

the connexion



**A JUST ECONOMY THAT
ENABLES THE FLOURISHING
OF ALL LIFE**



**A PLANET WHERE THE
ENVIRONMENT IS RENEWED**



**A SOCIETY WHERE THE POOREST
AND MOST MARGINALISED ARE
AT THE CENTRE**



**A SOCIETY THAT WELCOMES
THE STRANGER**



**A WORLD WHICH ACTIVELY
WORKS FOR PEACE**



**A POLITICS CHARACTERISED
BY LISTENING, KINDNESS AND
TRUTHFULNESS**

Choices: choosing life



David Perry
Editor

What is the Connexion?

Methodists belong to local churches and also value being part of a larger community. In calling the Methodist Church in Britain 'the Connexion', Methodism reflects its historical and spiritual roots.

In the 18th century a 'connexion' simply meant those connected to a person or a group – for instance, a politician's network of supporters. So when people spoke of "Mr Wesley's Connexion" they meant followers of the movement led by John Wesley.

Wesley believed that belonging and mutual responsibility were fundamental Christian qualities. The language of connexion allowed him to express this interdependence, developing its spiritual and practical significance in the organisation and ethos of his movement. Both language and practice are important for Methodists today.

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"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Deuteronomy 30:19

"Choose life." So says Ewan McGregor's character Renton during his famous monologue in Danny Boyle's 1996 film *Trainspotting*. Tellingly, he goes on to proclaim: "I chose not to choose life." The film brilliantly and unsparingly unpacks what that choice means for him and those around him, who live in a cruel, cursed and deathly shadow world of heroin addiction. It is also an indictment of the prevailing socio-political realities of the time, which left so many families and communities mired in hopelessness and despair.

Choices have consequences. The climate emergency clearly sets before us in its starkest form the choice between life and death that God presents to the people in Deuteronomy 30:19. We are also living with the consequences of the Brexit referendum and the general election. What does it mean to choose life when one person's blessing is another's curse?

Changing our choices so that we are a blessing to the planet and to each other, rather than a curse, is the most pressing priority we face. So it is timely to remind ourselves that the Church exists to be an exemplar of what choosing life looks like. It was raised to embody and make real the life-giving blessing of God in Jesus for the whole world.

That is why our front cover proclaims our modern identity as a godly people of radical life-affirming choices, expressed in six key hopes for the future. That is why this issue of *the connexion* explores what changing our choices as Methodists might entail. Stories of choosing life and blessings, which range from the global through to the smallest rural chapel and to every one of us considering our way of life, give us hope and spurs us to action where we are. Each helps us appreciate both the cost and necessity of choosing life and of the truth that the One who puts the life-choice before us is the One whose Spirit enables us to take it and make it work.

Whatever the choices around us, we choose life.

Love and peace,
David

the connexion

Issue 17 • Winter 2020

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Six Hopes that the Joint Public Issues Team will prioritise for the justice work of the Churches (see page 24)

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
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Highlights



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Next Youth President

Following elections at 3Generate, the Methodist Children and Youth Assembly, it was announced that the Youth President Designate will be Phoebe Parkin, aged 17, from Telford Circuit in the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District. Phoebe will become the Youth President for 2020/2021 at a service to be held in September 2020.

Phoebe campaigned on the theme of 'God's World – Our Home' and promises to highlight environmental issues during her year in office. She says "I have always been passionate about the environment and I believe that as Christians, we are called to take care of God's creation. The environment is a very real concern for young people, as it will shape the world we inherit in so many ways."



Inderjit Bhogal to receive WMC Peace Award

Past President of the Methodist Conference the Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal is to receive the World Methodist Council Peace Award. The annual award goes to those "who have made significant contributions to peace, reconciliation and justice."

Inderjit is a tireless supporter of refugees and works to foster interfaith relations and multicultural communities, peace and reconciliation. The award's citation describes Inderjit as a "central figure" in interfaith relations in Britain and Ireland.

One of Inderjit's peace-related initiatives was City of Sanctuary, a grassroots movement to build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety for asylum seekers, refugees and other vulnerable people. Inderjit is also president of the Methodist Peace Fellowship.

On hearing of the award, Inderjit commented:

"I am surprised but deeply honoured. My whole life has been inspired by people around the world who have held up witness to peace-making; challenging war, violence and killing. I am more persuaded than ever that non-violent resolution of conflict is the way forward in all human relationships.

The award will be presented on 27 March 2020 in London.



A man with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue quilted jacket with 'THE NORTH FACE' logo, stands in front of a large white banner with 'welcome' written in red cursive and 'www.castleconnectchurch.org.uk' in black. The banner is illuminated from below. The background is dark blue.

**THINK
PIECE**

The Revd Peter
Hancock, Mission
Consultant for the
Chester and
Stoke-on-Trent
District, says the choice
is yours – to open up
to God or to close down

CHOOSING
to open up to God



Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25 could be called the parable of the two choices. A master gave talents to three of his servants. Faced with what to do next, the first two made 'opening-up' choices, putting their talents to work and making more. The third servant made a 'closing-down' choice, burying his talent in the ground.

An opening-up choice can lead us to embark upon an unknown road and to discover more about life, God and ourselves in the process. A closing-down choice will leave us never knowing what might have been.

New choices

Twenty-five years ago, a superintendent of mine guided the circuit through a decision-making process. It led to me being set free to plant a new congregation and focus my energies on mission throughout the circuit. This in turn opened up a fresh experience of God not just for the team I was working with, but also for people in our churches, for people outside the Church who came to faith, and for young people in our congregation who eventually became Christian leaders themselves.

In recent times, the Chester and Stoke-on-Trent District has chosen to adopt a church planting and re-seeding policy, which it is part of my remit to oversee. As a result, we are currently establishing the Castle Connect Church in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

It came about as the result of another brave, opening-up choice, made at Easter 2018 by members of the then Newcastle Methodist Church. Encouraged by the leaders of the North Staffordshire Circuit to which they belonged, they decided to cease meeting. This made it possible to establish a new congregation in the same premises with members from the neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent Mission Circuit. After 18 months' preparation, we launched the Castle Connect Church last November.

