

2. General Secretary's Report

My theme is the gathering momentum of change throughout the Connexion.

In this report I touch briefly on the principle themes, as I see them, which characterise our Church at present. I write from my perspective as General Secretary, but unashamedly add some personal touches to the portrait I attempt to sketch. I hope also, through this report, to set the scene for the Conference's work in 2006: I try to show how the apparently disconnected items on the Agenda in fact fit with and contribute to change and the witness to Christian values in the Connexion as a whole, to the benefit of our mission in 21st century Britain.

1. **What has the Conference given to the Connexion to guide and encourage change?**

I remind the Conference of the most recent resources the Conference has adopted in its long pilgrimage over the past generation to re-describe what the Church is and is for.

Our Calling (2000)

The Church exists to:

- Increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love [Worship]
- Help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care [Learning and Caring]
- Be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice [Service]
- Make more followers of Jesus Christ [Evangelism]

Priorities for the Methodist Church (2004)

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

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2. With greater realism and with increasing sophistication, **the Connexion is confronting the issue of resources and of our heritage and tradition.**

2.1 People: our greatest resource, but also our greatest scarcity. How crucial, therefore, to discern gifts, play to people's strengths, concentrate on releasing energy and imagination (in accountable and disciplined ways), increase the sharing of responsibility, and do well what we can do, worrying much less about doing things because we've always done them or have always done them in a particular way. We must address with courage the fact that we cannot any longer fill traditional key roles on the scale we have been used to: e.g. circuit stewards, treasurers and ministers. We must deploy better the lay and ordained leaders God in fact gives us. (The shortage of ministers for Circuit stations in 2006-07 was aggravated by our not being able to receive fourteen or so interns/probationers from the United Methodist Church in the British American Ministry Programme. See the *Stationing Committee* report. We are actively pursuing with Government the inadequacy of the immigration rules, which have led us to this outrageously foolish situation.)

2.2 Buildings. I bring the Conference's attention to two reports which indicate the breadth and complexity of this challenge: the resolution adopted by the Methodist Council (*see Methodist Council General Report*) and the report from the trustees of the *New Room, Bristol*. In general, I observe that the maintenance, development and radical questioning of our buildings create one of the main pressures which demoralise ministers, especially superintendents.

2.3 Money. We are a wealthy Church, because Methodists have been a generous people. Our giving remains high, but I am confident that Methodists would give much more if there was a better flow of information and clearer advocacy of the excellent possibilities for worship and mission that need support - in Britain, as well as worldwide. This past year has seen a much greater awareness of locked-up resources which are slowly being released - e.g. from connexional and circuit Advance Funds into district Advance Funds. Districts are on a steep learning curve in making effective grants, the outcomes of which can be monitored. We now need much greater attention to releasing the excessive reserves held by many churches and Circuits, which should (morally and legally) be spent for the Church's work and not kept for no good reason.

All this attention to our historic wealth should not disguise the reality that some parts of the Connexion are seriously short of revenue or the capacity to increase income: a big test of our connexionalism.

2.4 Structures and systems. The promise that we are working hard to eliminate repetitive and redundant decision-making, and to streamline authorisations (e.g. for minor property schemes) is greeted with undisguised delight. In general, I find support for the thesis that our systems are too cumbersome and our structures are too complicated and numerous (we have too many churches, Circuits, Districts, minor

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trusts, meetings and committees, etc.). Support sometimes ebbs away, however, when the consequences come home to a particular church or a particular Circuit, committee or trust! The Agenda shows some changes to lighten or speed up our procedures – see, e.g., the report on ***Complaints and Discipline***, or the outworkings of the decision to bring to an end the World Church Committee and the Connexional Property Committee. Next year, I predict, this will be a much more prominent theme.

3. Putting together *Our Calling* and *Priorities for the Methodist Church* with greater realism about resources and history, I discern **the Church capturing or recapturing a vision-which-engages-with-reality**. This is the fundamental condition for significant and sustainable change and the liberation of energy and imagination. Illustrations are found everywhere in the Connexion and surface at several points in our Agenda.

