

Priorities for the Methodist Church

(Report of the “*Where are we heading?*” consultation process)

1. Summary of the key resources to which this report refers

Our Calling:

The Church exists to:

- Increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love
- Help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care
- Become a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice
- Make more followers of Jesus Christ

Priorities for the Methodist Church:

In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church

As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:

Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer

Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide

Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Encouraging fresh ways of being Church

Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible

2. Introduction: the consultation process

In October 2003 the Methodist Council issued a consultation document which was widely circulated throughout the Connexion. It was entitled “*Where are we heading?*” The consultation document had emerged from initial conversations during the connexional year 2002-03 in the Council, in many other groups and in an open session of the 2003 Conference. A large number and wide range of responses to the consultation document were returned by the 10th March 2004, for which the Conference expresses its gratitude. They showed widespread support for the Methodist Council's proposals. The responses are summarised in Appendix 1.

3. Setting the scene

- The Methodist Church has stated its purpose in these words: “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” (1996).

(This builds on the foundational statement of the Deed of Union, that ‘in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith’.)

3.2 The Church has committed itself to a wide-ranging understanding of “mission”; it includes (1996):

- telling the good news of Jesus;
- calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and to Christian discipleship;
- caring for individual people and communities;
- sharing in the task of education and social and spiritual development;
- struggling for a just world;
- being alongside the poor;
- becoming friends with people of different cultures and faiths;
- caring for the earth;
- building partnerships with other Churches and other groups who share some of our mission aims.

3.3 The Church will always honour initiatives relating to any of the many aspects of its mission, encourage commitment to them and pray for their success. Who can tell how God will draw particular individuals or groups, with their distinctive gifts and working in particular contexts, to bear their witness and pursue their discipleship? The Church is a fascinating mosaic of diverse mission tasks, the sum of which can never be fully counted.

3.4 The majority of mission activities are linked to local churches, where people gather to worship and pray, to grow in faith and to develop mutual care. In 2000 the Conference adopted the *Our Calling*

process: a basic framework of inter-related, fundamental concerns and a pattern of annual review which is consonant with the purpose of the Methodist Church. It is designed primarily to help local churches. Thus, the Church exists to:

- Increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love
- Help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care
- Become a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice
- Make more followers of Jesus Christ

The consultation process (Appendix 1) illustrates the degree to which the *Our Calling* process has penetrated into the self-understanding and practice of local churches over the last four years. Where the *Our Calling* process, or something akin to it, has become a regular part of a church's life, church members have become much more aware of a number of important perspectives:

Local churches do not have to perpetuate what they have always done or continue to do things in the way they have always done them.

Local churches have become clearer in distinguishing activities which are central to the church's worship and mission from those which are peripheral.

Local churches have become more aware of where their strengths and weaknesses lie, as their life is assessed against the *Our Calling* themes.

Congregations have increasingly recognised that they may be authentic churches but that they cannot do everything that may be implied by the *Our Calling* themes.

Local churches have therefore become much more confident in agreeing together priorities in developing their worship and mission. Local churches know better than a Circuit or District ever can the details of their social context; and they know well the people who are available to do the work of God in that situation, utilising their experience and gifts. They have therefore brought together resources, commitment and imagination to take agreed initiatives, or to attempt core Christian responsibilities in new ways. *"The Buzz"* (circulated monthly by e-mail) provides stories which celebrate both small changes in local churches and large and risky projects, in response to each of the *Our Calling* themes

Local churches, bolder in reviewing what they have always done, adapting it, doing it differently or initiating new ventures, have increasingly taken a longer view of the changes they would love to see in their worship and mission. So the challenge has become one of vision: where do we want to be as a Church in five years' time? What steps have we to take to get from where we are to what we believe God is calling us to become? Once these questions are entertained, the challenge of good leadership is never far away.

The sort of review and vision-setting processes sketched above have rekindled an interest in connexionalism and partnership. If a local church cannot be entire and complete in itself - though it can

certainly be authentic and valid, a true focus of worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism - it can develop partnerships with other Methodist churches in the Circuit and with ecumenical partners. If its stimulating ideas for mission need resources, it can call upon Circuit, District and connexional help. If it has a good story to tell, it can encourage other churches.