It has struck me on a few occasions that a 'closing-down' choice would have led to neither of the above seeing the light of day: like a talent buried in the ground.

Choices which close down

There can be a number of reasons why we may make closing-down choices.

- We listen to narratives of decline and defeat, which persuade us that our mission will always be thwarted.
- We are risk averse. We choose to conserve what we have, which prevents us from investing in the hope of growth.

The choice not to choose can mean we miss the moment. In my time as a district chair I often reflected that a church in dire straits is frequently the result of big decisions that were shelved or postponed 20 to 30 years ago.

Maintaining the present state of affairs can become a tyranny. We treat the Church in its present form as an unchangeable monolith and forget that God is always speaking new things into existence. What was a movement can soon become a monument and then a mausoleum. By contrast, the Spirit is always calling us on to new adventures.

Taking risks

Adventures, born of opening-up choices are, of course, risky. When reading Jesus' parable of the talents it is easy to assume that there was no question that the men who were given the five and the two talents would succeed in producing more. This is not so – in the transactions they were making they could have lost all that the master had entrusted to them. The master commended them, however, because they understood that his business was not about preserving what you have at all costs, but putting it to work in order to make more.

"Making more disciples of Jesus Christ": that is our Master's business. To be engaged in it opens up a whole new dynamic of life in the Holy Spirit. God did not give the Spirit for things we can do in our own strength but for those steps of faith which take us beyond ourselves. There is a risk and there is a cost. However, there is also an exhilaration and a sense of rightness in following our calling – and there is the promise held out in the words "enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21).

Not to choose can mean we miss the moment

✓
✗

CHOICES
Question

How will you guard against 'missing the moment'?

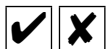
Maintaining the present state of affairs can become a tyranny



Choosing to be a **BEACON** of hope for young people



Project manager Mandy Taylor tells how a dream led Lyn Edwards to follow God's call to set up 'Shackles Off'



CHOICES
Question

What dreams and
visions is God
gifting into
your context?

Our story started when a Welsh lady, Lyn Edwards, came to stay with her friend, Heather, two miles outside the village of Seascale, in Cumbria. Here Lyn had a series of dreams that would change her life forever. In the first, she saw a young man, who was a member of her youth group back in Pembroke, playing his guitar and singing a song called *Shackles*.

Her second dream had teenagers with their heads bowed, dragging their chains through the streets of Seascale. Lyn heard the voice of God saying, "Who will tell them of a God that loves them and a Saviour that cares?"

Finally, she dreamed of a cafe with the Shackles Off sign above. It had young

people sitting inside around tables, and her friend Heather serving behind the counter.

That weekend when she visited Seascale for the first time, Lyn recognised the place from her dreams. She realised that God wanted her to move to Seascale to start the cafe she had dreamed about. Lyn was a faithful servant and with her husband Bri sold her house and moved to Seascale in 2005. When I first heard Lyn's testimony I cried because I knew that she was the answer to my prayers.

Reaching out to young people

Lyn was quite impatient and got frustrated when things didn't happen straight away,

*We want young
people to be
the best version
of themselves*





I'll find 100 people to pay a £1 a week

offering youth club and fitness sessions, informal education workshops, support for those struggling with problems such as mental health and addictions, community action programmes and intergenerational work.

God is at the very centre of our project, which is a fresh expression of church. We show God's love and care to all those we come in contact with by offering them support. Our aim is to help young people, foster their personal, social and spiritual development and empower them to make a positive and full contribution to the local community and to society. Quite simply, we want young people to be the best version of themselves.

The Sunday X-treme group is the highlight of my week. It caters for young people and adults looking for a less traditional form of worship. We sing, pray, study the Bible, share breakfast together and support one another. The missing element was Holy Communion, which we could only receive two or three times a year due to the constraints on our rural circuit and staff. Our minister Wendy said she was going to nominate me to have 'authorisation to preside' over communion. One member said that this decision made her feel like we were now a "proper church". My hope for X-treme is that we will grow in number and strength and spread the gospel throughout our community.

and I had to point out many times that God's timing is different to ours. However, in 2008 the project started to move. Lyn, myself and Heather (later joined by Janet Hardy) loaded Heather's car with crisps and cans donated by people from local churches and drove it around the village every Friday night, engaging with young people on the streets.

They were understandably suspicious at first, but we built up their trust to discover what they wanted for Seascale: a building, a place to go that wasn't school or home, a place they could call theirs. We found the building that Lyn had seen in her dreams and she persuaded the man who owned it to rent it to us. When he asked how she would pay the rent, thinking on her feet, Lyn said "I'll find 100 people to pay a £1 a week." This became our '1 in 100' scheme and there are still people who pay into it today. In January 2009 our 'drop in centre' was ready and we started to have regular Friday youth sessions.

The project today

Ten years later, we have four part-time and two casual staff, ten volunteers, and a very supportive management team, with trustees from the Methodist Church and the community. We are funded through grants and support from the local community and individuals.

We currently interact with 174 children and young people on a regular basis,

Find out more

A fuller version of Lyn's story may be found in *John Sentamu's Faith Stories* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013). It is an inspiring account of faith, calling and courage, which you can find on our website www.shacklesoff.org.uk



WANTED: 100 dreamers



Mark Williamson, pastor of Westminster Central Hall Sanctuary Project and director of One Rock International is passionate to release hundreds of new missional leaders through '100 Dreams'



So here's a story for you... a youth worker, an entrepreneur, a climate change activist and a fashionista walk into a church. No, it's not the start of a joke, but for this group it's the start of a year of training and coaching to help them each change the world.

What is 100 Dreams?