- 3.1 Circuits. Everywhere I go I hear of cross-Circuit cooperation, of Circuits merging and sometimes of Circuits working together in a federal structure. I have witnessed radical and courageous changes in some Circuits. (I preached, e.g., on Easter day at the inauguration of the Methodist Church in Hemel Hempstead, following the merger of five local churches; and this step was taken without the new congregation knowing where the new, single church building will be situated in the still-to-be-redeveloped centre of Hemel.) I have heard much debate this year on what we mean when we talk about the Circuit as a natural unit of mission or the primary unit of mission (Standing Order 500). Districts are encouraging and supporting all this rethinking about and regrouping of Circuit life, as it bubbles up from Circuit needs. In some Districts a strong steer is being given to move towards a comprehensive reorganisation of Circuits.

Districts. I have observed the release of energy and imagination for the development of the three new Districts, each in its own context inventing new ways of being a District, in south-east England (see ***Towards Three New Districts***). The Conference is also being asked to endorse significant changes in District organisation in ***The Methodist Church in Wales***. I am aware of the large strides being taken in cross-District working in some parts of the Connexion; and of new ways of running existing Districts. The Liverpool District has taken advantage of S.O. 48A (2004) to inaugurate a new constitution for itself.

Connexional Bodies. Last year the Conference authorised changes to the constitution of the Methodist Council and its ways of working. Action has been taken to implement these changes from September 2006 (***Methodist Council General Report***). This year the Conference debates a review of itself and its ways of working (***The Review of the Conference***). The Connexional Team continues the challenging review of everything it does and of its ways of working in the light of *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, which is crystallised in the *Team Focus 2005-2008* process endorsed by the Conference in 2005. The ***Connexional Team Report*** updates the Conference on progress and alerts the Council and the Conference to the significance of careful

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decision-making next year, to prepare for the new Connexional Team from September 2008 onwards.

- 3.2 Development of faith and spirituality - or confidence in God. I have no hesitation in identifying the resources and activities which have stimulated the greatest imagination and support everywhere in the Connexion in the past twelve months. They are: exciting and excited participation in *Prayer without Ceasing*; the enthusiastic take-up and use of the resource *Time to Talk of God*; and rapidly growing involvement in fresh expressions of Church supported and monitored by the organisation *Fresh Expressions* (which was initiated by the two Anglican Archbishops and from its inception has been developed in partnership with The Methodist Church).

All this augurs well for a change of culture in the Church, which will empower us once again to be a lay movement (supported by a few ministers), where the principal focus of discipleship is everyday life. The intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual challenges implicit in a confident re-engagement with our complex culture are immense. We all need to play a part in this, with our diverse theological convictions. The resource prepared during the year by one of the Team ground-clearing Projects (on *Evangelism and speaking of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved*) is proving very helpful in rebuilding confidence in these aspects of our mission right across the theological spectrum. Similarly we can discern here the huge significance of the decision being asked of this Conference to reshape ***Foundation Training*** and ***Future Use and Configuration of the Training Institutions***, to assist and resource high quality learning and training for lay people, for preordination candidates and for ministers and deacons in their continuing development in ministry.

4. Managing Change

- 4.1 The well-worn phrase “Managing Change” highlights the need to guide and co-ordinate change in effective ways. To be more precise, the Conference has already made it clear (in 2005) that we must develop throughout the Church a much deeper awareness of ‘oversight’, if change is to be gospel-based and is to be developed according to theologically informed ‘best practice’. Three crucial notions were introduced into connexional consciousness last year, to flesh out what we mean by oversight: theologically informed ‘governance’, theologically informed ‘leadership’ and theologically informed ‘management’. I can assure the Conference that at connexional level hardly a day goes by without our reflecting critically on how these notions apply to the Conference, the Council and the Connexional Team. My personal concern is that we have not yet found an accessible vocabulary nor a shared conviction in every part of the Connexion, to apply these themes in churches, Circuits and Districts. In particular, I judge that it is urgent that we upgrade awareness of trustee and governance responsibilities everywhere in the Connexion. The need is for bodies of trustees to think strategically (that is, to set a vision and to plan a path towards the implementation of an agreed vision over a period of, say, three to five years, always keeping an eye