3.5 Not all local churches have yet entered into the transforming culture sketched above. They may be living off the “spiritual capital” of earlier generations and doing their traditional things very well indeed. Some have closed themselves off from the possibilities of change, or from creative engagement with their local communities. So we hear of churches in “maintenance mode” or enveloped in what is sometimes called “chapel culture”.

3.6 In 2000 the Conference provided the *Our Calling* process as a tool for review, for focusing on priorities and for the release of creativity, not just for local churches but for the Connexion as a whole. In differing degrees it has begun to re-shape the self-understanding of Circuits as the principal units of mission within the Connexion. Consequently Circuits have started to take a more strategic approach to their resource needs and their resource deployment. This in turn is encouraging Circuits in many places to look towards co-operation across Circuit boundaries. The *Our Calling* process has also influenced the role of Districts. It has become a key component of the self-understanding of the Connexional Team, whose principal strategic goal in the period 2000-04 (now 2005) has been:

To promote and support the Our Calling process throughout the Methodist Church and liaise with the Districts about its progress.

3.7 The Our Calling process remains the basic framework and process through which the Methodist Church in Britain, in all its aspects (local churches, Circuits, Districts and connexional bodies) will express its purpose in obedience to the challenges and guiding of the Holy Spirit.

3.8 The Conference now listens to the insistent demands that are emerging from beacons of hope and creativity in the Connexion and from the thoughtful prayers of God's people - to “do things differently”, to try new initiatives, to confront profound questions and challenges in contemporary society in the name of the gospel and to clarify our vision as a Connexion of where we are heading — and affirms Priorities for the Methodist Church for the next few years.

4. Priorities for the Methodist Church

The Conference is invited to take one step back from the release of energy and creativity inspired by the Our Calling process.

Are there challenges and imperatives of great importance which are shared issues right across the Connexion?

The outcome of the consultation process makes it clear that there are. In whatever context local churches and Circuits are set, in and through the attempts to apply Our Calling locally, some common concerns have been identified . We need to help one another throughout the Church to address these concerns.

If we do not together give concentrated attention to these shared challenges and imperatives, we shall fail as a connexional Church to support the rich and diverse local expressions of worship and mission which are the throbbing heart of the Church in congregations and Circuits.

Conversely, if we pull together in addressing these shared concerns — Circuits and Districts, local churches and the Connexional Team — we shall discover a strong sense of journeying together, and confidently, into the early decades of the twenty-first century. We shall know where we are heading. (See Appendix 2 for more detail on this theme.)

These shared challenges and imperatives thus become Priorities for the Methodist Church . In summary they may be expressed like this:

In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church

As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:

Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer

Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide

Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Encouraging fresh ways of being Church

Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible

5. How do we understand the Priorities for the Methodist Church ?

5.1 Adopting the Priorities for the Methodist Church is a commitment to a journey rather than subscription to settled ideas or particular programmes. We have to help one another over the coming years to explore ever more deeply, in all sorts of settings, the meanings and implications of each of the Priorities for the Methodist Church . Certainly there are challenges here to theological study as well as to the development of practical projects. We will pray for and expect a “thousand flowers to bloom” from these short seminal sentences. But we know enough to make a difference straight away! And we can start dreaming dreams of what might become possible.

5.2 The richest understandings of the Priorities for the Methodist Church and the deepest challenges to the way we communicate our faith in word and action will come from taking seriously the context in which we are set in twenty-first century Britain. It is impossible to grasp fully the diversity of cultures

that make up contemporary society or the rapid changes in culture that are taking place. It is not necessary to wait for the elusive goal of a comprehensive understanding of the world in which we are called to be disciples and witnesses. But helping one another to understand more deeply what is happening in us and around us is integral to the development of the Priorities for the Methodist Church in the coming years. Ours is a contextualised mission. Our faith is that God - the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ - is present and active in every facet of society and is calling us to follow where the Spirit leads. Whatever may be the details of the social, political and economic situations in which we live, in particular places and organisations, some general themes are likely always to demand our attention. Such as:

The scandalous disparity between rich and poor in the world

Deep-seated prejudices - racism, sexism, ageism, and the like

The ephemeral and unpredictable nature of human commitments

The widespread sense of meaninglessness

The challenges of a multi-faith society

The confusions in personal identity

Distrust of all authority

The threats of violence and terrorism

Rapid changes in technology and the media of communication

The adulation of celebrity personalities and consumerism

The dangers of environmental pollution

5.3 In the midst of all this change and confusion our central and overriding concern is the reality of God . How is “the Gospel of God's love in Christ” to be heard in contemporary society in a way that is both true to the revelation in the scriptures and persuasive, attractive and life-changing to modern women and men? What words and metaphors shall we use to elicit awareness of God's grace? How do we recover confidence in God's love for all when the circumstances of so many of our contemporaries are so hard to understand or empathise with? How do we deepen our own trust in God when difficult questions have to be faced day by day, when relationships break down, or when disappointments break our hearts? Can we really find joy and confidence and creativity through God's Spirit in our hearts when so much about God's Church feels like a burden or trivialises life's challenges, or dismisses our day-to-day concerns as of little account? How indeed do we find God afresh and give our hearts to God in daily life - at work, in the family and local community, in the political debates provoked by everyday events? Are we willing (shaped as we are by the values of our society) to stand alongside the poorest and most vulnerable members of our community and work with them for their betterment and for social justice?

Are we able to break out of inward-looking church life to make friendships and to speak of God and of faith with people we meet in secular and multi-faith settings?

5.4 To stimulate further reflection on the Priorities for the Methodist Church, some notes are included here, both from the Methodist Council consultation document "Where are we heading?" and from the responses received.

(i) **In partnership with others wherever possible.** Partners will include: Methodist Churches throughout the world; ecumenical partners; Christian agencies; and secular organisations. In respect of "ecumenical partners", much reference is made to developing rapidly and consistently the implications of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant signed with the Church of England on the 1st November 2003. The joint pastoral strategy with the United Reformed Church is also important. Many Methodist churches who are in local ecumenical partnerships with the URC looked simultaneously at "Where are we heading?" and the URC equivalent consultation document "Catching the Vision", noted their similarity, regretted that there was not already one document being consulted on for both Churches and urged us to implement our shared vision together.

(ii) **To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church.** There was overwhelming support for this as the key priority for the Church. At the same time, in the wording which was circulated for consultation (which included 'recapture' and 're-build' - see Appendix 1), it was controversial. Some were offended by the suggestion that all Methodist churches have lost their core convictions about God and confidence in God; or no longer share a universal vision. So it needs to be made clear that the Methodist Council was intending no such offence, nor was it in any way belittling the faith and commitment of Methodist people. Indeed, the Council and the Conference comprise people of deep faith and broad vision. The wording has been amended in the light of these helpful comments.

However, the force and significance of this key priority must not be blunted. The depth of the challenge the Church faces is illuminated by reflection on some stark realities:

The institutional Churches in Europe, including the Methodist Church in Britain, have been in numerical decline for a long while, and have reached a critical point where large changes are necessary if we are to recover confidence as a movement for transformation in society.

The National Church Life Survey (2001) sharply described the Methodist Church as it is and illuminated the mismatch between what we aspire to be and what we achieve. For instance, we long to communicate the gospel to all, but in fact our age profile is heavily weighted to the higher end of the age spectrum, raising questions about our capacity to engage children, young people and people in their 20s and 30s.

People with energy, enthusiasm and vision, who want to experiment and take risks in developing new forms of worship and mission, regularly report that the traditional church structures are fearful of change or discouraging, curled in on themselves and able to consider only the faithful maintenance of the way things have always been.

The changes in society and the insistent questions put to Christian faith by thinking people have proved to be profoundly unsettling, so that churches have become refuges from the world instead of places where energy and confidence are rediscovered for creative engagement with everyday life in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Methodist Council suggested a small number of implications latent in this first priority: “We therefore need to work creatively to:

Bring the Bible alive to ourselves and to our contemporary world;

Provide safe and loving places in which to share honestly the deepest concerns and questions of our lives, to become vulnerable to one another, supportive of one another and challenging of one another;

Develop renewed confidence in connecting faith with work and everyday life.”

All these - and many more such themes - will need attention in the next few years, building on what is already available but concentrating much of our “learning and caring” on these challenges.

(iii) Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer . The replies to the consultation confirm this to be the theme which requires deepest attention. It flows immediately out of the key priority referred to in the previous section, and sets the theme for all that follow. Thus the central question of God, and response to God, flow through the Priorities for the Methodist Church from start to finish. All that we say and do as disciples, dispersed in everyday life or gathered together in fellowship, must be open to God's grace and energised by God's Spirit. God's love casts out all fear and enables us to trust God whenever we seek God and seek to serve God.