Last month they all joined the new 100 Dreams initiative supported by the Methodist Church. The aim is to release 100 lay young adults to each start a new missional project over the next five years. 100 Dreams is being piloted in London, and then hopefully expanded to other cities and districts around the Connexion.

100 Dreams will catalyse new youth events, church plants, missional communities, social enterprises, charities, ethical businesses, political campaigns; basically any of the God-given dreams on the hearts of some of our gifted young leaders. Each one will start a project that furthers the kingdom through their challenging of injustice, being a good

neighbour to those in need around them, or making more followers of Jesus Christ.

Missionary entrepreneurs

For many years I worked with the Revd Dr Rob Frost, former Connexional Evangelist. I remember him saying: "What the Church in the 21st century needs is missionary entrepreneurs – people who will try new initiatives that will further the kingdom and communicate the gospel in fresh ways." This is exactly what these young lay leaders will do.

We've put together a package of training and coaching in missional leadership that helps our 'dreamers' develop a personal rhythm of spirituality, a clear vision and strategic leadership plan, and then become equipped with leadership skills – all to help them start up the missional dream that God has placed on their heart.

So far, this training and coaching has helped birth online discipleship ministries, safe houses for trafficked women, charities working with vulnerable teenagers, residential mission training centres, new missional communities, and much more.





Projects that further the kingdom

And now we're able to resource young Methodists to think more like entrepreneurs and start new kingdom ventures, helping us explore what it means to be church in 21st-century urban contexts.

Initial participants

The value of the package is £5,000 per person. With subsidies from the Connexional Grants Committee and the London District Advance Fund we're able to offer this to lay Methodist leaders for a much-reduced price of just £200 per person, making it affordable to young people and churches right across the Connexion. The initial 100 Dreams participants are currently one month into their one-year course, and are already excited about the possibilities it will open up:

"I love it. It's practical, engaging and propels my passion for solving problems that are kingdom oriented. It has renewed my faith in God in a different way that makes me feel more confident for the race ahead."
Mofoluke Ayoola

"A blessed experience which enabled learning new points and meeting new people. It will be a blessing for God's kingdom that all participants of the workshop will be involved in ministry afterwards – and could work together."
Jarson Jaganathan

We're excited to see what new projects will be birthed through these leaders. And let's not forget the words of John Wesley: "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth."¹ Substitute *preachers* for *missionary entrepreneurs*, make the language inclusive; and it's a great summary of what we're trying to achieve.

We will not be afraid of failure, which is often the biggest thing holding young people back from pursuing their ideas. Instead, we will trust these young people to dream big dreams for how God is calling them to follow Jesus and change their part of the world.

The future

The next 100 Dreams course begins in October 2020. We're on the look out for more London-based lay leaders who have missional dreams, and for people around the Connexion who would like to see this project brought to their city or district. If that's you – we'd love you to get in touch. Visit www.100dreams.co.uk and email me at mark@onerockinternational.com Together, let's release hundreds of new missional projects across the Connexion!



CHOICES Question

How is your district going to respond to this exciting invitation?

¹ In a letter from John Wesley to Alexander Mather, 6 August 1777. Source: John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley* (London: 1931), volume vi, p. 272.



CHOOSING

to start a movement
of awakening and revival

Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, says overseas support can help UK churches create more followers of Jesus Christ

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” (Romans 12:2)



How often do we resist change, even good change? We so often get comfortable with the status quo. We even get used to situations that are worrying and need change. But God clearly instructs us to change our mind-set and therefore our way of doing things. As the popular saying goes: “we cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results!” The kingdom of God requires change – a new mind-set and new actions.

The kingdom of God also requires partnership. We need to live as brothers and sisters in Christ who support one another through difficult times and help each other with our weaknesses. Despite encouraging signs of how our mission is supporting communities, the Methodist Church membership in Britain continues to decline. We find it hard to make new disciples of Christ and we can find evangelism tricky and uncomfortable.



*We need to
regain our
passion for
evangelism*

Helping hand from Latin America and the Caribbean

As a Church that is part of a worldwide family of over 80 million Methodists, we have a unique opportunity to learn from Partner Churches overseas that are growing and making new disciples of Christ.

This is becoming a reality in the UK thanks to the Council of Latin American Evangelical Methodist Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean (CIEMAL), which represents our Methodist Partner Churches in that region. It is preparing to send CIEMAL mission partner evangelists to work with local Methodist communities in the UK under a pilot scheme. The mission partners, who may be lay or ordained, have a track record in evangelism, including church planting, church revitalisation and church growth. Alongside local church ministers, lay leaders and church members they will develop evangelistic work in the community. They will do this sensitively, aware of cultural differences and how we do evangelism here. However, their work will also be distinctly different from what we may be used to, and may challenge our mind-set and our usual pattern for evangelism.

CIEMAL's General Secretary, the Revd Luciano Pereira said: "CIEMAL believes that the mission belongs to God and that we are only collaborators with God in mission. Our vision is to develop three key aspects: mobilise, train and connect. So now we are preparing to send the first mission partner to the UK in 2020. We are looking forward to the future and evangelism and discipleship opportunities as we obey the commandment that Jesus, our teacher, gave us "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Our hope is that Latin American and Caribbean mission partners will help sow seeds, and a new hope will emerge for the continuation of mission in the UK through the Methodist Church. Our goal is to partner with and serve the Methodist Church in Britain by following the principles of the Methodist movement, helping to perhaps start a movement of awakening and revival in the United Kingdom."

CIEMAL mission partners come to the UK

In September 2020 the Newcastle District will be the first to receive a CIEMAL mission partner.

The Revd Elaine Lindridge (left), the District's mission and evangelism enabler,

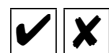


says about the programme. "Having visited the Methodist Church in Cuba, I'd seen first hand the work of God there and been hugely encouraged by their commitment, faith and passion. I believe we have much to learn about evangelism from our sisters and brothers in Latin America.

