

Connexional Report | 2020



WELCOME

from the Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler



It is a privilege to introduce the *Connexional Report 2020*. Through its pages, we hope that you will get a snapshot of the life of the Methodist Church. Of course it is a picture of a Church in the midst of a global pandemic, but sometimes times of adversity reveal who we really are. In the pages of this review, we see how the Church has refocused its energy and its resources on *Our Calling*, to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out our discipleship in worship and mission.

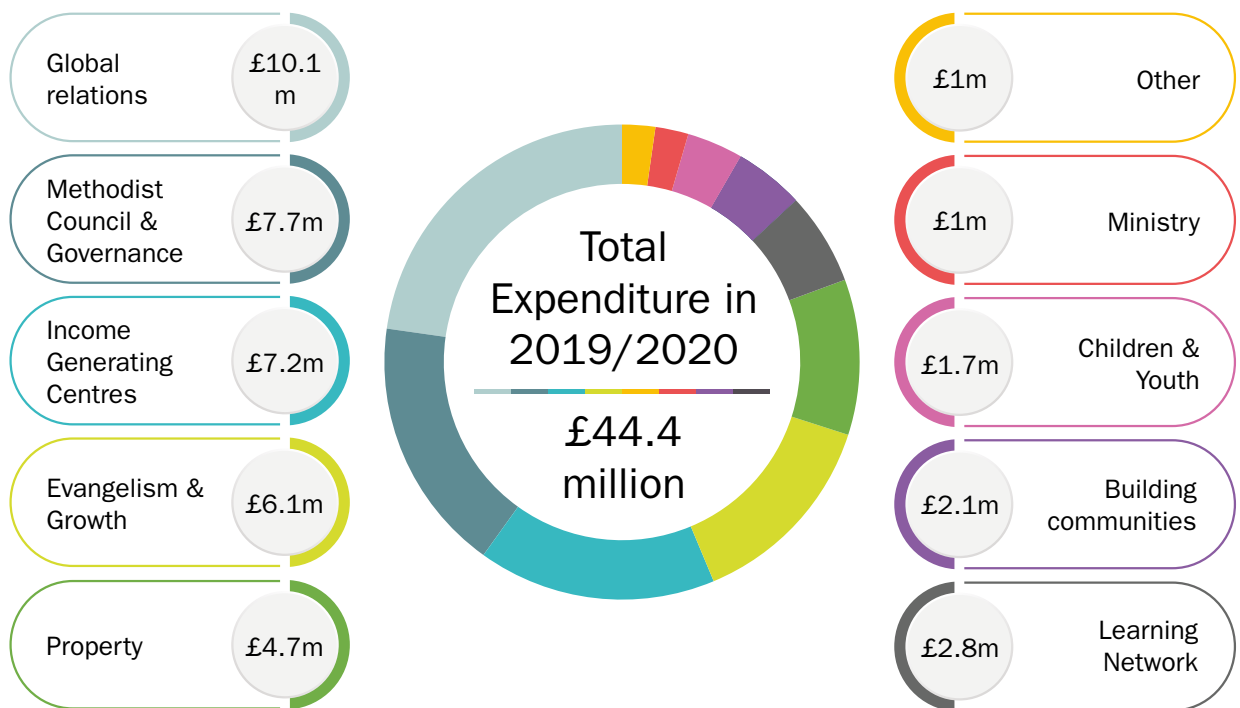
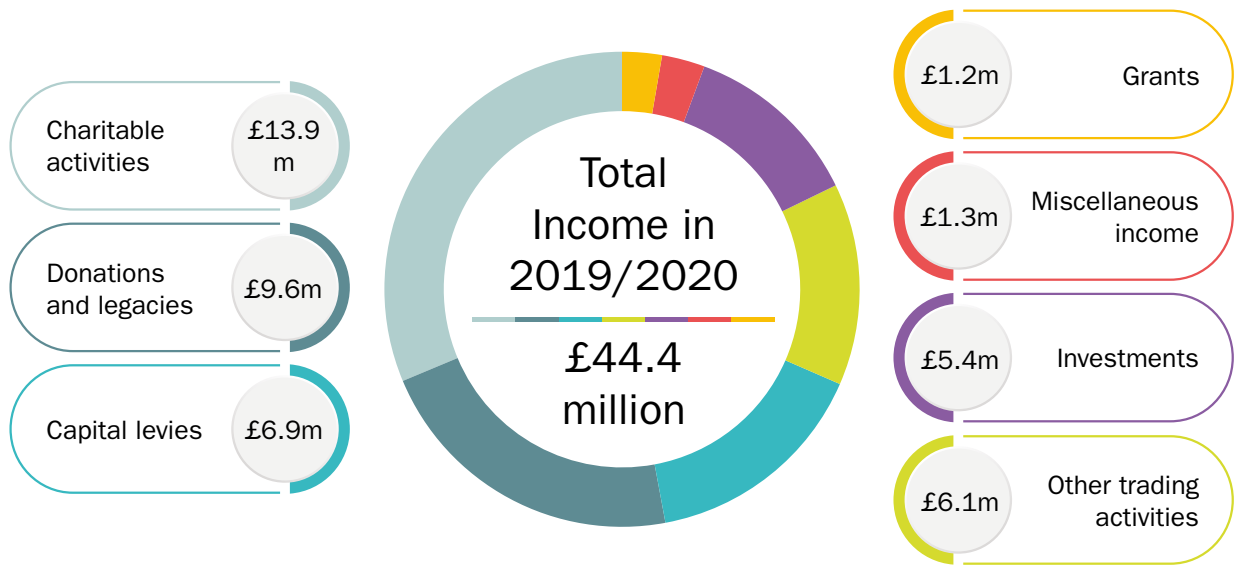
Through the focus on *Our Calling* we have learned afresh what God wants us to be. Through the 'God for All' strategy, we live out our calling to be people who share the Good News. Through the 'Inclusive Church' strategy, we live out our calling to be a hospitable people who stand for justice. Through *A Methodist Way of Life*, we live

