

Plymouth and Exeter District Synod

Methodist Conference

Some reflections

Is the conference the pinnacle of the church? Yes and no – each member of the methodist church is important no matter where we meet, in conference, synods, circuits or local churches as we are all part of the Methodist Connexion – we have all got something to say about how our faith involves us in the world and in the Church.

The Methodist Conference met in Birmingham – it was a steady Conference - no one got terribly excited until the last day when lots of things seemed to happen all at once which was a pity as we did not have time to discuss these matters properly – but that is the way of all such gatherings.

We talked of many things... we got into groups and talked about the Covenant with the Church of England which produced lots of heat and some light, we talked about being part of a connexional church which to me is vitally significant as it talks about every member ministry, but isn't on the radar of others who see church in different ways – but of course it is not and either/or – it is an and/both... and that is the joy of conversation at conference – we are all Methodists but we all have different experience, different expertise and we all are passionate about the way that God is doing mission in the 21st Century in and through our denomination.

As always at Conference there is structured and unstructured time, there are times of deep significance and times when the conference becomes rather more introverted – but the all the time there is a deeply held conviction that we are talking about as the old agendas put it – the 'state of the work of God in the church and in the world' and for some of us, for some of the time, what we talked about was really challenging either for its deep significance or its irrelevance – depending on where in the process of discipleship we are.

The significant times were when we remembered and affirmed – we remembered local preachers who had died since last we met, and we remembered ministers who had died. Both are part of what the church is about – the unnamed in the Methodist Church until they become the saints of God when they become part of the church above. The significance of the Conference being the place of ordination was affirmed and celebrated both in the conference itself and in churches around the West Midlands as ordination services took place.

So we sat and listened, we conferred, we spoke with others – I had a particularly interesting conversation with the Methodist Bishop of Ruanda whose issues as a Church leader are very different from ours – but we are part of the same church where all people matter because people matter to God and we are part of the local and national church seeking to bring an understanding of God to our world today amongst people now. And that is always my benchmark – now much of what we talk about matters to people outside the church?

Well it does but we need to be careful not to internalise the debate. We are a church – a movement which is focussed on mission – and when we get our act together as a Church that is what we do – and we do it well. As a denomination we have not stood still – we are still a people where – all can be saved, all can know they are saved, all are saved to the uttermost – all are saved by grace through faith.

There was a theme about numbers flowing through the conference – the number crunchers tell us we are on the edge – both legally as a charity as a denomination – and we have to address this – however we only started to address this practically on the last day – which is really only a morning. It was agreed that we hold a day of prayer and fasting, but then a notice of motion that says that we have 2 years to do a mission action growth plan and if we don't grow then we do an end of life plan. Of the 25 of us who wanted to speak about the negative language of this, particularly the signal it puts out to small rural churches – only 3 people were able to do so because of time. I trust that someone will fight the corner for small churches whose faithful witness is vitally significant but they are often in communities which are not growing or are declining. The Church should still be in those places though. I'm sure that we will revisit this next year while we still have another year to go before many of our small faithful churches become potentially terminal. We shall wait and see and hopefully there will be deeper and more realistic conversation about this next year using language that is more affirming while still reflecting on this important issue.

So as a conference it was good to meet people, to engage with conversation around the way that the Methodist church is, and explore how the methodist church could be – we have much to do but as in all things – we are growing up and growing older – but we can still engage with the world as it is and as it can be.

We listened to each other's contexts and to God – and sought to keep faith alive, symbolised by the candle that was always alight as we talked of faith, or possibility, of disappointments and of God.