"I am absolutely convinced that we [the Methodist Church in Britain] need to regain our passion for evangelism and encourage people to become disciples. This generous offer of help from CIEMAL has the potential to be fruitful in ways that we can only dream of at this stage. We are praying, and invite others to pray with us, that we will see God do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. We are delighted that the CIEMAL mission partner will be coming to the Chester-le-Street Circuit. They will live on an estate that does not have any church presence at the moment and the circuit will be working with them to share the good news and serve the community."

For more information on this pilot programme please contact Global Relationships:

gr.admin@methodistchurch.org.uk



CHOICES Question

What does this opportunity inspire you to ask for?

SIMPLE

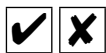
choices for the long term



Combining the Romero Prayer with *Our Calling* helps the Chair of the Darlington District, the Revd Richard Andrew, form a hopeful vision for the future

*This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*

*(From the Romero Prayer, often attributed to Oscar Romero
but originally composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, USA, 1979)*



CHOICES Question

What new, hopeful
actions will your
circuit choose to
invest in next?

*A prayer
encouraging
the long-term
view*

The first time I chaired the Darlington District Synod, I offered a reflection on what has become known as the Romero Prayer. A copy of the prayer was tacked to my door for many years, a daily reminder of how we might enter into God's mission and, by implication, what might get in the way.

It is a prayer which I return to regularly because I find it refreshingly liberating. It encourages the long- over the short-term view; a vision of the kingdom over immediate ecclesiastical concerns. It is realistic about what we are able to achieve as human beings in a lifetime; and is wonderfully permissive in encouraging us to make use of what is before us, sowing and watering the seeds that hold promise because they are offered to God, not worrying about what we do not have. It is simple but, as is often the case, its

simplicity and elegance are signs of its profundity.

Choices for the future

Making choices about the future in light of the reaffirmation of *Our Calling*, the Darlington District is developing a 10-year focus entitled, 'Every Church Growing'. In 10 years we want to see every church growing holistically in its worship, in its learning, caring and discipleship, in evangelism, in acts of service, community engagement and justice. We have chosen a long-term horizon for a number of reasons:

- We recognise that currently many of our churches feel anxious about the future as we respond to decades of decline.
- We know that in order to grow we will need to plant and prune carefully and

that will involve courage and perhaps pain as we begin to change.

- We are acutely aware that many of our members feel tired, discouraged and overloaded.
- We recognise that developing a culture of growth takes a long time as we develop the habits and make the choices by which we will live and encourage a mindset focused on the needs of the kingdom.

Hopeful choices focusing on *Our Calling*

Central to the development of our district strategy is the conviction that we are an 'Easter people', and therefore a people of hope. Whilst the future might look daunting, we affirm the conviction of the American theologian and activist, Jim Wallis that, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then making the evidence change." That is the way in which we choose to live.

We believe that change in our context requires a consistent, long-term approach committed to the nurture of a Christ-centred, Spirit-filled, outward-looking, hopeful and confident culture open to risk for the sake of the gospel. The guiding principle is to retain a focus on *Our Calling* as a template for considering vision, short- and long-term mission objectives and the change of structures to make them simpler, adaptable, more flexible, and targeted upon the mission and ministry needs of local churches and circuits.

Investment means growth

I am a firm believer in the idea that what we invest in grows. Where we invest our time and energy is usually a good indication of our priorities. *Our Calling*, it seems to me, provides us with a useful opportunity to identify what is core and what is peripheral to our vision and to make wise choices about where in the future we will invest the time, talents and energy God has given us. What we do in response to the gospel is, of course, as the Romero Prayer reminds us, never complete, yet it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace. I find that wonderfully liberating.

What I offer is never complete, which is a different way of saying it's not all down to me. But because that is the case, I don't have to carry the burden of the future. I can choose to live simply by hope and to invest in those hopeful actions through which God builds the future. As the Romero Prayer reminds us in its conclusion: "We are prophets of a future not our own."



We want to see every church growing

What we do in response to the gospel is an opportunity for God's grace

A radical **RURAL** choice

**The Revd Shalome MacNeill
Cooper tells how seven small
congregations in the Shropshire
and Marches Circuit have made
difficult choices to follow God**



Choices can be big or small. Some may have little effect and others result in real change in the world. John Wesley was faced with a difficult choice in his early ministry: whether to stay in the American colonies or return to Great Britain. He stated there was “no other way of knowing God’s will but by consulting [one’s] own reason and [one’s] friends, and by observing the order of God’s providence.”¹ Like Wesley, we also face difficulties. So how do communities of faith make choices? And how do we know if the choices we make are our own or belong to the Holy Spirit? Responsible choices usually stem from asking difficult questions. Occasionally the answers may be uncomfortable truths, which bear their own solutions, if only we have the ability to perceive them.

More buildings than congregations

In the area where I minister in beautiful Shropshire, we have eight chapels but only seven congregations. One of our chapels does not have a congregation but it is a wonderful building. We decided the time had come to address some difficult questions about our chapels. Like other faith communities in the country, our membership is in decline. We have been waiting in hope for the seeds that were planted yesterday to bear fruit today, but over a two-year period we also asked ourselves what would indicate a chapel was no longer sustainable, and what would God want us to do if so? Would the signal to change be a lack of finances, declining membership or the loss of a key player in God’s story in our communities?

Answering these questions was difficult but in the spirit of Acts 2:44, “All who believed were together and had all things in common”, on 15 July 2019 we voted to merge all seven congregations into one society; and on 1 September 2019 we amalgamated to become Rea Valley Methodist Churches. It has one church council, one bank account, one membership list/community roll and eight worship locations.

Whilst this was a big decision, it was based on previous smaller, discerning choices. We believe that Jesus’ vulnerability was his great strength, and so we too should embrace our own vulnerability. Our eight chapels chose to be vulnerable to each other – and this is an ongoing choice we make at every worship service, church council or gathering.