out our calling to be faithful to our common purpose. Above all, through our 170,000 members and 4,110 local churches, we live out our calling among our neighbours every day. As the President and Vice-President remind us of John Wesley's words "The best of all is, God is with us", Methodist people continue to make God's presence known – in worship, in service, in learning and caring, and in evangelism. I read this review with thankfulness for all that has been achieved and with great hope for the future – hope that shines through even these troubled times.

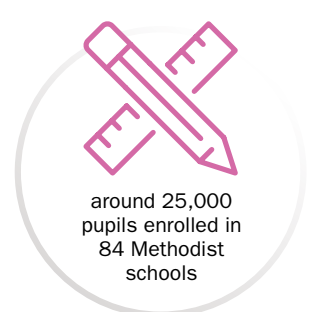
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J R Hustler".

The Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler
Secretary of the Methodist Conference
January 2021

The **numbers** that tell us where we are:



The **Methodist** Church in Britain has:



Our Calling

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

To help fulfill *Our Calling* a number of connexional grants were made, including:

£80,000 was awarded to the Fijian Methodist Fellowship, which is serving the pastoral, mission/outreach and connexional needs of Fijian Methodists. Worship and congregational care are key objectives, forming two pillars for building fellowship and integrating Fijian Methodists into local churches around the Connexion.

£23,000 was awarded to Leven Online Radio an internet-only station. Its studio is in Hutton Rudby Methodist Church, in Darlington District. The Schools Engagement Project has formed links with local primary and secondary pupils. It draws schools into a partnership with the radio station and hence the Church, offering pupils a range of broadcasting opportunities including recording, writing and reading scripts, interviewing and editing. One local school has established a radio after-school club in the studio.

£40,000 was awarded to The Asylum and Refugee Community (ARC), in West Pennine Moors Circuit. ARC provides an enhanced English club programme, and a job club offering IT courses. ARC also works with partner organisations to access training and learning, and develop volunteer opportunities.

£110,435 was awarded to Bastion Tabletop Ministries in Manchester to develop a new Christian community, based around the gaming community. One of the weakest areas of Christian mission in the UK is among young men. This is therefore, a deliberate strategy to create a place where they will feel comfortable and confident to discuss all aspects of their life. The project capitalises on the growing popularity of strategy, war and educational board games, to bring Christianity to people in an innovative and fresh way. The Centre has a clear missional focus, providing opportunities for gamers to explore their faith, their values and their health. The unique approach will benefit many hard-to-engage people.

A Methodist Way of Life

A *Methodist Way of Life* is a way of living in response to God's love made known to us in Jesus. Based on *Our Calling*, it's a set of practices offering a way to live out discipleship. It consists of 12 commitments based on *Our Calling*. *A Methodist Way of Life* is a crucial element of the connexional Evangelism and Growth strategy, and is both new and old.

It is new in that Methodists discussed this particular pattern of discipleship at the 2018 Conference and during autumn 2020 distributed 250,000 new *Methodist Way of Life* commitment cards (in more than a dozen languages) across the Connexion and made available a suite of accompanying resources. However, it is also old in that it is

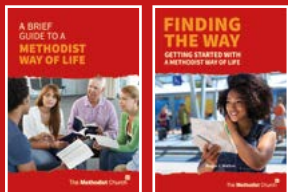
built on what Methodists have always done – since the days of John Wesley – seeking to live out the Christian faith in regular, practical actions.

