

62. Looking to the future

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Jonathan R Hustler, Secretary of the Conference SoC@methodistchurch.org.uk
---------------------------------	--

1. Introduction

- 1.1 It has not been customary in recent years for the Secretary to report to the Conference in this way and this report is not intended to set a precedent. In fact, it might be argued that it is not properly a report at all, more a discussion paper. This has been an extraordinary year and it will take some time for both churches and society to come to terms with what has happened to us. This report is designed, therefore, to stimulate some thinking about that 'coming to terms'.
- 1.2 We have found ourselves in unknown territory. The current situation of the pandemic is challenging and unlike anything that most of us have experienced before. However, one of the words that has been overused (and misused) has been 'unprecedented'. Of course, none of us has witnessed a global pandemic like this in our lifetime before. But in the broad panorama of history, little of the last 18 months' experience has, strictly speaking, been unprecedented. Human beings have lived with rampant contagious and potentially fatal diseases before; schools and businesses have been closed for extended periods before; social gatherings have been limited before; even churches have been shut to worshippers before. All of which enables us to see that societies (and churches) emerge from such periods changed (but often in ways that were anticipated before the pandemic hit). The effect of a pandemic has been to accelerate a change that was already beginning.
- 1.3 Whatever lies in the future, therefore, one thing that is known is that we will not return to how we were in 2019. The economic shift and change to society will challenge the Church, and the Church will need to respond to a new environment and to rediscover how it best serves this reshaped society and therefore what it is. This report suggests some major themes that might inform that rediscovery and therefore offers some questions to the Conference for discussion.

2. Being a Connexion

- 2.1 One of the most rapid changes to the life of the Church was the move to online worship that took place in March 2020. Within weeks, many churches and Circuits had purchased licences in order to gather their congregations on Zoom or another platform. The Connexional Team was quick to produce resources and guidance to help in this process and preachers speedily learned the art of communicating to

tens, hundreds, and even thousands of listeners whilst looking at a few faces on a laptop screen.

- 2.2 As the Faith and Order Committee reports, this speedy change has left us with a considerable amount of thinking to do about what it means to be an online church; this is a theological and anthropological conversation that we will need to have over the next few years.
- 2.3 To begin the conversation, a key question to ask ourselves is not 'how do we become a digital Church?', nor 'how do we make the most of the potential of the digital connections?' but 'how are we faithfully being what we are called to be, as we connect in this way more and more?'
- 2.4 There is much to reflect on in this area in relation to the experience of online life. For example, how do we include those who are not at ease with technology? How do we maintain confidentiality? How do we welcome others if they need an invitation whilst ensuring that it is a safe space? The Connexional Team in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee has published guidance on the Methodist Church in Britain website, but there is still much thinking to be done.
- 2.5 The move to digital has been difficult for some. Many of our most vulnerable and isolated members have not been able to access all that has been made available due to it only being online. The past year, therefore, served to highlight some of the inequality in the Church, as in wider society. Not every congregation had the expertise to move online; not every area had the necessary broadband width to support that form of gathering. Whereas some churches found that their online congregation was much greater than the physical gathering had been, part (possibly much) of that growth was from those in Circuits that were less well-resourced joining larger services.
- 2.6 Conversely, of course, the move to online has been a boon for a number of people. Those who have for some time been unable to attend physical worship for whatever reason (illness or infirmity, work patterns, or domestic responsibility) now find themselves included and churches and Circuits are challenged not to lose what has been gained in this regard when a return to worship in church buildings becomes the norm. It has been difficult for members of the Connexional Team to know how effective engagement with online worship has been in many places but the anecdotal evidence has sometimes challenged the lazy assumptions about who can and who cannot get online.
- 2.7 Digital inequality is not divorced from the financial inequality of which we have been aware for many years. There have been some Circuits that have struggled as

62. Looking to the future

the closure of buildings for worship and the lack of any lettings have cut off both their main sources of income. We do not have the statistics but it is clear that many churches and Circuits will have had to draw on their reserves in order to maintain their regular outgoings, first of which, always, is the monthly stipend bill. Members of the Conference will almost certainly be aware of the campaign in the pages of *The Methodist Recorder* and elsewhere for a year's holiday for Circuits from paying stipends. The idea was not that no minister should be paid but that the Connexion should draw on its reserves to cover the cost for 12 months to enable Circuits to recover their balances.