Our decisions were also based on hope

rather than fear, because Scripture tells us, “Do not be afraid”. Decisions based on fear tend to reflect our own thoughts and wishes, rather than God’s desiring.

Clustering together

As creatures of habit, it is easy to do the same things and wonder why outcomes do not change. We knew we needed to be innovative whilst maintaining local priorities; to move past seeing success merely as numbers and more as God-in-relationships.

And while it is usual to say “The Church of God has a mission”, it is better theologically to affirm that “The God of mission has a Church.” So we chose to see *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* as a connexional permission-giving pathway for mission. We decided to cluster together and organise travel to different chapels for worship services. We also have a ‘cluster’ service every three months in our building that does not have a congregation. Coming together in this way has fostered better relationships, helped the chapel coffers, and made worship more vibrant with congregations of twenty worshippers rather than four. We also decided to make relationships a priority and shift our focus from fundraising to a spirit of tithing resources of money, talent and time. We agreed that sharing resources should not be seen as ‘richer’ churches saving ‘poorer’ ones from closure, but as a group endeavour. It has allowed our network of chapels – each unique to its own context – to offer expressions of faith across the locality we serve.

This may seem a very rosy outcome but it was not an easy one: the choices have been difficult. There were passionate objections and reluctant agreements, sleepless nights and all-consuming prayer; we have struggled to make hope-based decisions and quell fears. But, our choices were made together and we have grown closer. It is still early days and we will continue to explore and question, wrestle and discern, answer and make choices, in Wesley’s words “observing the order of God’s providence”, one choice at a time.

¹ From a recollection written in a letter of 1 May 1736 by Benjamin Ingham from Georgia, North America. Ingham is recounting a conversation in London with John and Charles Wesley and a Mr Salmon, who explained to him how they came to decide to leave England for the American colonies. Ingham made reference to being called of God, and this was their reply. Source: Heitzenrater, Richard P., *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd edition, p. 65.

Our choices have been made together and we have grown closer

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CHOICES
Question

In your context, what uncomfortable truths is God inviting you to address with hope and courage?





INSPIRING choices

*With brave
choices change
is inevitable*

The Revd Claire Simpson describes the choices for herself and the East Solent and Downs Circuit as they respond to God and the community

In the main street of the town where I live, I have a choice of 10 coffee shops for my elevenses. On the one hand, that's great. On the other, it creates indecision. And often, one choice leads to another. Cappuccino or latte? Cake or pastry? Card or cash? Like opening a set of Russian dolls, no sooner have I made one decision, than another presents itself.

In my life as a Methodist presbyter I am presented with choices every day. In my previous life as a teacher I rarely had to make a choice about how I spent my time. A timetable would see my working week mapped out for me. However, ministry is different and after 12 years I have become accustomed to the level of autonomy and choice I have in fulfilling my role.

The word choice has a positive ring to it.

Choice suggests more than one possibility or opportunity. That is surely a good thing? Well, yes... and no.

I currently have pastoral oversight of four churches as well as circuit responsibilities and a weekly session as a spiritual care volunteer at my local hospice. In all these places I am confronted by choice, which is both exciting and inspiring, but also daunting and challenging.

Choosing wisely

A strategy gifted to me by a lay person applies a 'must, should, could' approach to my working life. So, in terms of how to prioritise tasks in any working week I can ask: what *must* be done, what *should* be done and what *could* be done (if time and energy allows). This approach doesn't work



God's Spirit
moves us
to encounter
fresh
possibilities



for everything – because life isn't neat – but it can enable priorities to surface.

In Robert Frost's poem *The Road not Taken* a walker comes to a fork in the road and has to decide which path to follow. He has to choose from two apparently equal options. One is chosen over the other and whilst the narrative of the poem is inconclusive it ends with the lines:

"I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference."

This poem resonates with my ministry. Fundamentally, I'm seeking to be open to God revealing where I need to be to make "all the difference", using the gifts and graces that God has given me.

So I choose to prioritise my time to be with people who are at a particularly difficult point in their lives. These include people who are sick and dying or sad and bereaved. I also prioritise spending time with those who are refugees and asylum seekers; those encountering change; people responding to God's call; the unchurched and those on the fringes of faith.

A fork in the road

As a circuit we are at "a fork in the road" and facing brave choices. In 2013, we reshaped for mission bringing together three smaller circuits to create a new one. This has created opportunities and released resources. Now we are trying faithfully to walk a road "less travelled" as we respond to God and the needs of our churches and their communities.

We are looking to use a different mix of people to deliver ministry across the circuit. In 2020 we hope to appoint a lay pastor for three churches that are geographically close to one another in the south, and encourage

them to work together and focus on the needs of their communities. We may also be able to appoint a missionary to create "a new place for new people" in the Portsmouth area, and we have a new worshipping community already forming in ecumenical partnership at Beacon Church in Bordon.

These are exciting times, but with brave choices change is inevitable. It can be unsettling as we encounter the new, for with change comes an acknowledgement of loss. As we let go, we need to trust God and one another as we seek to walk a different path hopefully to make all the difference to our congregations and communities.

God's Spirit moves us to encounter fresh possibilities and is encouraging us to break new ground. As we step out in faith and inhabit the choices we have made, we pray for God's blessing on all that is to come.



CHOICES
Question

What brave choices
are you yearning
to make in your
church and circuit?



Choosing life in its **FULLNESS**

In the face of life's challenges the Church offers a counter-story of loving hope, says Nottingham and Derby District well-being officer Becca Byass



I chose, with that belief, to live

I am really important. I am employed as the first well-being officer in a Methodist district, paid for by an *Our Calling* grant. My job is to promote, support and resource well-being in the district, particularly for ministers and lay employees. I'm doing this by shaping district policy, building relationships, sourcing materials for training and retreats and looking at how we change culture that might be an obstacle to the well-being of our people.

But, that is not why I am important.