While there has been significant interest over the past few years in recovering and embedding such a pattern of discipleship, during the pandemic there has been a remarkable groundswell of exploration and attentiveness across the Church. Connexional webinars,



district synods, circuit worship services, local home groups, and other gatherings have begun to explore and practise how a sustained commitment to *A Methodist Way of Life* might both deepen and expand mission and ministry.

Resources to help churches embed and sustain *A Methodist Way of Life* in their daily lives:



- *A Brief Guide to A Methodist Way of Life*
- *Finding the Way* – study guide
- *Preparing the Way* – a set of Powerpoints and a presentation structure
- *Proclaiming the Way* – preaching and worship-leading notes
- *Methodist Way of Life* conversation cards – image-based discussion cards

'God for All': The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth



The 2020 Methodist Conference voted overwhelmingly to implement a new strategy for evangelism and growth. 'God for All' commits the Church theologically, culturally and financially to deepen its mission to be growing, evangelistic, justice-seeking and inclusive.

'God for All' prioritises helping new people become disciples of Jesus, starting hundreds of new churches, and raising up new lay and ordained leaders to join God in engaging diverse communities across Britain. The strategy also focuses significant energy and resources on developing young evangelists, serving marginalised communities, expanding the Church's digital presence, and helping Methodists live out their faith.

'God for All' started officially in September 2020 with the launch of a 'Year of Prayer', which includes weekly online prayer meetings. These midday services, with accompanying British Sign Language interpretation, attract hundreds each week.

'God for All' has eight core areas:

Centred in God

250,000 commitment cards for *A Methodist Way of Life* were distributed across the Connexion.

Everyone an Evangelist

A new 'Evangelism for Leaders' course is running four times in 2021, with hundreds of people already booked in.

Transformational Leadership Learning Community

A one-to-three-year

programme of teaching, reflection and coaching is underway. It equips Methodist leaders with skills and confidence to bring about local transformation. After a pilot in 2020 with 45 people in eight teams, 13 teams have already booked to start the journey in 2021.

New Places for New People & Church at the Margins

In 2020/2021, ten District Chairs and their teams are joining with Evangelism and Growth staff in a year-long process to discern and plan proposals for starting new Christian communities.

Every Church a Growing Church

Available online, a practical eight-step guide for churches and circuits to write a helpful and effective mission plan, supported by the Mission Planning Toolkit.

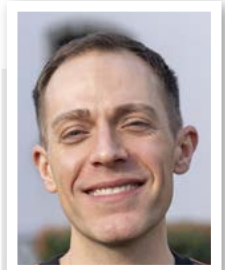
Young Evangelists, Pioneers and Leaders

The Children, Youth and Family Team are expanding the ONE Programme, including planning for a significant increase in vibrant residencies/site placements.

The programme also explores leadership in disciple-making, evangelism, and pioneering and planting.

Digital Evangelism

#GodsWithUs, the Methodist Church Christmas 2020 campaign, shared good news through 24 stories of individuals and their experiences over the past extraordinary year. Local church engagement with #GodsWithUs was very high and extremely positive.



Trey Hall, Director of Evangelism and Growth, commented:

“ I am delighted that the Methodist Church is emphatically engaging with these bold, missional commitments. We want every aspect of our commitment to evangelism and growth to flow from God's amazing grace. It signals a direction of travel for deep gospel transformation, not only for the next five years, but also for the long-term future of our mission and our whole life together.





The Conference voted to increase the work on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) throughout the Connexion, through the development of the 'Inclusive Church' strategy. It called on Methodists to engage with the issues in their own daily lives, to confront and challenge all racism and other forms of unjust discrimination; and directed every circuit to convene a forum for reflection, conversation and planning. It also voted to incorporate into the 'Inclusive Church' strategy work already started to ensure the inclusion of people who are intersex or transgender.

The Inclusive Methodist Church (draft definition)

1. Welcomes in safety all who wish to be part of the life of the Church whether through worship, learning and caring, service or evangelism.
2. Upholds the discipline of the Methodist Church in the face of discrimination, rejecting and resisting all types of behaviour that are discriminatory or belittling.
3. Celebrates diversity in the variety of God's creation.
4. Represents the diversity of the Methodist Church throughout its life and structures and affirms that there is no place for discrimination in our processes of selection, discernment and appointment.

Through the 'Inclusive Church' strategy we are seeking:

Attitudinal, cultural and systemic change

This will be achieved with a sustained and long-term commitment to winning hearts and minds, identifying where change is most needed, and raising levels of self-awareness.