Imagination, flexibility and varieties of style in worship services are now urgent concerns. So are the quality of worship and the care with which it is prepared - whatever the style. There is a need to look afresh at participation in worship, so that the breadth of human experience - joys and sorrows, successes and failures, conventional feelings and also troubling doubts and fears - are prayerfully placed within the mercy of God.

(iv) Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide. Few notes may be necessary here, but they are of great significance.

We cannot but continue and deepen our “mission alongside the poor”: it sustains something fundamental to Methodist identity.

This is manifestly a global commitment and demonstrates the interdependence of British society and nations in distress in many parts of the world.

Theologically this dimension of our mission confronts us sharply with the challenge of the cross of Christ. Do we allow the gospel effectively to question the life-style choices, the pursuit of power and the “culture of contentment” that prosperity has brought us? Are we committed, to the point of self-

sacrifice, to the ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking in situations where conflicts and violence are aggravated by disparities of wealth and opportunity?

(v) **Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved.** Once again, if there are few notes here, it is not an indication of disinterest or complacency. On the contrary, it is recognised everywhere in the Church that if we need help with any of the Our Calling themes more than the others, it is with this one. And yet we know we are nothing as a Methodist movement without recovering our confidence and skill precisely here. As with “mission alongside the poor”, commitment to evangelism is a distinctive mark of the Methodist way of being Christian. So strategies for evangelism, training for evangelism and sharing good stories of inventive presentations of the gospel story (using Creative Arts, developing a new vocabulary, and encouraging rigorous intellectual approaches to contemporary knowledge and secular philosophies) will be of paramount concern.

(vi) **Encouraging fresh expressions of Church** . For many correspondents the phrase “new ways of being Church” which was used in the “Where Are We Heading?” material caused confusion. What does it mean? Is it more than a piece of jargon? During the period of consultation on “Where are we heading?” , the Church of England produced a valuable resource which will help us to grasp the scope of what might be entailed in “new ways of being Church”. It is A Mission Shaped Church (2004).

Some correspondents expressed concern about the relationship between “new ways of being Church” and the refreshment of traditional ways of being Church. Both are necessary: the innovative, provisional and exploratory attempts to express corporate Christian worship and mission (“new ways of being Church”) and “traditional” forms of Christian fellowship, worship and mission (with the latter being renewed in hope through the Spirit's power). The phrase now used in the priorities - **fresh expressions of church** — better expresses the commitment both to new ways of being Church and to the refreshment and renewal of the traditional. Indeed one of the urgent challenges is the networking between the two, to mutual advantage - especially when the new way of being Church is routinely ecumenical and the traditional form of Church is typically denominational.

Other correspondents have expressed concern about the identity of some new ways of being Church. How can we be sure that they are genuinely an expression of what we mean theologically by “Church”, when they are so different from traditional churches in activity and aspiration, in leadership and spirituality? It may be useful to refer again at this point to the Methodist Church's Statement of Purpose and the themes of Our Calling (3.1-4 above): they set a simple template against which diverse interpretations of what “Church” means may be assessed. A comprehensive source to refer to on this matter is the Conference Report Called to Love and Praise .

But even if there is mutual recognition as churches between traditional and new ways of being Church, there is no doubt that in the coming years a great deal of work will be required to look afresh at what in traditional church we call “faith and order” questions, to enable the Conference both to affirm and to learn from “new ways of being Church”, within an ever-broadening understanding of “Connexion”.

(vii) **Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible.** The consultation document hinted at what may be involved here: we want “to become the sort of community where:

We concentrate on people and relationships and value everyone

We strive to release the gifts and talents of individuals and encourage their use

We help one another to deepen commitment , expect lives to be transformed and empower faith sharing (including, however, the expression of doubts)

We are tolerant of different views within the Christian family

We cope with change confidently and support people who take risks for the sake of the Church's mission”.

Maybe unhelpfully the consultation document referred here to a “new” culture in the Church. Many correspondents reminded us that this has always been the sort of culture we have aspired to and which God in Christ both requires and empowers.

