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Barbara's vocation has been the world of education. Before becoming Connexional Director of Education in 2014 she was an RE teacher, inclusion and interfaith specialist and secondary headteacher in various challenging contexts in the West Midlands. She now leads the Methodist Academies and Schools Trust, committed to shaping our schools as diverse communities of empowerment and transformation in their work at the margins of the church.



She is a longstanding local preacher, contributor to IBRA Bible notes and has a calling to chaplaincy, volunteering at 3Generate and Greenbelt. Through international Methodist education and her upcoming role for global Methodist Women, she seeks for Methodism to have an impact greater than the sum of its parts.

The Vice-President's Address to the Methodist Conference 2021

I'd like to start where the story starts: with chaos.

This is my kind of chaos - Fabric scraps. I can make something with these.

Some of you might be hyperventilating at the sight of this; maybe it screams dissonance, confusion and muddle - and to be honest, there's a bit of me can see your point. Raw material can be quite daunting.

But the raw material is also very lovely. The possibilities are exciting! The bits come with their own colour, and texture and backstory. I could go on here! But I won't – but look at this bit.... I bought it on a special adventure 35 years ago – it's a real treasure... I'm saving it for something special... and now I can't bring myself to do anything different with it... so it'll probably stay in its bag 'til I die. There's a moral in there somewhere...

But it's exciting. To my creative streak, it is full of possibility, full of potential. It's got so much that's lovely in it, but it's also awaiting transformation. What it could become.... It's capable of so much more...

So, here's a possibility of what possibility realised looks like - In true 'Blue Peter' style, here's one I made earlier....

In preparing for this afternoon, people encouraged me to speak from my own experience. Well, I'm a bit of a quilter and for me the quilt is a pretty good image for what's possible for the church – and for the world, really.

Now, I realise that there's some (more than a few) flaws in what I want to say...

Some of you might be thinking – 'theme's a table, that's for a bed.... Is she saying that the church is all cosy and ready to go to sleep?' hummmmm

Some of you might say, isn't it a bit limiting? And of course that's true – I suppose we *could* say that both the sewing and the church are only limited by the qualities and vision of the one who makes them. I suppose it's our job, as the Conference to stand in the gap between 'time and eternity' (as the hymn says) or, as Brian Wren puts it, 'to offer all that faith can do while love is making all things new'.

When we were talking about the theme, I talked about the hymn line, 'to everyone born a place at the table' and someone said they were uncomfortable with that because it made them think of that line from 'All things bright and beautiful' about how God 'ordered their estate'. In truth my thinking had been much more along the lines of John 14, with places for all in the many rooms of my Father's house – 'an invitation to all'... but it is true that, in the quilt the pieces are in their places, they are

'fixed' (well, maybe that's not untrue of the church!); and that by the time you get to the quilt decisions have been made and a lot of work has been done – so it can be very difficult to imagine things differently.

So, having said all that, why do I think this is actually a good image for the Church?

Well, at its most obvious level, the quilt is a model of the wholeness that can come when you bring together many parts. If you don't bring lots of different bits together then – you don't have a quilt. Variety here isn't making the best of a bad job – it's actually essential. 'ontological' Like the church, bringing together into wholeness is its very being.

And when we bring this Babel-chaos of pieces into the Maker's work then it becomes more than the sum of its parts. One piece may be a treasure on its own, but it isn't a quilt. It's when you put them with each other that you can bring out different sort of beauty and a usefulness. In fact, how you do that is how (to borrow Michaela Youngson's lovely phrase) you 'make the colours sing'. It reminds me of that bit in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells the disciples that it's our job to 'bring out the God-colours in the world'. Of course, to really bring out the potential of each piece – in itself, and what it has to give to the whole – well, that can take some care – sometimes it needs careful thinking and hard choices – and sometimes, you have to go back on things you've worked quite hard on and do them again in a different way. Sometimes, to see if what you're doing works, you need to go and put yourself in a different place and see what it looks like from where someone else might be standing. (What might seem fine from over here doesn't look so good if you stand over there). The resonances with how we build the church are evident.

When I was making my first quilt I spent a happy time in the fabric shop picking out lots of bits that I liked. But when my teacher looked at them she said that although they were all very nice, they wouldn't make a very good quilt. They were too much about what I liked and what works for me. To really make the colours sing you actually need to include things that work for other people more than they work for you. A limited perspective actually yields a disappointing quilt but the paradox is that variety gives you something more like you were actually looking for to start with.