- 2.8 The problem is that the Connexion has reserves but those are not held centrally. As the Director of Finance and Resources reported to the Methodist Council, something in the region of £300,000,000 is held in trust funds by Local Churches and Circuits, three quarters of it unrestricted. Under the control of the Council, however, is only something like £2,000,000 available and unrestricted. Given that the annual stipend bill is approximately £44,000,000, there seems to be no reason why the Circuits cannot stand a year with reduced income and pay stipends (and that does indeed seem to have happened). The problem, of course, is that the £225,000,000 is not evenly or proportionately shared across the Connexion.
- 2.9 We have lived with this inequality for some time and not been blind to its deleterious effects. A Notice of Motion at the 2018 Conference challenged us to look again at stationing practice and 'in particular, the funding of ministerial appointments and the needs of the most deprived parts of the Connexion'. The implication was that ministers should be deployed not where there are funds to pay for them but where there is a clear need for pastoral, preaching and sacramental ministry. It is a motion on which we have been slow to act, but perhaps the time has come for decisive action. The Conference could determine that the basis on which circuit assessments be paid changes so that no longer would a circuit be charged to cover the costs of the stipends of ministers stationed to them but would pay into the connexional payroll on a different basis. That basis could be the number of members, the value of investments, the social deprivation index for the context in which the churches are placed, or a combination of the three. Stationing matching would then be remodelled so that by a series of criteria each potential appointment was graded in terms of its connexional priority and those places where the need or opportunities were deemed greatest would be matched before others with a lower grading, regardless of how much the Circuit concerned paid for stipends. The much-vaunted ambition of our ministers to follow Mr Wesley's dictum and to 'go not to those who want (need) us but to those who want (need) us most' might then more clearly be realised.

- 2.10 As the 2017 report, *The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century* noted, “For Methodists connexionalism is not an abstract principle or a piece of historical baggage, but a way of being Christian”. The proposal in the previous paragraph might or might not gain traction, but it can help us to reflect whether or not the distribution of resources around the Connexion truly witnesses to a connexional principle as a way of being Christian. A first question for the Conference to consider, therefore, is ‘Has the time come radically to rethink the funding of stipends by assessing Circuits by criteria other than the number of ministers?’

3 A Different Presidency

- 3.1 One of the privileges of being Secretary of the Conference is working closely with the President and the Vice-President. The Connexion owes a particular debt of thanks to Richard Teal and Carolyn Lawrence and before them to Barbara Glasson and Clive Marsh for the way in which they have re-imagined the role at a time when the ministry of visitation has not been possible in the manner expected.
- 3.2 The President and Vice-President in 2021/2022 have, again, different expectations. Members of the Conference might have noticed that the usual Prayer Diary for the President and Vice-President has not been produced this year, though prayer cards have been circulated and the Methodist people have been urged to remember the President and Vice-President in their prayers and to inform those prayers from the updates on the website. The decision not to publish the diary as usual was symptomatic of the position that we have reached. The 2020/2021 President and Vice-President have been extraordinarily gracious in accepting invitations during the year to engage online with different parts of the Connexion; in some ways, the reach of digital visits has been greater than could have been achieved physically and the online initiatives (particularly the weekly Facebook Live) have enabled the President and Vice-President to connect with many around the Connexion in a previously unimagined way. The challenge for the Presidency going forward is how both to continue to offer the benefit of that reach and to resume a ministry of visitation physically.
- 3.3 It would be helpful to the Presidency for the Conference to reflect on that question and to offer some views. Whilst the 2021/2022 diary is now largely arranged, work will begin with those designated on how we make best use of the 2022/2023 Presidential year. In all this, the President and Vice-President represent the Conference and so the Conference’s thoughts on how it best connects through them with the Connexion, reflecting on the decisions of the Conference and their impact on the Circuits, hearing the joys and sorrows of the Connexion, and promoting the strategies that the Conference has approved for growing, evangelistic, inclusive, justice-seeking Church are invaluable.