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on the “big picture” of what is happening to society and to kindred spirits who can work with us); for bodies of trustees to be in confident control of their resources (human and financial); and for bodies of trustees to identify, assess and manage the risks of everything they plan and direct, always keeping an eye on the duty of complying with the law of the land and the directions of the Conference.

- 4.2 The Conference has supported the development of insights into governance, leadership and management in recent years by clarifying many significant roles in the Church: the roles of the President, the Vice-President and the General Secretary (2002); of ministers (2002), deacons (2004), and superintendents (2005). This year the Conference is asked to approve a report *What is a District Chair?*

Three reflections on the groups and individuals the Conference expects to guide and encourage change:

As ever, it is one thing for the Conference to adopt a carefully crafted report on particular leadership roles; it is another thing for change to be effected in churches and Circuits to clarify in practice the distinctive contribution of, say, ministers or the superintendent in relation to Circuit stewards or the Circuit Meeting. Much more work is needed here over the coming years.

The clearer we become about what is expected of ministers and deacons, the more urgent becomes the issue of how we deploy them in the Connexion to maximise their distinctive contribution to the worship and mission of the Church as a whole. That theoretical issue now meshes with harsh reality when it comes to stationing policy. We know we cannot go on as we are: so the Conference is asked by the Stationing Committee and the Council to endorse a radical review of all aspects of the Church's deployment policy. (See the *Stationing Committee* report.)

I report that the Connexional Leadership Team is working hard to understand how its members (the Presidency, the District Chairs, the Warden of the Diaconal Order, the Co-ordinating Secretaries, the Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee and the General Secretary) help one another to exercise their distinctive ministries effectively; and how all together we understand our contribution to change in the Church - searching together for a shared vision of what God is calling us to become and to do; and understanding how we collaborate in effective implementation of the Conference's decisions in the Districts, Circuits and churches.

5. **Re-focusing on core values and convictions**

It is crucial in an era of rapid and wide-ranging change that we become explicit and confident about what we believe and about the values that we feel compelled to live by in obedience to God's claim on our individual and corporate lives. Here is a brief list of themes and questions which rightly belong here:

How do we relate all the changes going on in the Connexion to the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit of God? Are we in fact being

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'driven' to radical change *because* the Spirit is freshly at work among us? (The President has majored on these sorts of questions and insights this year.)

We want to develop a more thoroughgoing commitment to a theologically informed 'equality and diversity' agenda; and always, precisely in this moral framework, to witness to our historic concern to be alongside the poorest, the weakest, the most damaged and oppressed members of the human family. This Conference must address some particular examples of these concerns: see the report on *Ministers and Deacons with Impairment* and the *Time for Action* report. Here also we place the complexities of shared decision-making flowing from the *Pilgrimage of Faith*, especially in respect of the blessing of civil partnerships. This will require of us, in abundance, the spiritual gifts of wisdom, discernment, sensitivity, love and courage. But we have experience to draw on: both the Pilgrimage of Faith itself since 1993; and the recognition of how God has called us to live together with contradiction and diversity over many decades. (See *Living with Theological Diversity*.)

We want to maintain and develop the long tradition of carefully researched, politically astute and theologically grounded social witness. Examples this year: the report on the ethics of modern warfare, *Peacemaking: a Christian Vocation*, which was developed jointly with the URC; and the complexities of ethical investment (see the report of the *Joint Advisory Committee for the Ethics of Investment* and the reply to last year's Memorial on the use of funds in relation to *Conflict in Israel and Palestine*).