And it's ok to have a lot of quilts – the world is richer for it. Every summer I go to the NEC (I kid you not) for the international festival of quilting. As you walk through from the railway station you join an endless host streaming in from the airport speaking an astonishing range of languages. It's like in Harry Potter when they go to the quidditch world cup – turns out that everything you thought you knew from your little corner of quilt-making is but a small piece of a rich and diverse world. Japanese quilts; Indian quilts - people from all over the world bringing their 'traditions richest store'. And although convention dictates that a quilt is a particular size and shape, and obviously often for a 'good reason', you find that other people do things differently. There's a whole world of contemporary quilting- they're quilts, Jim, but not always as we know it.

Well, we need to crack on and make the quilt! The chaos becomes the quilt through a process of transformation, a mixture of vision and hard work – and occasional good fortune. There is certainly work to be done. But this is also where the imagery breaks down because one of the great paradoxes of the Christian way of looking at things is that we both need to make the quilt and that we actually already 'are' the quilt. 'In Christ', Colossians tells us, 'all things come together'. Not 'will come' but are already established in a new, life-enhancing, colour-singing relationship with one-another. We both need to change and yet are changed in Christ. We are invited into a journey of transformation. As Guru Nanak says, 'simply yearning is not enough'. (Gandhi – be the change)

Transformation. In 1451 the University of Glasgow was founded by Papal Bull at the request of the King, charged to raise 'to distinction those born in the lowest places'. I find it astonishing that, in 1451, popes and kings were even thinking about those born in the lowest places, let alone raising them to distinction. Of course for people of faith, 'raising to distinction' is, at its heart, about the restoration of the divine image in humanity. GK Chesterton speaks of humanity as the 'million masks of God' – and our privilege is to draw the world's eye through the million masks to the million images of God that surround us. Faith re-imagines humanity; in Christ, both our being and seeing are transformed.

Our life is 'lost with Christ in God' – and the way 'God sees', as the Lord tells Samuel, 'is not as man sees'. The more we encounter God, the more we find that God is complex and rich and mysterious so why would we find any less an image in the joyous diversity of humanity. As Christians it's foundational to who we are because it's foundational to the God whose we are. One spirit moves within us. But this message of common humanity, of divine community and humble solidarity is one to which our prophets have so often had to return us. In different ways, the Bible calls us back to it again and again, through the baby-reins of Law and fierce calls to justice. Even amongst those who had been within touching distance of Jesus, it was a struggle to get it right. Like them, we need the visionaries and dreamers and straight-talkers and justice-namers. Christ has 'broken down the dividing wall of hostility' and made himself the peace that brings everything together. However we look at it, faith calls us to see people in a different way.

Of course, when the writer to the Ephesians talks about the at-one-ment which God works in Christ, he sees quite clearly that this restoration is not just about people. In the Christ, God has set back on its feet our right relationship with the whole of the created universe. And this isn't a fanciful dream of an imagined future; it is not what 'might be' but what 'is'. Now that we are 'in Christ', we are reconnected not just with each other but with the raw fabric of our world – a complex dimension of things which are both 'bright and beautiful' and 'red in tooth and claw'; where neither life nor ethics are, I think, simple. Here is a world of difficult choices for people commanded to be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves.

There are those who, apparently, believe that green issues are not the Christian's appropriate concern. My reading of the Bible speaks differently: 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'. It is sin that causes us to live in the world as though it isn't. To take for ourselves the place which is God's is rebellion of the first order - the sort of rebellion for which the poets described angels being cast out of heaven. Human arrogance, and the arrogance of apathy, encourage us to treat the planet with disdain. We have run amok in the garden and, as the people of God, we know that that's not a good thing. We know what happens in the garden when people overstep the limits of God's good purposes. As a Church we need a spirituality which reminds us that this is God's reality, just as we need one which makes clear our common humanity. Activism enables us to actualise it, justice to secure it but spirituality enables us to see it. Relationships make it matter. (I never cared so much about where my eggs came from until I had my own hen, Aggie Twitterton). It takes a real St Francis to be able to articulate that same intimacy of relationship with brother sun and sister moon, and wasps...

It is not as though we are without 'knowledge'. Ironically in our generation it is the non-theists – Attenborough and Thunberg, who have expressed most clearly our perilous situation on this glorious blue planet. Ironically - and maybe shamefully – for the people with most to say about God, and who are capable of creating quite a noise, the church has often been much noisier about other things. And yet this, also, is a place where faith is found: writers speak of a journey through atheism to Christian faith because the environmentalist challenge to materialism brought them to a place of spirituality in response to the created, and humility in right relationship with the creator. It's very Ephesians; it's also very Micah – walking humbly with God coupled with right relationship with each other - and a hunger for what is just. The climate emergency is not one which pitches justice-warriors against climate-warriors - not for nothing was Schumacher's seminal "green" work subtitled 'economics as if people mattered'. People – the matteringness of the image of God.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Methodist young people for the energy and direction that they give to the issues of climate emergency; to Phoebe the Youth President for her outstanding articulation of the theme 'God's world; our home'; to the COP26 team, and to the church leaders who made that happen – who saw that this would be the right thing to do.