62. Looking to the future

- 3.4 With such an unusual year for the presidency there have been many highlights of new digital engagements. They have had over 5,000 total engagements with weekly Facebook Lives with a reach of over 26,000 users. An average of over 245 engagements on Facebook with 17 video prayers released. Over 11,500 visits to the President and Vice-Presidents' blog and 450 calls since January to their free phone line reflection. Both Richard and Carolyn have participated in the Methodist Podcast and the two CDs that have been prepared by the Communications team.
- 3.5 There have been fourteen district and circuit visits, seven conferences or ecumenical meetings organised on Zoom to a number of Districts, Circuits, 3Generate, the Armed Forces, meetings with the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and with the Archbishops of York and Canterbury, the Parliamentary Covenant Service, and visits to the Queen's Foundation, Southlands College and the Tri-Service Chaplains' Conference. In addition, the President and Vice-President have attended a large number of connexional meetings online.
- 3.6 Alongside this new side of engagements, there have also been media interviews with Local Radio, columns in the *Methodist Recorder*, *Church Times* coverage including of ecumenical letters and statements that have been signed as well as national news on BBC Radio 4 and *the Guardian*.
- 3.7 A glance at the 2020/2021 Presidential diary indicates the way in which time that would have been taken travelling has often been used for online encounters. The diary has also been changed far more in the year than would normally be expected. What would usually be a very busy schedule travelling around the country meeting many people face-to-face has become a very busy schedule of digital engagement. In part, that was inevitable but the Presidency and the Secretariat are all too aware that the necessary response to changed circumstances after March 2020 is not the basis for a sustainable ministry in the future. The President and Vice-President for 2021/2022 and their successors will not be able to adapt as their immediate predecessors have and members of the Conference are asked to encourage those requesting or arranging Presidential visits to communicate with the Conference Office in good time (and no later than the March preceding the Presidential year).
- 3.8 There is now a delicate balance to be found between a return to the pattern of earlier Presidential years and a desire to retain the benefits of the digital engagement described in paragraph 3.4 above. 2021/22 will inevitably be something of a transitional year but shortly after the Conference work will begin on the 2022/23 diary. The Conference is therefore invited to reflect on the question 'How can the ministry of the Presidency offer the best of both a physical

presence and online engagement across the Connexion?’

4 One Part of Methodism

- 4.1 Just as much of our attention in the last year has been focused on the provisional resolutions in *God in love unites us*, so our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church have been wrestling with similar questions and exploring whether they need to organise themselves differently and separately where they cannot agree. We have watched and prayed with and for our Concordat partners in this difficult time and in doing so we have grown in the depth of our fellowship. At a time of change in the UK’s relationship with the rest of Europe, we particularly have much to celebrate in the strengthening of ties within the European Methodist Council where gatherings to share common concerns have become more frequent and enabled new levels of understanding.
- 4.2 Such watching and praying remind us of the richness, the complexity and the huge potential of the Methodist movement throughout the world. Our 170,000 members constitute but a small part of a global family of some 80 million Methodists. Many reports to the Conference have noted that the relationship of the British Connexion to the rest of the Methodist family is one that has had to change and develop. Difficult decisions that have been made about grant-funding because of our reduced resources do not detract from the commitment of Methodist Church in Britain, expressed through the work of the Global Relationships Committee and our partnership coordinators, to support, and to receive support from, Methodists in other parts of the world in mission within an evolving relationship.
- 4.3 It is a relationship that also sees increasing communities of Methodists from other Conferences and traditions in Britain. The sterling work of the Fellowship Groups and their Chaplains and other representatives of other language congregations has been invaluable in enabling Methodists from other parts of the globe both to feel part of Methodism here and to rejoice in their own traditions. Not all those who would call themselves Methodist from around the world, however, worship in churches that are part of the Methodist Church in Britain, as some from the global Methodist family worship in their own traditions.
- 4.4 Our brothers and sisters in the UMC remind us that they are used to living with multiple Methodist identities. The Union of 1932 may have caused us to be less cognisant of that, though the Methodist tradition in Britain has continued to be represented not only by the Methodist Church in Great Britain but also by (*inter alia*) the Wesleyan Reform Union and the Independent Methodists. Over the last two years, a small number of our ministers has explored ministry opportunities

62. Looking to the future

with The Free Methodist Church which has a growing presence in some parts of the country.

