

Following the address given by The Revd David Gamble (President of the Conference) and Dr Richard M Vautrey (Vice-President of the Conference) to the General Synod of the Church of England on 11th February, you may well have read such headlines as 'Methodists likely to merge with the Church of England' (Telegraph) and 'Methodists declare 'we're ready to merge' with the Church of England' (Times). You may even have heard the matter discussed on Radio 4's Today programme. The full text of their address is given below.

In response to such press coverage a Pastoral letter to spell out exactly what has been said, The Revd David Gamble (President of the Conference), Dr Richard M Vautrey (Vice-President of the Conference) and The Revd Dr Martyn D Atkins (General Secretary) have written a Pastoral Letter to the Methodist People which appeared in full in Martin Way's March 2010 Newsletter and is also available as a separate download from the Publication page of this website

-oOo-

David:

Let me first thank Archbishop Rowan for his generous words of introduction and welcome. And let me also thank both Archbishops for their invitation to us to come and to address the General Synod today

We thought by way of introduction it was worth rehearsing a few basic things about Methodism and explaining who we are.

The British Methodist Church has churches and circuits in England, Scotland, Wales, Shetland, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, Gibraltar and Malta.

Each year the Methodist Conference, our governing body under God, elects a President and a Vice-President. The President is a presbyter. The Vice-President is a layperson or a deacon. At the annual Conference there is an election as a result of which a President and Vice-President are designated to take office at the next year's Conference. So, you spend a year as President and Vice-President Designate. Then, pretty well the first thing that happens at the next Conference is the election of the President and Vice-President by standing vote. As the person designated by the previous Conference you're the only candidate – so you've got a pretty good chance you'll get elected and it's pretty devastating not to get in.

The President and Vice-President hold office for a year. They then spend a year as ex-President and ex-Vice-President, before joining the ranks of what we call 'Past Presidents and Vice-Presidents'. As one of my predecessors described it, 'You spend a year being 'It', a year being 'Ex-it' and then you become 'Past-it'.'

Next year's President and Vice-President therefore have already been designated and they are the Revd Alison Tomlin will be our President and Deacon Eunice Attwood our Vice-President.

It's probably also worth noting that, because the President and Vice-President are elected to the position for a single year, as President you remain in the role to which you had previously been stationed by the Conference and at the end of the year you return to your full-time station. The Methodist Church has a way of creating snappy job titles and my 'day-job' is Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice and Head of the Governance Support Cluster. You cannot imagine how nice it is to be 'President'!

It's probably also worth noting that we have a report coming to this year's Conference on senior roles within the Methodist Church. One of the things on which the Conference is likely to be asked to express its view is whether we should remain with the current annual presidency or should we move to a three year term – and if we did what would that mean in terms of how we express the collaboration between presbyters, deacons and lay people in our Church.

Richard:

The Vice-President of the Methodist Conference is the highest office within the Methodist Church in Britain that can be held by a lay person, and it's a role that I've been privileged to hold since the Methodist Conference last July. One of the things I've quickly found is that so many people assume, that I'll be the President next year, but I have to assure them, or may be reassure them, that's not be the case.

One of the key differences between the President and the Vice-President is that whilst the President takes on the role in a full time capacity, traditionally the Vice-President continues to fulfil their lay role, so for me that means continuing as a GP in a practice in Leeds and as deputy Chair of the BMAs GP committee. It makes for a

busy year, and you need a very understanding family, but actually I think that this is quite important, as part of what any lay person brings to the role of Vice-President is their lay ministry, and what I do in my day job informs and enriches how I fulfil this office. In the position of Vice-President, the Methodist Church affirms the central role of lay ministry in its life and witness.

David:

The titles of certain people within the Methodist Church are a reminder of our polity. Authority lies with the Conference. That is where episcopate or oversight is primarily located for us, the process of ensuring that the Church remains true to the gospel, to Christian tradition and Methodist experience, and to the promptings of the Spirit. The President and Vice-President are the people who preside at the Conference. Similarly, we call the person who chairs a District Synod the Chair of the District. So the titles President, Vice-President, Chair point to the way in which, for us, authority lies with the corporate body, rather than with the individual.