On the other hand, it is a moot point whether we have ever achieved our ambition here. In the present consultation it has been frequently reported that our systems and procedures, our institutional frame of mind, readily deflect us from our aims. So instead of local churches flourishing by discerning and using the multitude of gifts among their members, they become somewhat atrophied by ‘shoehorning’ people into fixed roles where they cannot easily play to their strengths.

In addition, there is throughout the Connexion an anxiety about the impact of an “over-managerial” approach to church administration - as opposed to a “pastoral” approach. Of course, in practice situations are much more complex than these analyses suggest. But this Connexional Priority indicates commitment to a vision of how in every Christian community, and in all aspects of connexional life, we help one another to grow and learn as Christians, honouring the amazing potential of every individual as a channel of God's grace and wisdom.

The phrase “tolerant of different views within the Christian family” is a focus for many issues.

Some correspondents wrote about the need for limits to toleration in the Church. Everything must be tested against the truth of the gospel. In a diverse Church there are many interpretations of the gospel, as there are many understandings of the authority of the scriptures. So debates about the meaning of faith, tradition and experience are part of our ongoing ‘Methodist way’ of being Church.

Some correspondents expressed concern about the voices that are rarely heard or that are marginalized in the Church: the voices of ethnic minorities, for example. Racial justice within the Christian community, with empowerment of black and Asian voices in the Church, is an integral part of the wider struggle in British society to root out racist talk and behaviour, and institutional racism.

Participation in the Church by children, young people and adults under 40 has been mentioned frequently. It is an area of great concern, to be vigorously and consistently addressed. Without doubt

children, young people and adults under 40 can make distinctive contributions to all aspects of the Priorities for the Methodist Church , and must be empowered to do so. And there are seamless links from the ministry of younger people in the Church to a radical re-think of the Church's mission and strategies for engaging effectively with students in schools, FE and HE, and with younger people at work.

6. Conclusion

The Methodist Church in Britain is ready for change. We sense in many places signals of hope, a willingness to take risks and creative actions inspired by the gospel. We can re-group our resources and make a difference, especially in partnership with others. We can glimpse a shared vision of God's action in the world and feel again the compulsion of sharing in God's mission. We are beginning to enjoy again the strength and encouragement that come from pulling together across the Connexion and rediscovering our connexionalism. Long-standing problems are no longer being avoided but are being tackled with energy and imagination. God's Spirit is re-building our confidence.

But we cannot do everything. Each local church must sharpen its missionary vocation, appropriate to its context, inspired by the Our Calling process or an equivalent system of review. Circuits too and Districts, along with connexional bodies, are refocusing on their mission, grasping opportunities and confronting or working round obstacles. Structures and systems, including those which have served us well for generations, are now under scrutiny. Methodists are increasingly aware that if we simply continue as we are, our systems and structures will come under ever greater pressure and our sense of being a stretched, exhausted and marginal institution will increase. We need structures and systems which facilitate mission and do not thwart it. We are learning to be more courageous in setting priorities - and by implication, saying "no" to other options.

In this environment we have identified through prayerful conversation and consultation our Priorities for the Methodist Church - shared and urgent claims on us in every part of the Church, as we take stock of Our Calling at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When the Conference has adopted the Priorities for the Methodist Church , churches, Districts, the Connexional Team and Circuits can exercise their decision-making powers to make their own contribution to the outworking of the Priorities for the Methodist Church . And in learning from one another, we shall journey purposefully together where God guides us.

*****Resolutions**

1. The Conference receives the Report.
2. The Conference adopts the Priorities for the Methodist Church in section 1 of the Report.
3. The Conference directs the Methodist Council to work with the Connexional Team to bring to the Conference of 2005 a Strategic Plan for the Team covering the period 2005-08 which is developed with Priorities for the Methodist Church as its principal focus.
4. The Conference invites Districts, Circuits and local churches to make their contribution to the outworking of Priorities for the Methodist Church as they shape their own mission.

APPENDIX 1

Analysis of the replies to the consultation document *Where are We Heading ?*

555 replies were received to the questionnaire. Of these, 106 were certainly from groups, of varying sizes. In the case of 121 responses to the questionnaire, it was uncertain whether they came from an individual or a group. In the remaining 328 cases the replies were certainly from individuals.

Is your church using the *Our Calling* process to help you move forward?

Yes 418

No 114

The heart of the challenge we face: 'We need to recapture a conviction of God's love for us and for all the world, and re-build confidence in God.' Does this statement ring bells with you?

