

## **Mission and Ministry in Covenant**

In a slightly odd twist to the Conference Agenda, we were sent this paper separately, invited to discuss it in large 'workshop' groups, without any further discussion or resolutions. Formal proposals are to be brought to the 2018 Conference, but I wonder how much notice will be taken of the fairly robust commentary that seemed to come from most groups?

The paper proposes a way forward for the interchangeability of all ministries between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, and specifically attempts to address the differing views of apostolic succession and oversight in the two churches. Whilst the CofE would need to accept that such 'oversight' is held within the Conference, the Methodist Church would need to be prepared to accept a more personal expression in the form of a President-Bishop. The latter would be brought about by an Anglican Bishop being present along with other Methodist Presbyters to lay hands on the appointed person. Successive President-Bishops would be appointed in a similar way, with a predecessor also being present. Despite the theological and functional explanations, for many this still appeared to be the suggestion that only the presence of an Anglican Bishop would really make a connection with apostolic succession.

## **Professional Supervision for Ministers**

The Methodist Conference, has confirmed that supervision is to be introduced for its ordained ministers. This new programme of one-to-one support is the first of its kind within a UK Christian denomination.

Supervision was recommended within the Methodist Church's Past Cases Review (2015) to increase support and accountability for safe practice and provide vital pastoral care to value and nurture ministers while ensuring their well-being.

A study by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre in 2012 reported that one of the most effective safeguards within organisations and professional settings is the frequent, open and supportive supervision of staff.

Supervision will take place within the Methodist District framework. Chairs, Superintendents and those nominated to undertake the supervision, will all receive appropriate training. Within the Methodist Church the supervision will take place at six one-to-one meetings throughout the year. It is intended for all ministers to have been in supervision for at least six months by 2020.

Conference adopted the interim policy on supervision to cover the period of implementation 2017-2020. This policy has been informed by the lessons learned from the pilot phase conducted with the Liverpool and South East Districts and the Chairs of Districts. At the end of the introductory period the learning from this phase will inform the Final Supervision Policy.

### **Past Cases Review Implementation Group**

Conference was updated on the work of the Past Cases Review Implementation Group (PCRIG). The group has worked to oversee the implementation of the 23 recommendations of the report *Courage, Cost and Hope* received by the 2015

Conference. The report called for a culture change towards safeguarding in the Church. Selection criteria for senior leaders in the Church now include awareness of and ability to deal effectively with safeguarding issues. There is to be policy and guidance to define what should be recorded by ministers and others undertaking pastoral work, although the Conference was told that this did not include pastoral visitors. This guidance will be placed on the Methodist Church website.

The issues of Initial Ministerial Formation and a Code of Conduct for - and structured supervision of - ministers were addressed here and also elsewhere in the Conference Agenda. The work of the PCRIG is now complete and the Safeguarding Committee is the body charged with continuing to monitor this work. The terms of reference and membership of this Committee are to be reviewed by the Methodist Council to ensure that the Committee is best placed to support the ongoing work of ensuring a safer Church for all.

## **Methodist Council**

There was a lot to report from the Methodist Council at Conference which reflects how much work has been carried out this year. Here are a few of the issues which stimulated interest and discussion:

- The reshaping of the Yorkshire Districts – there was a notice of motion to try to amend the naming of the Yorkshire West District as some felt that it should include North Yorkshire in the name but this was lost. It was felt that there had already been extensive consultation on this matter and that the names proposed for the new districts should remain as they are.

- Ministerial Code of Conduct – a draft of the code was presented to Conference and it was agreed to commend the draft for widespread consultation across the Connexion. The code seeks to remind ministers of ‘the exemplary standards of behaviour which befit their calling as representative people.’
- The ‘Issues of Pornography Working Group’ are planning to produce resource materials to help people engage with the issues involved appropriate to different age ranges.
- Regrouping for Mission – it was noted that the process has been largely positive but has not had a significant impact on membership which continues to decline. The research points to ‘mission as the key area where Methodism now needs to focus.’ Laurence Graham (President of Methodist Church in Ireland) reminded us that ‘normal Methodist church should be people meeting Jesus and growing in their faith.’ Some of the discussion as part of Statistics in Mission followed on from this theme.
- Racial justice and inclusion – everyone was encouraged to make use of the EDI toolkit which can be found online.