I came to a full realisation of my worth, head and heart, standing in the garden on a damp, autumn afternoon. Out of bed only because I was smoking a cigarette; questioning if my existence mattered and, if not, then why carry on?

Looking at a dried up, uninteresting, not-even-worth-an-Instagram-filter, dead leaf, I saw its worth as part of the cycle of creation, a part of the whole plan. It had worth because of how it belonged. Into the murky, airless darkness of my depression, the melodic, tri-fold voice of God whispered

lovingly in my ear: "You are of us. You are of us. You are of us."

I chose, with that belief, to live and immediately made an appointment to see the doctor.

I am valuable and important, I am loved. But I am not unique in that, nor was my struggle.

Mental health

Thanks to recent media campaigns, mental health awareness is rising and the stigma that previously accompanied it is dwindling. I hope you haven't written me off because I've told you that I, like one in four people who will experience mental health problems this year, had depression.

Mental health issues are only one of the obstacles to well-being. Increased stress and expectations, the faster pace of life, fewer hours of daylight, sedentary jobs, the pressure inherent within the language of 'progress' and 'growth', alongside climate change, population growth, political unrest, the rising cost of living... Such obstacles contribute to people feeling hopeless,



apathetic or anxious, which perpetuates and contributes to mental, physical and emotional health issues.

Hope, worth and well-being

The Church, in all of this, tells a counter-story of loving hope. A hope born in the belief that God longs for creation to flourish, both planet and people. It is hope in Jesus who came that we might have life and have it to the full: who modelled healthy relationships and a balance of work and rest and prayer; who challenged the wrongs that inhibited others' flourishing. This same hope hisses, hackles raised, in the face of injustice, poverty and discrimination. It was hope that whispered my worth in the bottom of the pit and gave me enough spirit to fight through the murk and find help.

With safeguarding, the Methodist Church has spent time and effort investing in systems which protect our most vulnerable people. We train, create and implement policy so that everyone is included and safeguarded from harm.

We are not the only ones focusing on this or on well-being. Since the banking crisis, corporations have invested heavily in employee well-being and engagement. Research has shown that where people have good well-being, they are more

creative, innovative and less likely to be off work with stress. If people are flourishing in business, their productivity increases and therefore profits rise.

Faith in God brings fullness

However, the hope-filled story that the Church bares is so much greater – it's not simply preventing harm or being more productive. Being alive is more than not feeling depressed. Living a full life is about good connections and problem-solving, about feeling useful and optimistic, finding a sense of worth, having moments of joy, feeling loved and valued, giving generously, having energy to spare and thinking clearly.

The Church, with its traditions and disciplines has something to offer a world that spent £3.6 trillion on 'wellness' last year. At the very least, we need to identify the ways our disciplines are equally as helpful as mindfulness or yoga. Our faith in a loving, restorative God means we have something better to say and something better to show, that feeds the human need for hope and wholeness.

As a district we are seeking to identify and overcome obstacles to well-being. We are committed to creating inclusive communities that gather around and elevate the most vulnerable. We will be monitoring well-being and turning our research into positive action and good practice. Through this, we will challenge stigma and bullying and model healthy relationships in our worship, service, learning and caring.

In short, we are seeking to embody and reveal the future hope of God's kingdom that, in our imperfection, we only see a glimpse of.

Because you are important. We are important. They are important.

God longs for creation to flourish, both planet and people

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CHOICES
Question

What has Becca's honesty and faith touched and inspired in you?



Choosing a **METHODIST** way of living



Past President of the Conference, the Revd Dr Roger L Walton challenges the Church to adopt new commitments that echo John Wesley being inspired by the love of God

A METHODIST WAY OF LIFE
The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ

With God's help, we commit to this way of life:

Worship

- We will pray daily.
- We will worship with others regularly.
- We will look and listen for God in Scripture and the world.

Learning and Caring

- We will care for ourselves and those around us.
- We will practise hospitality and generosity.
- We will learn more about our faith.

Service

- We will help and serve people in our communities and beyond.
- We will honour creation and tend the environment.
- We will challenge injustice.

Evangelism

- We will speak of the love of God in Jesus.
- We will live in such a way that others might be drawn to Jesus.
- We will share our faith with others, sensitively.

May each life be a blessing within and beyond God's Church, for the transformation of the world.



The 'Methodist Way of Life' is not a detailed list of beliefs, but rather how we seek to live our lives in response to God's love in Jesus. The commitments left are a work in progress, but aim to set out, in simple terms, what being a Methodist is all about

In 2018, this description of the Methodist Way of Life was presented to the Methodist Conference. From 2020, resources will become available across the Connexion for people to explore our Methodist way of living out Christian commitment.

The Methodist Way of Life grows

Last year, the Yorkshire West District piloted its use, although this was largely accidental! We printed 500 cards bearing this text for Synod, so that people could see what the Conference had discussed. Together we recited it aloud, and considered what it might be like if we adopted this way of life. On the Monday after Synod, we had some left over, so sent an email asking if anyone would like them – first come, first served. By the end of Monday, the District Office had requests for 5,000 copies, with another 1,500 requested shortly after. In the end, 7,500 were printed and distributed. It had clearly struck a chord.

Using the commitments

No instructions were given as to how the cards should be used. So we learned a great deal from feedback. Some ministers gave them out with membership tickets. Some formed small groups to study and reflect on how this was working (or not working) in



Worship



Learning and Caring



Service



Evangelism

their lives. Some distributed them at their Covenant Service, for putting into daily practice what people had just committed to in that act of dedication. A few introduced them into membership preparation, while others used them for preaching or devotions at church meetings. One person even wrote a set of daily prayers to accompany the Methodist Way of Life. Most importantly, many individuals placed them in their Bible and looked at the commitments every time they opened its pages.

Why was the take-up so great?

Let me offer some suggestions for why so many people adopted this Methodist Way of Life.