Yes 473

No 45

Urgent needs: do you sympathise in general terms with the following priorities?

Develop confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Strongly 392 Moderately 134 Not really 17

Encourage new ways of being Church

Strongly 315 Moderately 187 Not really 27

Support community development and social action, especially among the most deprived and poor — in Britain and world-wide

Strongly 412 Moderately 138 Not really 5

Re-build confidence in worship and prayer

Strongly 483 Moderately 63 Not really 5

Nurture a new culture in the Church

Strongly 333 Moderately 116 Not really 53

In addition to the above questionnaire responses, 96 letters, extended reflections, mini-theses and a poem were received. There has not been opportunity to acknowledge all these or respond in depth to them.

This is a place to express our thanks to all who contributed to the consultation.

The Report is informed also by workshops, groups and conversations that have been held throughout the Connexion, on at least a weekly basis throughout this connexional year.

APPENDIX 2

What will be involved in the Conference adopting Priorities for the Methodist Church ?

1 The Connexional Team is to present to the Conference of 2005 a Strategic Plan for its work for the period 2005-08. Granted that the Connexional Team has regulatory functions to fulfil on behalf of the Conference and granted that the Connexional Team provides a range of services, standards and monitoring processes which are done most effectively and efficiently at connexional level, the Team will develop its work with Priorities of the Methodist Church as the principal focus. In every appropriate way the Connexional Team will provide resources, leadership and co-ordination for the whole Church, with the Priorities of the Methodist Church always in view.

2 The Districts have immense resources and opportunities to develop insights into the Priorities of the Methodist Church and to encourage their application. The Districts are the best judges of the mission challenges in their areas. They will develop their strategic plans in the light of their unique knowledge of local and regional contexts, of ecumenical and other partnership possibilities. But as they constantly review District priorities and strategic commitments, they will be influenced by the Priorities of the Methodist Church .

3 The Connexional Team and the Districts will need to work collaboratively to advocate the importance throughout the Church of the Priorities of the Methodist Church , and to inform and challenge one another. For example, Team and Districts need one another to improve communication throughout the Connexion, to spread good practice and stimulate the vision of new possibilities for Christian presence and Christian mission. Team and Districts need to support one another in sticking to agreed Priorities of the Methodist Church when all sorts of distractions or crises might lead to loss of heart or confusion of vision.

4 Whether in the Connexional Team or the Districts, talk of “priorities” entails making hard choices. To give priority to one theme involves reducing or removing commitment to another. To agree priorities means that we set a limit to the activities to which scarce connexional resources are allocated. One of the hardest challenges implicit in adopting Priorities of the Methodist Church is saying “no” to admirable projects which are not priorities and giving up some things in order to release additional resources for the Priorities of the Methodist Church .

5 To concentrate on Priorities of the Methodist Church involves confronting obstacles which block progress in putting them into practice. In other words, we shall have to face many consequential changes. Over the next few years the Church will need to identify these and in an orderly way address them. They will include:

A review of the role of buildings (Are they resources for worship and mission? Are they a hindrance to mission? Can buildings be adapted to become “fit for purpose”?)

A critical examination of procedures (Are they too bureaucratic? Are they always necessary?)

A reflection on how ministers and deacons are best trained, deployed, supported and held to account

An assessment of the financial resources of the Church and how they can be used where they are most needed

A review of Circuit and District boundaries to ensure the most effective sharing of resources and the most appropriate areas within which to develop a strategic approach to mission.

Energy will need to be applied locally as well as connexionally to engage constructively with issues like these. And such matters need to be confronted, dealt with or worked round whenever an initiative is taken locally to develop one or more of the *Priorities of the Methodist Church*. So, for example, a desire to develop worship patterns in a particular church will raise questions about training, equipment, the decor and flexibility of available rooms, timing and the focus of advocacy and publicity.

6 While the Connexional Team will be committing itself to the *Priorities of the Methodist Church* in the first instance for the three years 2005-08, it is unlikely that the *Priorities of the Methodist Church* will be less urgent in 2008 than they are today. The Conference will have to review the *Priorities of the Methodist Church* from time to time in the light of experience. But it might be wise to recognise that in adopting the *Priorities of the Methodist Church* in 2004, the Conference will need to commit itself to them (however modified from time to time) for at least the rest of the decade.