Just a reminder that all the Methodist Council papers and minutes can be found on the Methodist Church website if anyone is interested in finding out more detail about any aspect of their work.

### **Statistics for Mission**

The Statistics for Mission report (formerly known as ‘membership statistics’) is now presented to the Conference every three years, and this was the year. It made depressing

reading and it would be fair to say that it cast a long, dark shadow across the rest of Conference. So many of the other reports were seen in the light, or in the shadow, of this.

The bare bones of the statistics can be seen in detail online but the simple fact is that, since the last report in 2014, membership numbers have fallen by around 6,780, or 3.6% year-on-year. Over the ten year period from 2006 to 2016 membership has fallen from 262,972 to 188,398 – an average of 3.5% year on year. For those who are interested in such trends – total membership in 1976 was 528,370 compared with 188,398 today. In 1910 it was 841,000!

Whilst 350 churches are growing, the rest are in decline, sometimes rapid decline. We are not making members and we are losing those that we have. 45% of our losses are because we fail to hold onto those who once worshipped with us. Attendance at worship has been falling by around 7,500 per year for the last three years. Teenage attendance is less than half what it was in 2006 and pre-school attendance is down by nearly three quarters.

Of course, a very significant number of people attend a whole variety of activities which local Methodist churches offer to their communities but the majority of these people never move from these activities into the worshipping community of the local church.

At Conference we met in District groups to consider our own District figures and those of another District – ours was Chester & Stoke. No one had a eureka moment! But a number of things became clear: the church of tomorrow is going to look

very different from the church of yesterday; if we keep doing the same things we are likely to get the same results and all our best efforts will not be enough; we need God to do something.

It was this conviction which led the Conference to pass a resolution calling the Methodist people to prayer and fasting for renewal in the church and revival in this land. It was proposed and seconded by members of our own District and the President is to write to every church commending it for the beginning of the new Connexional year.

## **Finance**

Changes in accounting practices means that the financial year 2015-16 was a complicated as the previous year's accounts had to be restated, new items included and the figures rearranged in different ways.

The Connexional Team finances showed a very small surplus but this was generated by an increase in the value of investments. In cash terms, the Team had overspent by nearly £3m, mainly on the work of the Team, grants to overseas churches and grants for work both national and local in our nations and islands. This was part of a policy to reduce reserves.

The Conference reinforced the point that all lay employees should be offered a pension and this backs up the auto-enrolment requirements that the Government has legislated for. The Conference expects every employer to contribute 6% of salary to a lay employee's pension fund, with the employee contributing at least 2%.

## **Connexionalism - a gift to the church**

During the conversation on the report on Connexionalism, Revd. Peter Hancock (Chair of the Northampton District) said, 'Real Connexionalism implies a dynamic, not static understanding of 'the Connexion''.

The Methodist Church is a connexional church. Being part of the Connexion goes deep in the story of the shaping and ongoing work of the Methodist Church, although it can be seen as something of a mystery to other church traditions. Being a connexional church means looking beyond our individual congregations to a wider network of Christians who are Methodists who, through our discipleship, are seeking ways of sharing faith in today's world. This allows us to have both a local and a national emphasis in our prophetic, pastoral, preaching and missional ministry.

The report and the conversation at Conference raised many issues as to how we understand, celebrate, challenge and develop our sense of Connexionalism in today's mixed economy church. While this will be a challenge, the report to Conference gives us the opportunity to re-engage with the conversation about the shape of the Methodist Church for the present and the future.

If we are to engage with meaningful mission plans, explore new opportunities and get our people excited about faith again, then we will need a framework in which we can share ideas, develop faith and celebrate hope. The Connexion has served us well in this but, in a changing world, we need to redefine what it is to be part of the Church in our particular cultural context in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This means that we take the experience of what it is to be 'connexional' and redefine it 'to serve the present age'.

To be a connexional church celebrates diversity; gives strength through prayer and mission; engages us in theological debate; gives us a framework for worship and witness. The Connexion has served us well but now is the time to rethink it so that we can continue to live in the richness of the gifts that being connexion bring us.

The conversation which was begun by those who brought the report - and our continuing conversation about it - will shape how we see the Methodist Church developing in the present and the future.



# **Plymouth & Exeter District**

of the Methodist Church

# ***2017 Conference Paragraphs***

Written by members of the Conference Team