Of course, with a Conference that only meets once a year there is a question of where does authority lie in the meantime? Well, we have a Methodist Council that meets regularly during the year. It has its own responsibilities and is the employer of our Connexional Team. But it also has certain limited powers to act as the Conference between Conferences. Any actions it takes in that way have to be reported to the next Conference.

And then there are certain powers vested in the President to act on behalf of the Church between Conferences. The powers are set out in our Standing Orders, are strictly limited and have to be reported back to the Conference.

So much of what the President and Vice-President do could be described as representational or perhaps ambassadorial. We sometimes speak on behalf of the Methodist Church to the media, the government, or other bodies. And then the President and Vice-President do a lot of travelling during their year. They pay visits to probably just over half of the Districts of the British Methodist Church – sharing in worship, meeting people and celebrating in important events in the life of the local Church. We are shown exciting new developments and are sometimes involved in discussions around major challenges or difficulties facing the church in a particular situation.

Many of our visits include ecumenical gatherings, occasions and services. This coming Sunday I shall be sharing in an ecumenical service in Pateley Bridge in Yorkshire.

It also feels as though we visit half the world as well. We've been privileged to visit partner churches on almost every continent. In each case we have been challenged by a fast growing and vibrant church. Richard has been to Chile, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Uganda. I've been to Brazil, India, Sri Lanka and Ghana. In May we have been invited to Antigua to share in the celebrations of 250 years of Methodism in the Caribbean. But from Antigua we are due to go straight to Haiti, on a pastoral visit to our sisters and brothers there.

Richard:

One of the first visits I made after the Conference was closer to home, to the birthplace of Primitive Methodism in the early 1800s at Englesea Brook and Mow Cop in Staffordshire. Primitive Methodists separated from the Wesleyans in the 19th Century. One of the characteristics of the early Primitive Methodist movement was the way that lay leadership played such a prominent role. From the early days of camp meetings, organised by lay leaders Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, to the widespread development of class and cottage meetings, prayer meetings, love feasts and Sunday schools, lay women and men played a crucial role in the development of this movement. Lay people were not only able to be preachers as they were in the Wesleyans, but they also had a voice in the decision making bodies of the church, which was for many if not all, a new and exciting experience.

Over time, as the Primitive Methodist Church became more established the voice of lay people, and in particular women, did start to wane although it was they who in 1872 introduced the position of Vice-President of Conference and on rare occasions a lay person like Sir William Hartley, of jam making fame, was made President of the Primitive Methodist Conference.

Much of this has fed through in to our current tradition. In 1932 Wesleyan, Primitive, United and other Methodist traditions united to make the Methodist Church in Great Britain as we know it today. The Methodist Church is still characterised by the tradition of recognising and valuing the role of lay people. Many of our major committees are chaired by lay people and the Conference itself in its representative session is half lay and half ministerial. We're also seeing a greater emphasis on lay ministry and recognising the importance of

collaboration and working in teams across circuits, that each of us has different God-given gifts and talents but by bringing them together and working together we can often be far more effective in our work and witness.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians makes it clear, we have different gifts, we can offer different services, but the body is only made whole if we all appreciate and value what each other brings and offers.

I saw this clearly on a visit I made to a small Methodist church in the north of Scotland. A few years ago they had 12 members and their church was literally falling down around them. But through the inspirational leadership of a woman in the church, working together with a supernumerary minister, they've fought against what seemed the inevitable and completely renovated their building. Time and time again problems have been solved better than could have been hoped for and money has been found to support the work. And now they are left with a building that serves their mission and is no longer a burden to it. But more importantly there is a renewed sense of confidence that they are doing what God intends. And as a result their membership has almost doubled.

It's a great story that is replicated around the country but wouldn't it have been better if the work they had done was between churches in the area, not just them alone. Shortly after the signing of the Covenant between our two Churches my own church in Leeds joined in a covenantal relationship with our neighbouring parish church. It was the culmination of years of working together, exemplified by St Matthew's hosting Chapel Allerton Methodists whilst our own church was rebuilt. It was wonderful that Bishop John Packer could join us in our Methodist Church to celebrate the covenant that we signed. And since then we've continued to develop a fruitful partnership, not least by the joint appointment of a children's worker, together with our Baptist colleagues, and the running of weekly joint youth groups.