We want to translate into the emerging situation our conviction about 'connexionalism'. It is insufficient to 'plot' the bonds between every part of the Connexion simply by maintaining formal and institutional links between them, with information and decision-making flowing through these links. To be sure, clear lines of accountability, in governance terms, are crucial. But 'connexionalism' is a much richer and more fluid notion. It is about the initiatives that need to be taken in every part of the Connexion (every church, every Circuit, every District and every connexional body) to network with or relate to other parts of the Connexion (electronically and personally as well as institutionally). It is about nurturing a spirit of expectation: each part of the Connexion expecting to have something good to share with and receive from another part, and expecting to enjoy the mutuality of the encounter.

We need to place all the uncertainties, anxieties, fears and the sense of threat which are generated by rapid and multiple changes in the context of our faith: God always meets us with infinite and life-enhancing grace. So the inner turbulence provoked by (unwelcome?) change is a gift! Similarly the excitement and the liberation from tired and draining procedures which change sometimes promises need to be refined and directed by encounter with the costly demands of the God who asks of us unqualified obedience. The psychological dimensions of change (both negative and positive) are to be interpreted and transformed through the gospel!

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6. Challenges

The scale of the changes now emerging in the Church, the speed at which change is happening and the sheer volume of changes make special demands on the Conference and on the Church's leadership.

6.1 A crucial aspect of 'oversight' is holding things together in all their variety and diversity, of discerning how all the apparently disconnected areas of change might in fact deliver a rounded, coherent and purposeful outcome, which better enables the Church to share in God's mission in 21st century Britain. That is indubitably a challenge to faith and hope, and it must be held in tension with the understandable human fear that we are rushing headlong towards chaos and disintegration. We need to help one another both to give attention to the detail of each particular movement for change and simultaneously to see 'the bigger picture', of a Church emerging under the Spirit's guidance more appropriately shaped for the next few decades. Above all, it is crucial for the Conference and for leaders not to lose their nerve when so much is happening in so many parts of the Connexion.

6.2 The Conference and the Church's leadership must face honestly and deal patiently and pastorally with the shadow side of change, supporting with insights drawn from the best available practice those among us who are hurting and confused. Some illustrations:

The deep pain of bereavement when treasured buildings or roles or groups of friends who have kept together in support of a particular cause in the Connexion can no longer be sustained;

The stubborn resistance to change or the refusal to contemplate change in any circumstances and most certainly in the present;

Settling for low standards or colluding with ineffectiveness in relation to what is familiar because the price of doing things differently and better is more than people are willing to pay. To my sorrow, one vital area of the Church's life about which this comment is frequently made is preaching. Somehow or other we need to recover a commitment to meaningful, attractive and engaging forms of communication, notably in worship, which probe the depths of human experience and the mystery of God, and which display honesty, integrity and rigour in relating scripture and tradition to the contemporary world and the inner turmoil of the human heart.

6.3 The complexities of decision-making. The governance structures of the Connexion are extraordinarily complicated, especially for members who have little or no experience of the Connexion beyond a local church. We need as much clarity as possible at every stage of our processes about the authority which is invested in particular governance bodies. But we must not shirk tough decisions at the proper place when they must be taken (whether it be a church council, a Circuit Meeting or a District Synod), in the hope that the decision can be passed somewhere else for other people to deal with the pain which ensues. Nor must we lose patience or act precipitately when urgent

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decisions seem inordinately delayed. In ecumenical settings, the complexity of decision-making is multiplied many times over. I understand people's frustrations in this area. I also understand, though do not endorse, the view of some that, for all the changes now gathering momentum, it is 'too little too late', or too slow.

The Connexion is, from many points of view, stepping into the unknown. We have no privileged insight into the detail of God's call to us in the future. But by deepening our solidarity with Christ and with one another, we can make significant changes with courage and in hope. Many mistakes are bound to litter our journey over the next decade or so, however careful we are to exercise wise judgement. We shall need one another's comfort and forgiveness when things go wrong. But also encouragement in faith.

David G Deeks
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*****RESOLUTION**

2/1. The Conference receives the Report.