- First, it is a **reminder**. People see in it what they aspire to be and do as Christians. This is how they want to try to live. It is no surprise in one way, as it relates to *Our Calling*. The 2000 Conference endorsed *Our Calling* as expressing what the Methodist Church is to do in the 21st century. The Methodist Way of Life sets *Our Calling* in personal terms. It outlines what I am committed to do as a part of this Church. Its handy postcard-size, which can slip into a Bible or bag, offers a convenient regular reminder of this way of living. It can also be a useful means of sharing with others about being Methodist. One person told me that when asked, “What are Methodists about?” she showed her Methodist Way of Life card.

- Second, it is a **rule** or yardstick by which to check on one’s growth. With the Methodist Way of Life, comes simple, but probing questions to help us reflect on our Christian lives, which we printed on the reverse of the commitments card. So in relation to



The Methodist Way of Life sets Our Calling in personal terms



**Greater sense
of intentionality
about Christian
living**

the section on Worship, the questions include: What is the pattern of your prayer life? What has recently spoken to you in worship or Bible study? When has God been close to you? In the section on Service, questions include: What issues of justice are you involved in? Are there any you need to take up?

These first questions feed into the Church's 2019/2020 Year of Testimony, while the second ones challenge us to live ethically. The questions prompt personal reflection, but you could explore them with a prayer partner, a soul friend or in a small group. Living out the Christian life is never going to be success all the way. With some commitments, we will struggle; with some, we may fail. So being able to share honestly with others helps us to find the support we need.

In Burley, in Wharfedale and Aireborough Circuit, a series of groups were initiated by the Revd Tim Perkins. The groups explored the means of grace and integrated the Methodist Way of Life into their meetings in two major ways. First, in each session, one of the questions from the Way of Life was posed and people shared their experience honestly. Second, at the end of the session, the group said the Way of Life together. It sent folk out with a strong sense of how they were to live.

Jo, one of the group leaders, said, "People really enjoyed having the card

with the Way of Life printed on it. It helped them to clarify in a helpful way what sometimes gets lost in years of attending church." Tim said that for most, there was nothing new in the Methodist Way of Life, but it gave folk a greater sense of intentionality about their Christian living.

- Finally, the Methodist Way of Life holds a deep **resonance and reconnection** with our tradition. Methodism began as a holiness movement, and the societies John Wesley formed had rules to help people form and grow in their faith. The core was that Methodists would do no harm; that they would seek to do good wherever they could, and that they would develop a pattern of prayer and worship to draw near to God. Within the societies, there were small groups – classes and bands – which helped people work out what these basic rules meant in their daily lives. For these groups, Wesley wrote rules, as he did for those preachers who helped him in the work. He even wrote rules for the singing of hymns and outlined a rule for handling personal finance in his sermon 'The Use of Money'. When John Wesley was asked about the people called Methodists, he described how Methodists lived out their faith in daily life, inspired and empowered by the love of God. The Methodist Way of Life resonates with that first description. It is in our DNA.



CHOICES
Question

Spend some time with God imagining just how much would change for the better if you were to adopt each of these commitments.



GOD'S choice

Questioning our motives in choosing, the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, Secretary of the Conference, reminds us of God's choice of Israel



What matters enough to us to risk the future?



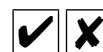
I cannot claim to be an Hebrew scholar at all – my training included only a short course in Hebrew and I have never mastered the language. But I can still remember clearly some of the insights into the Torah that we were given in those classes. One was the eulogy that our tutor uttered around the word *bachar* which is used of God's choice of Israel, a word that he said carried implications of love and delight. And of risk – God's choice is God's investment of the future.

I write during the general election campaign when millions of us will be presented with a choice: in which of these candidates do I believe the future should be invested? How I make that choice will be informed by my attitudes. The questions that I answer in the ballot box are not simply 'which of these would make the best MP?' but 'What are the issues that really matter to me?' 'Which of my values do I see reflected in the candidates?' 'Whose interests do I have at heart?'

Bachar (according to my tutor all those years ago) is a beautiful word because it discloses not simply the choice but the love that dictates the choice. And God's people are invited to respond – to choose to serve God is to make a decision based on hope and love however risky that might seem.

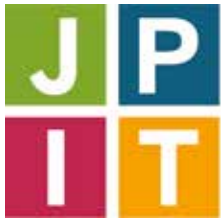
The supermarket shelves might present me with a bewildering amount of choice even for commonplace products. However, behind my loyalty card are algorithms that have probably told the store what I will choose before I have worked it out because the pattern of my shopping reveals what drives my choices. For instance, how important are price, trade justice, the environment, quality, or familiarity to me?

Our choices are a witness to what motivates us, just as God's choice of us is a witness to the character and the longing of God. 'What will you choose?' can mean 'What matters enough to us to risk the future?'



CHOICES
Question

What motivates you?



HOPEFUL

choices for the world

Rachel Lampard and Paul Morrison of the Joint Public Issues Team say our choices can help take care of the planet and create a fairer society



Our choices are certainly constrained by what is possible. We have accepted, for example, that we are never going to make it as *Blue Peter* Presenters or long-distance runners.

But are we too quick to accept that things are not possible? When we see something that is not right, do we say to ourselves “this is the way of the world” and we can do nothing about it? Things can look very bleak, but with hope, we can respond to God’s call to challenge the injustices we see all around us.

Injustice is not inevitable

If we see continued climate change as unavoidable, for example, there is no reason to reduce the number of flights we take, or to ask the government to change energy subsidies. We could read “you always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11) to mean we don’t need to challenge poverty. Since nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented, do we decide that we shouldn’t bother to press governments to live up to their longstanding commitment to get rid of them?

Accepting injustices as inevitable means that we fail to challenge them. But our trust in God provides us with hope for a more just world.

The Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT, photos right) joins together the Methodist Church with the Baptist Union, the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church to work together for justice and peace. JPIT has identified ‘Six Hopes’ (below) which will

drive the justice work of the Churches over the next few years.