David:

Obviously, one of the main reasons Richard and I are here today is because our two churches, the Church of England and the Methodist Church, have made a Covenant together. A covenant is a serious, deeply committed relationship. Not some irrelevant optional extra. But something at the heart of how we understand our present and future life as church.

And you, the Church of England, and we, the Methodist Church, are committed to each other in a covenant relationship. Within God's overwhelmingly gracious covenant relationship with us and with our churches, we are in covenant with each other. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, but always for the gospel.

Others could tell you far better than I where the Joint Implementation Commission has reached in its thinking and doing. It's well and truly up and running and it's identified some of the big issues to which as churches we are currently responding.

One of those big questions is what does it look like on the ground? What signs are there that these two churches have a covenant relationship with each other?

One sign is our presence here today – to be followed by a visit by Archbishop Rowan to our Conference in June.

Another sign, one which you will be looking at later this morning, is the Fresh Expressions initiative, to which both of our churches are fully committed.

Another, with which I have direct involvement, is our work on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults – with a joint post as our national officer, increasing joint working between dioceses and Districts and new joint committees supporting this work.

However, it has to be said that around the country the situation is patchy. In some places there are very close working relationships and exciting new initiatives. In others you could spend quite a long time trying to find any sign of the covenant in practice. Some churches, clergy and communities are very enthusiastic. Others have theological, ecclesiological or other differences and/or reservations. Some think we have moved beyond these ways of thinking of church structures. For them, the Church is post-denominational and the ecumenical movement as we know it is history.

And sometimes a bad relationship or total non-relationship between churches can even be down simply to how particular individuals do or don't get on.

It's also the case that ecumenical working potentially involves many other churches and Christian groups as well as Church of England and Methodist. Quite rightly. There's a long tradition of very valuable ecumenical working in chaplaincy to the forces, to hospitals, to prisons, etc. And some of the most exciting newer ventures I've seen

on my recent travels have been developments of the chaplaincy concept – workplace chaplaincy, for instance; or town centre chaplaincy. I've seen this in several places now, most recently in Watford. Often, part of the chaplaincy setup is some kind of street pastor or street angel scheme. I also saw it in Wolverhampton. At its best, it is always ecumenical, across a wide range of Christian traditions.

Another place that impressed me was Cambourne, a new town outside Cambridge where the churches have worked together from the beginning. First they established an ecumenical church school, which provided all kinds of links with the new community developing there. Now, 10 years on, they've opened their church building. Again, ecumenical, to be used by all denominations including the Roman Catholics. The other denominations contribute resources of people or money to an ecumenical staff team. So it really is 'the church' in Cambourne.

When I entered theological college, at Wesley House in Cambridge, in 1971, I really expected to spend my ministry as minister in a united, Anglican/Methodist Church. I still remember our great disappointment in 1972. I really hope and pray that we can take this Covenant seriously and enable it to bear fruit as we worship, pray and work together wherever and whenever we possibly can.

Richard:

We can and do work together on issues of social justice, on issues that we both know God calls on us to challenge our society and our world. We saw that clearly in December when Archbishop Rowan joined David and me along with a large number of other ministers at a service across the road in the Methodist Central Hall prior to the Wave climate change march which was held before the conference in Copenhagen. The President even lent Archbishop Rowan a pair of blue gloves so that he was appropriately dressed for the march. What better sign of the covenant could there be? We saw it at the political party conferences where we both offered our support to the Citizens for Sanctuary movement, a campaign to challenge the negative stereotypes and prejudice towards those whom we often call asylum seekers but who are seeking sanctuary from persecution elsewhere in the world. We've also seen it on our joint working on the social impact of gambling and the expansion of the gaming industry, and the campaign to decrease the danger of nuclear weapons Now is the Time. .

There is though more that we could and should be doing together. David and I have just come back from a visit to Israel/Palestine. There can be few other places in the world where the cries for justice and peace strike deeper in to the heart. We heard of the pain and hurt of individuals from all communities, not least Palestine Christians who so often feel forgotten about and marginalised. We also saw the inspiring work of the Ecumenical Accompanier Programme of the World Council of Churches, men and women from all denominations and none who stand alongside their brothers and sisters as they try to go about their daily life, including the crossing of the separation barrier that now extends hundreds of miles through Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. Palestinian Christians have recently articulated their concerns in an important statement, the Kairos Palestine Document. It's a clear call to their own people, but also a bold and courageous call to the whole international community and the Churches in particular.

