

A Pastoral Letter to the Methodist People from the President and Vice-President of the Conference and the General Secretary

And are we yet alive? Our answer, despite some recent press speculation to the contrary, is a resounding “Yes!”. We have seen the evidence in various ways through our complementary roles. As President and Vice-President we have represented the care, oversight, authority and support of the Conference as we have visited local churches and situations in different parts of the connexion. We have seen the Methodist people being faithful and the Spirit at work in them and through them. We mentioned some examples in our address to the General Synod. As General Secretary, Martyn (Atkins) is responsible for leading the development of the mission of the Methodist Church. He too has seen evidence of energy being released amongst us.

We are all convinced that God is not finished with the people called Methodist yet. We began as a discipleship movement within the wider church, a society of people seeking holiness and engaging in worship and mission. In Wesley’s time and through succeeding generations we have continually adapted to circumstances to fulfil that calling as effectively as possible. It is still Our Calling today. And mission has never been more needed than it is now. We live in a world ravaged by war and poverty, and torn apart by questions of how we care for the natural environment and the morality of financial systems. We live in a world where people need to hear the word of God in a language they can understand, where they need to see the love of God through people like us and experience it as good news for themselves. We live in a world where not enough people are being attracted and formed into disciples of Jesus Christ, responding to the promptings of the Spirit.

Responding to situations like this, allowing God to transform us so that we can be most effective in doing so, supporting each other in that through our interconnections, is what Methodism has always been about. We best honour those who have gone before us by doing the equivalent in our time and our circumstances of what they did in theirs. It is our DNA as a people to be a group of disciples who are committed to glorifying God in worship, to holiness and to being obedient and active in mission. We are therefore delighted to see an increasing interest in and commitment to discipleship amongst us.

We believe that God has a role for us in this mission, and we are increasingly embracing it. We have about 265,000 ‘card-carrying’ members, and that number has been decreasing because of the age-profile of our members. But more churches are making more members each year; a quarter of our churches are growing; the numbers worshipping with us on Sundays and, increasingly, mid-week is rising; fresh expressions are starting to flourish; we have regular contact with over 800,000 people; and we are part of a growing world-wide Methodist communion of over 70 million. There is a growing self-confidence amongst us accompanied by an appropriate humility about ourselves, and a releasing of energy for mission.

But we are not the whole of the church, and we cannot do it all by ourselves. So we have voted consistently over the years for unity schemes that are designed to increase the whole church’s effectiveness in mission. This is not a death wish, but a desire to be obedient and a willingness to be transformed. We can countenance ceasing to exist as a separate Church because we know that we will still be the Methodist people within a wider Church.

As our major statement on the nature and mission of the Church Called to Love and Praise put it in 1999 “the British Methodist Church may cease to exist as a separate Church entity during the twenty-first century, if continuing progress towards Christian unity is made”. Methodism will still contribute some of the riches of its own distinctive history and mission to any future church. We know from that history that we can be the Methodist people either in our own separate church or in some wider expression of the universal church. Helping to create a wider expression of the universal church and becoming part of it will require not just us but other churches to be prepared to move forward together and to leave some things behind in the process for the sake of the Kingdom. So it is not a question of Methodists being submerged or absorbed in the Church of England or any of our other partners. It is not a matter of Methodists returning to the Anglican fold, but of seeing whether together we are prepared to become a ‘new fold’.

This is not just true of our relationship with the Church of England. We have also signed a Covenant with other churches in Wales, and recently a partnership with other churches in Scotland. We have many local partnerships with other churches, the United Reformed Church in particular. And we are all part of wider denominational groupings. For example, the world-wide Methodist communion is over 70 million strong and the world wide Anglican communion about 78 million. Both are faced with questions of how they cohere in the 21st century, and how they deal with situations where there are competing and even contradictory convictions within them. In addressing these we have a lot to share with each other.

When we addressed the General Synod it was only the second time that the President of the Conference had done so; the first since the Covenant between the Methodist Church and the Church of England was signed in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen in 2003; and, importantly, the first time the Vice-President and the president had been invited to address the Synod together. What we were saying to the General Synod was that Methodists have always been committed to unity in order to create greater effectiveness in worship and mission. We said that thinking like this comes naturally from our spirituality. We approach our Covenant with the Church of England in the light of the Covenant Service in our Worship Book which we pray each year. We were gently but urgently asking the General Synod whether the Church of England was prepared to make the same commitment and allow itself to be transformed for the sake of the gospel. And what we say to the Church of England we say to our other partners.

So what happens if other churches are not prepared to be changed in order to become more effective in mission with us? Rather than being groups of Methodist people in a new and wider church, we shall continue as a Methodist people in a separate Methodist Church faithfully trusting in God's continuing leading of us. We could do that, and we currently do. But even as a separate church we shall have to continue with our commitment to co-operate with others in mission wherever possible and to whatever extent it is possible.

Whether co-operating with others or allowing a wider expression of the universal church to come into existence will require a lot of working together in mission locally. Doing that will throw up some obstacles that will have to be removed and some issues that will have to be resolved if mission is not to be hampered. Some of those include matters of interchangeability of ministries, common decision-making structures, the role of women in the church, and how oversight is embodied. Much work has been done on these and some people will have to be asked to keep working at them on our behalf. When we signed the Covenant we committed ourselves to working to remove any obstacles to visible communion so far as our relationship with the Church of England is concerned. Any solutions will have to be agreed by all of us in due course and by due procedure. But in the interim we must all keep striving to engage as effectively as possible in worship and mission.

We have found the Methodist people in good heart, and an increasing sense of the energy of God's love being released amongst us. We are a people of one book, the Bible. We allow the gospel to both comfort and challenge us. We let the love of God both confirm and transform us in the body of Christ through the Spirit.

We are yet alive. We shall be alive in the future in whatever form God wills. God has not finished with us yet!

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President of the Conference

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