The Six Hopes involve choices we can make about who we prioritise in our society and who we push to the margins; what following the biblical injunction to welcome the stranger looks like in practice; and how we can renew, not destroy God’s creation. In the coming years, JPIT will work to resource local churches theologically, politically and practically as they make these choices.

Choices for a better world

One of the issues we have before us is how to change our economy in the face of the climate crisis. It’s agreed that we need to change rapidly to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions and avert disaster. The big question is how.

We currently judge the success of our economy by how much we trade and consume. Economic growth has been the central aim of government for almost a century, but rising greenhouse gases and other types of pollution have been the inexorable consequences. Ever-increasing consumption cannot be sustainable.

Economic ideas such as endless growth once looked as solid and immutable as the law of gravity. Today they look more like choices that need revisiting. Imagination and hope can offer us the opportunity to challenge injustices that seemed inevitable just a decade ago.

SIX HOPES FOR A MORE JUST WORLD



A JUST ECONOMY THAT ENABLES THE FLOURISHING OF ALL LIFE



A PLANET WHERE THE ENVIRONMENT IS RENEWED



A SOCIETY WHERE THE POOREST AND MOST MARGINALISED ARE AT THE CENTRE



We can transform society

Some of the biggest issues today – ecological degradation, unsustainable economic models, poverty – are all the result of choices that we made as societies and individuals over decades. None of them is the result of inevitable, unchangeable laws. This means that we do have choices about transforming them.

It is a big task. But start at an individual level. We can examine the choices we make in our homes; how we spend money in local communities or businesses; how we vote to make a difference. We can question whose contributions we really value: unpaid carers, for example, are currently excluded from measures of economic activity.

And we are not alone. In March, JPIT is hosting an ecumenical conference that will enable people to listen and discuss issues with politicians, economists, theologians, development workers and many others who are hoping and helping to reframe our economic choices.

The choices we make, whether small or large, help us to stand together against injustice, to speak of God’s love and say



another, more hopeful, world is possible.

To find out more about the Six Hopes and to explore the kinds of choices you can make around them visit

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/SixHopes

The JPIT Conference, ‘Renewal and Rebellion: Faith, Economy and Climate’, will take place in Derby on 7 March 2020.

To book visit **www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/conference2020/**

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CHOICES
Question

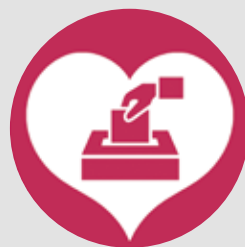
How will your church bring these hopes to life in ways that make a real difference?



A SOCIETY THAT WELCOMES THE STRANGER



A WORLD WHICH ACTIVELY WORKS FOR PEACE



A POLITICS CHARACTERISED BY LISTENING, KINDNESS AND TRUTHFULNESS

Our trust in God provides us with hope for a more just world

Reflection

*“From everlasting to everlasting you are **God.**”* Psalm 90:2

*“Come with me” he said
and he took me by the hand and led me out of the door.
Out through the narrow corridors of my mind
into the spacious vastness
and he said:
“look up...”
and in doing so
I glimpsed the universe.
Millions of stars in an ink black sky
Clear.
Calm.
So still
that I could hear the Eternal echoing from The Beginning...
and I beheld in that moment “that it was good”.*

*And
whirling thoughts were stopped –
swapped
for twirling orbits...
An invitation to join the Dance
and gaze starry-eyed
on all of this
to be
immersed in God's infinity
and
I saw in God's Creation
the limitless love of God
for me
a fleck –
a speck amidst the spectacular
but formed
by the same Hands as of all of this
and held always heart-close
precious and blessed
and delighted upon.
A wondrous rebalancing:
I know and am known
and from this epiphany
overjoyed – return home.*

My Dad first introduced me to Kenneth's Graham's *The Wind in the Willows*. My favourite part of the story is at the beginning – when Mole is busied and flustered with his spring-cleaning tasks. Into all this steps Ratty – with an invitation to adventure. Mole takes some persuading at first, but eventually he downs tools and joins Ratty, and the decision to do so changes him.

It was late one evening and I was feeling rather like poor Mole must have felt; when Simon, my husband, walked Ratty-like into the room and said to come outside as there was something I needed to see. I must confess that at the time it wasn't what I wanted to hear. My head was full of the everyday busyness of things and I was tired and feeling under pressure. Having to break off from it all felt at first like an unnecessary distraction, a choice of reluctant cooperation – and suffice to say it was made with none of the literary loveliness of woodland creatures setting out on an adventure.

But when we stepped outside my grumbling was silenced.

Looking up we could see shimmering shoals of stars defined in icy clarity against the cold night sky.

It was truly beautiful

I'm not one for sun-bathing, but I love

star-bathing and it was wonderful to just be still, take it all in and bask in the sheer, vast beauty of it all. As we did so, a shift in perspective took place that took me out of the narrowness and hassle that had preoccupied me.

Looking up at the night sky I felt I met God's smiling gaze of grace. It was at once a mixture of being aware of the awesome magnificence of the Creator and a comforting holiness that was so close and homely it was indeed a breath of "the peace ... that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

God's voice had echoed through the experience of being invited to see the stars. As a result I was changed – I saw things differently. The things I returned to moments later were still there, they hadn't changed – but I had; and I could tackle what I had to do from a totally different perspective.

Life is often so fast paced and insistent that to "Be still and know" (Psalm 46:10) God is sometimes a challenging choice that has to be intentionally made. However, God is good and knows us well and graciously reaches out to us in incarnational moments of everyday life, in backyard epiphanies just like these. Creation is full of God's glory and even the mundane is full of miracles. In choosing to embrace the wonder of all of this – we encounter the embrace of God.



Charlotte Rumble is a community pastor, school chaplain at Hippings Methodist Primary School in Oswaldtwistle and a local preacher. She works with the Revd Rick Ormrod as one half of the Hyndburn Section Ministry Partnership leading five churches in the West Pennine Moors Circuit.



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