- 4.5 Bishop Rosemarie Wenner of the United Methodist Church, who is also the Geneva Secretary for the World Methodist Council, is continuing work that aims to support churches in countries that host congregations with origins in other parts of the world. A statement¹ (*God is on the move*) on this work was agreed at a consultation on Diaspora/migrant churches that was held by the World Methodist Council.
- 4.6 *God is on the move* includes a number of principles for host and migrant churches and calls on Methodists 'intentionally to practice hospitality between migrant churches and host country churches' and for host and migrant church to 'work together to enable new migrant churches to be supported by, and included in, the structure of accountability of the host Methodist connexion.'
- 4.7 The time might have come, therefore, to ask what it means to be one of a number of Methodist bodies in these islands and whether conversations with those who are also part of the broader Methodist tradition would be of value. A pan-Methodist colloquium, for example, might point us to areas of dialogue and a form of receptive ecumenism in which we all draw more deeply from the wells that have sustained us so that we can better share the Evangelical and Arminian message. So, another question for the Conference to explore is 'How can we express our Methodist identity in collaboration with others who bear the name Methodist in this context?' It is to be hoped that, where there are some instances where other Methodist traditions are maintained outside global Methodist agreements, opening conversations might lead to the hospitality and accountability for which the World Methodist Council principles call.
- 4.8 We have also talked about the Methodist family in recent years in relation to the Methodist charities, organisations that were once in a closer relationship to the Conference than they now are but which still represent the best of our tradition. Under the umbrella of this family, as it were, is a remarkable range of wisdom and experience from many decades of engagement with society: the expertise in childcare and family support offered by **Action for Children** drawing on a century and an half of experience (having been established in 1869 as the National Children's Home); the engagement with the most marginalised communities in the

1 World Methodist Council Consultation on Diaspora / Migrant Churches 3 to 6 June 2019: *God Is On The Move: A Call to Be the Church in a New Way*.

world through **All We Can** (originally the Methodist Relief and Development Fund) since the 1930s; the resourcing of worship and care for those engaged in leading worship and preaching through the successor bodies to LPMA: the **Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust (LWPT)** and **LWP Homes. Methodist Homes for the Aged (MHA)** has grown from its foundation in 1943 to be the UK's largest charity care provider, offering support and accommodation for older people in need. It is pertinent at a time of rebuilding after a national crisis and in an era of economic uncertainty to note how many of the Methodist charities were born out of the trauma of the Second World War, amongst them the **Methodist Ministers' Housing Service (MMHS)**, ensuring that those who sit down in our ministry are well accommodated in their retirement whatever their financial circumstances. Alongside the wisdom acquired through those decades is the ministry to seafarers and their families offered by the **Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest (QVSR)** since 1843. The 'umbrella' therefore gives us as a Connexion perhaps an unrivalled opportunity to continue to engage with the needs of the world and to draw on the wisdom of those who in different ways are serving our neighbours and tackling injustice.

- 4.9 The previous Secretary of the Conference initiated regular meetings with the CEOs of the Methodist charities and those of the Central Finance Board (CFB) and the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP). In those meetings, common concerns have been identified and wisdom shared. In addition, it is now practice for the Secretary of the Conference regularly to meet the CEOs one to one to listen to their concerns and to explore how links between the charity and the MCB might be strengthened. The media team has also ensured that representatives of the charities feature in the podcasts and their news is shared in the weekly Methodist News.
- 4.10 This past year has been exceptionally hard for MHA. They have had a high profile in the media in light of COVID-19 and like many organisations, they have had to face the constant reviewing and updating of guidelines from the government, changing patterns of working and what that has meant for the charity as it continues to serve those who need it. In all of this, they have kept residents and their relatives, staff and volunteers at the forefront. There has been some recent good news with the vaccine and this has enabled many doors to be reopened to relatives to visit loved ones after months of separation.
- 4.11 In response to the memorial to the 2020 Conference from the Nene Valley Circuit (23/23) the Secretary of the Conference has had conversations with both LWPT and LWP Homes and a meeting of both charities with the Secretary of the Conference should have taken place before the Conference to address the issues pertaining to them.

62. Looking to the future

- 4.12 The work of QVSR continues to expand and the Trustees of the Seamen's Rest are exploring how the charity can more clearly be identified as the Methodist work amongst seafarers. Again, the work of the charity through the pandemic has been extraordinary. The Conference will be delighted to note that Alexander Campbell, the CEO of QVSR, received an OBE in 2020.
- 4.13 All of the organisations are working hard in their own areas and the meetings have been hugely beneficial, not only in this past year and in the support that has been offered between them, but also in more collaborative working and an increased aim to build on these relationships and partnerships in working together more in the future. Only so much, however, can be done in the office of the Secretary of the Conference and the Conference might want to consider how Circuits better engage with the Methodist Charities. Three specific questions have emerged this year:
- 4.13.1 Where an MHA home exists in a Circuit, are there ways in which members in the Circuit can be informed of and help to meet the pastoral needs of the home?
 - 4.13.2 Are Circuits (and particularly Local Preachers' Meetings) aware of the separation of LWPT and LWP Homes and willing to engage with and support both?
 - 4.13.3 Have Circuits been enabled to engage with the *All We Can* strategy 2021-26?