We know that Archbishop Rowan is shortly to visit Israel, and perhaps on his return we should explore ways that we could jointly work together, Methodists and Anglicans, to respond to the increasingly desperate cries for help coming from the Holy Land.

There is much too that we can learn together from our partners in the World Church. There are some 70 million Christians world-wide who claim a Methodist heritage. We as Methodists in Britain are having to re-think how we relate to this growing and vibrant Methodist family, and how we can best support our partners when they themselves are in difficulty.

For instance the Methodist Church in Fiji is currently under pressure from the government of Fiji. This year their annual Conference was prevented from taking place, as was their annual choir festival; significant speaking restrictions have been placed on senior church leaders; and in August the President of the Methodist Church in Fiji, the General Secretary and seven other church leaders were arrested and appeared in court. We are supporting them as well as we can, but wouldn't it be better if we could do it together as covenantal partners?

David:

So where do we go from here? That's not just down to the Joint Implementation Commission, but to all of us. Clearly, there are some big issues with theological, ecclesiological and other implications that we need to work on.

Our structures have something of a mismatch about them. You have national, diocese, deanery and parish. We have connexion, district, circuit and local church. But it seems that things we might do by way of connexion or district, you do through diocese or parish. So, some of the things we do through our daily work, actually we have a mismatch on our daily decisions.

Then there are all sorts of questions still to work on relating to ministry and ordination. How far can we develop interchangeability? What about women's ministry at every level? We Methodists still have work to do on how our expression of episcopate relates to personalised episcopacy in the form of bishops. And then there is diaconal ministry and two rather different histories of a diaconate.

Both of our churches are part of world communions where we have influence and history, but where churches in other parts of the world are growing rapidly in size and importance and sometimes see things very differently. As churches and communions, we're both struggling with how we can cohere in a post-modern world, with learning how to live with contradictory convictions. And at such times it is hard to pay attention to those beyond us. But it is precisely at those times that we have things to offer each other.

More practically perhaps, how do we relate to the rest of Britain? The Methodist Church covers the whole of Britain and we are delighted that the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales are now involved in our explorations under the Covenant.

But whatever happens in our discussions and theologising at a national or, as we would say, connexional level, the question of what is happening locally remains of major significance. There are many places, especially in rural areas, where we probably have too many buildings and maybe too many services and we could go much further towards working and worshipping together as The Church in that place. I mentioned Cambourne earlier, and that is quite a large community. But there are many much smaller where we could do so much more. The beautifully named MAPUM (Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission) can help us develop appropriate local covenant relationships and get the practicalities right.

But I wonder, too, how far we could work further on ecumenical church schools. Again, we have a lot to learn from Cambourne. Speaking from the Methodist Church's point of view, it's interesting that we have been involved in recent years in opening more schools – always ecumenically, generally with the Church of England, and always where it's been a response to the needs of a particular community.

I suppose my last question – at least for this morning – is how do we together respond to the challenges of the 21st century. A society of different faiths, different cultures, different histories. A society where many have no history of involvement with a faith community but where the big questions still remain on the agenda. Questions of meaning and purpose. Of how we shall live together. Of life and death. Of the future of our planet. Of right and wrong and the value of each person.

Throughout the history of churches working together, as I have experienced it, one of the major and oft-repeated texts has been John 17.21, where Christ prays for the unity of his followers not because it's a nice idea, not because it's financially a better use of scarce resources, but that the world might believe. It's mission led. We only exist to glorify God, to ensure that the word is duly preached, the sacraments duly celebrated, and the people duly formed in discipleship for worship and mission.

For Methodists, the word 'covenant' is very important – part of our spirituality and our understanding of our relationship with God. Many of you may have shared in our annual Covenant Service, with these powerful words:

Richard:

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

David:

Methodists approach the Covenant with the Church of England in the spirituality of that Covenant prayer. So when we say to God "let me have all things let me have nothing", we say it by extension to our partners in the Church of England as well. We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission. In other words we are prepared to be changed and even to cease having a separate existence as a Church if that will serve the needs of the Kingdom.

Are we willing to take our covenant that seriously? It's quite a challenge – for both of our churches.

The Revd David Gamble
President of the Conference

Dr Richard M Vautrey
Vice-President of the Conference