To end discrimination

Leadership from the victims of discrimination can help make this possible, as can making the systems and procedures of the Church more accessible, transparent and accountable. The Church will empower the voices of those who have suffered discrimination to ensure that they are heard in the life of the Church and inform its decision-making.

Improved inclusive standards

The Church seeks to embed 'Inclusive Church' standards across the Connexion, using guidelines underpinned by Biblical theology and supported with rigorous scrutiny.

Diversity in leadership roles

We are taking initiatives to address the issue of under-representation within leadership roles across the Church, especially with regard to Black and Asian people as well as those from other minority ethnicities, and women and disabled people.



This year's report is very different to previous years as we find ourselves as a Church, society and world in a very different place. Covid-19 has affected each one of us in very different ways.

This year's Presidential theme is "The best of all is, God is with us". We had no idea when we chose these words what extra significance they would have, for without their deep message we are nothing. It gives us great pleasure to offer our deep appreciation to everyone in the Methodist Church for your faithfulness during the pandemic.

It has been so encouraging for us to travel around the Connexion virtually. Church buildings have been closed, but great stories about mission have been told, and as the Church of Jesus has responded to a new situation, it has been agile, nimble and adaptable. The Holy Spirit has strengthened and empowered us. We have been caring for people in new and imaginative ways. We have also found new ways to connect: worship online was new to the majority of us, but we were joined by thousands of new people. We are serving communities in ways we had never thought of before as we responded to need.

And yet we have lost so much. Lament is part of our story too, along with fear, vulnerability and frailty. Those experiences and stories also need to be told and heard as they are very much part of our recent experience.

"The best of all is, God is with us" are not only the words of our founding father John Wesley, surrounded by his family and friends, just before he left this world and went to glory, they express something of God's very nature. God shows himself to be the same God he always was. He brings hope out of hopelessness; he takes strangers and makes them feel at home; he brings his greatest gifts out of those moments when barriers are down; and he draws people from the ends of the earth to wonder, at the miracle of his presence among the humble and the outcast.

The President and Vice-President's REPORT

The God who is revealed to us in Scripture says "I am who I am", and "I do not change", and "I will not fail you or forsake you". In what perhaps is one of the most moving sentences in the whole of Scripture, God says he has engraved us on the palm of his hands (Isaiah 49:16). What commitment. What faithfulness and that promise reaches its climax when he binds his divine life to our human life in Jesus Christ.

The pandemic has been hard. Great missional stories are coming out of it. Stories of lament and fear are part of the story also, but the thread running throughout is that God in his great mercy and love remains faithful to the world, and to humanity, which he loves unconditionally.

The Revd Richard J Teal, President of the Conference and Carolyn Lawrence, Vice-President of the Conference

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AFTERWORD

from the Secretary of the Conference



In a moving online ceremony with each of those making promises answering individually, 21 presbyters and four deacons were received into Full Connexion along with six by transfer and one by reinstatement. We look forward to the ordination services in April. We gave thanks for the lives and ministries of those who had died, we gave permission to ministers to retire, and we accepted candidates for training. In addition to the other business described here, we debated and affirmed plans to simplify the oversight and trustee structure of the Church, and to further sharpen the focus on *Our Calling* with the aim of providing greater support, enabling ministry, mission and broader strategic thinking, and promoting better coordination. We might be a smaller Church than we were, but we are determined to be a Church that is better fitted to face the future, whatever the future might hold.

Above all, at the Conference, we prayed together and we have continued to pray. This is a year of prayer for the Methodist people as we rediscover the power of prayer. It is only in God's grace that we can fulfill *Our Calling* and it is through prayer that we seek, we receive, and we become channels of that grace. As John Wesley put it, "We pray that we and all mankind may do the whole will of God in all things and nothing else.... that this may be the sole reason and ground, the whole and only motive of whatsoever we think, or whatsoever we speak or do."¹

This report summarises many of the matters that were discussed at the Methodist Conference of 2020. It was a Conference like none other. With a lot of the preparatory work already done, it was no small task in converting the Conference to a digital event. Nonetheless, it was achieved and many, many thanks are owed to Cliff College for its hospitality and the industry and skill of its staff, and to members of the Connexional Team, who worked on site and from their homes. Members of the Conference and visitors were able to join in and contribute online while a small number of us lived and worked in a carefully managed environment. But there was something symbolic about being in a place that has been associated for over 100 years with the mission of the Methodist Church as we looked to renew our commitment to sharing the good news and growing disciples.

So, in the strangest of circumstances and with many restrictions, the Conference completed its business. The President and Vice-President were formally elected and inducted, and their successors for 2021 elected.

¹ John Wesley *Forty-Four Sermons* (Sermon XXI, Discourse VI on the Sermon on the Mount)