference? And for the Connexional Team?