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 The last year has changed us. Historians tell us that periods of pandemic often serve to accelerate changes that were already in train and much of the content of this report will reflect that. Some of the things that have stopped during this last year might not resume, but that may not be a bad thing. What we have to do is to recognise in all this what has changed for the better and to hang onto it. The Church has been given the opportunity to create a fresh approach in which we can target resources where they are needed the most, not just where they always have been in the past. The experience of the last twelve months may have helped to clarify for us what it means to be God's Methodist people in this place and this time.
- 5.2 However, it is a smaller Church that faces the future. We do not yet know the extent of the effects of the pandemic. The periods of closure will prove permanent for some smaller churches and this, along with declining numbers, can have a debilitating effect. It can sometimes cause us to forget how to grow and relearning how to grow can be taxing. There is always a tendency to be inward

rather than outward looking, especially as more is done simply to keep things going rather than to engage with wider society. However, to do that, to respond to this crisis by living for ourselves, would be to betray our Methodist heritage.

- 5.3 *Changing Patterns of Ministry* highlights the experience of many in ministry of 'feeling overwhelmed'. The different ways of working over the last fifteen months will have been exhausting for some but perhaps liberating for others. Grasping missional opportunities cannot mean adding yet more items to overloaded to-do lists or meeting agenda. The Ministries Team has done a great deal of work in recent years on ministerial wellbeing and it is vital that in the resumption of activities we do not forget as a Church all that we have learned about taking care of ourselves and each other.
- 5.4 Facing the reality of being a smaller Church need not make us fearful. The gospel tells us repeatedly that God's strength is made known in weakness and that it is by letting go of the old that we find new life. This means, of course, that difficult decisions lie ahead and that there are some things that we might want to do that we simply can no longer afford to do. The 'God for All' strategy which the Conference embraced enthusiastically last year identifies eight important areas for the Church to explore as we respond to and share the gospel in the 21st century. The strategy expands pathways that engage new missional practitioners in hybrid formats (combining in-person and digital dimensions) for learning and development. It values a 'mixed ecology' orientation: expecting the flourishing of diverse, contextual mission and ministry models rather than enforcing a 'one-size-fits-all' approach or pitting different models against each other. And crucially it places foundational strategic decisions about mission planning and funding at the local (district/circuit) level: ensuring that decision-making flows from missional readiness, not rushed urgency, encouraging honesty about available resources, and expecting sustained collaboration between Circuits and Districts to be bold, to dream, to pray, to plan, and to test ideas.
- 5.5 With the 'God for All' strategy restoring our confidence in sharing the Good News of Christ, with a Methodist Way of Life reforming us as faithful disciples, with the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity strategy guiding us truly to be an inclusive Church, with 'Walking with Micah: Methodist Principles for Social Justice' refining and articulating our passion for justice, with 'Love this Calling' enabling us more clearly to discern our common and individual vocations, with confidence in our understanding of Ministry in our statement for adoption ('Ministry in the Methodist Church') and the flexibility of *Changing Patterns*, with reforms in oversight and trusteeship reducing our bureaucracy and enabling us better to discharge our responsibilities, with a strategic approach to our property, with honest, mutually supportive, and mission-focused relationships with our global and ecumenical

62. Looking to the future

partners, and with (always and most importantly) the faithful prayer and witness of Methodists in Local Church, Circuit and District, there are many reasons for this smaller Church to be confident and excited about its future place in God's mission to God's world.

- 5.6 So as we think about what it means to be God's Methodist people in this place and this time, the Conference is asked to reflect on these questions:
- 5.6.1 Has the time come radically to rethink the funding of stipends by assessing Circuits by criteria other than the number of ministers?
 - 5.6.2 How can the ministry of the Presidency offer the best of both a physical presence and online engagement across the Connexion (and how will that be supported)?
 - 5.6.3 How can we best express our Methodist identity in collaboration with others who bear the name Methodist in these islands and this context?
 - 5.6.4 How can we better witness to what we believe with and through the Methodist family of charities?
- 5.7 The Presidential theme, chosen before the pandemic, has been writ large this year. We live through these testing times as a Church that is ever more aware of its dependence on God. Whether the numbers go up or down, whatever our structures are, however much we meet in person or online, in the ways in which we need to interpret the Good News for different socio-economic circumstances, we continue to hold the (reported) last words of John Wesley: 'The best of all is, God is with us.' The Church that does that is a Church ready to face the future.

***RESOLUTIONS

62/1. The Conference receives the Report.

62/2. The Conference commends the report and a record of its conversation about it to the Council for further deliberation and action.