And what of the church? What do we bring to rich jumble of life which is the world's quilt? If the church is 'a sign to the world', of what does our sign tell?

As the church, we are the group of people drawn in by God's act of transformation. We become, as our United Methodist cousins have it, disciples for the transformation of the world. As the quilter takes what's there and makes real the potential within it, so the church is tasked with showing what

the world could be like if only humanity could get its act together. We 'sign' the building of God's Kingdom – a place where things work as they could work if God's ways were our ways.

I've always found it rather depressing that the term 'do-gooder' is used as one of abuse. 'Good' IS God's way. Jesus says we should do it: 'You who are my disciples must be like salt. You must make the life of the whole world worth living'. For Methodists, of course, trying to 'do all the good we can' is in our branding. The Church needs to be at the front of the queue for doing good; working with people with whom, in all our differences, the search for good is something we hold in common (like the quilt, we have a real power in togetherness); and nurturing the deep-seated inclination for good amongst people who might not always rush to show it. In doing good, and in nurturing good, we make the colours sing. I remember sitting with a friend one night after we'd been out doing our Christian Aid collecting. It hadn't been an easy evening – I'd been accused of stealing all the money and leaving the empty envelopes in the middle of the Ring Road and he'd been bitten by a dog. 'Why do we bother?' I asked, thinking more about the slender pickings our work had yielded. 'Because we are giving people an opportunity to do something good', he replied. 'An invitation to all', to be better.

Doing all the good we can is good in itself and a sign to the world of what things of God are like. It's simple!; it's difficult - it can be complex and costly. We know that the Church has an uneven history in this area. As a Methodist, I am proud that our name and our story sit behind front-line work of real significance and quality – in Methodist Homes, Action for Children, Methodist Schools, All We Can, through JPIT and the new-but-already-fabulous Walking with Micah initiative - Kingdom-justice and loving-kindness on a local and global scale. And we know that, on a domestic scale, disciples are trying to unlock salt and light in their everyday places (example of the banda machine) But I also have to ask if we have done enough – if our strapline were 'Christians – making the world better for 2000 years' – would it stack up? Maybe I am being unfair but when I was writing this I was listening to people in a country, with no arms industry of its own, angry that their families were being blown to pieces by arms made in our country. I'm really not very sure about that. In our own country, the cradle of Methodism, the UN reported that a fifth of the population live in poverty and during the pandemic we've been able to see more clearly what that means. I'm not very sure about that, either. Where does God's invitation to all sit with that?

But I don't think this is quite the whole of it – the Church as a sign to the world. Loads of people do good, and sometimes they do it better or sooner than we do. That's not what distinguishes the Church as 'a priestly people'. My favourite ever description of church came in the TV series Ally McBeale where her life is in a bit of confusion and she says that she wants to go to church. And when the other character asks her 'why?' she says, 'I want to be in a great big room full of forgiveness'. The problem here is that the Church is made up of people like me (and probably you) who haven't 'got there' yet. But this is what I think distinguishes the Church – that we are called, together, to be yet more – God's possible people, not just 'doing good' but communities framed around the goodness of God, dis-covering the good news and trying to make it real to one another. We are the place of God's table, where the things of God are shared – bread and wine, yes, but also the things of which they are a sign - healing, reconciliation, at-one-ment and mutuality in a fellowship which is the antidote to our fractured selves and our fractured world. God, with us. Love, actually.

From the very beginning, the church has been bringing people together with God and with each other. And since about the same time, people have sometimes been surprised at God, and sometimes been surprised at people with whom they are brought together. It starts with the incarnation and the unexpected God in an unexpected place with unexpected people – and unexpected animals too. Even if the details are a bit wobbly, the nativity set is a good model for the rest of the story – dyers of purple and prison warders; Galilean fishermen and Ethiopian eunuchs. And, heavens to Betsy – women AND men! People who would be natural comrades, people who wouldn't; people who fit, people who don't; people who agree, people who can't. The thing Jesus was consistently criticised for was who he sat at table with. It was sensational and sacramental.

As a teacher, I've given kids a lot of 'sentence stems' to complete. I had quite a lot of fun doing it with Church names: In Peru I on-line-visited a church that was the House of Hope. I like that – it tells

you 'what's in the tin' and it's quite a sign to the world. For Ally McBeale it was House of Forgiveness. What word would you like to use to gather God's people around, as a sign to the world? House of Healing? House of Justice? House of Love? It makes me re-think what's outside our church now! Talking about finishing off sentence stems, here's another – the one that Jesus said he wanted the Church to be distinguished by: 'By this the whole world shall know that you are my disciples, that you have love one to another'. I heard a speaker ask recently, 'What would you have liked Jesus to have said?' 'By this the whole world shall know that you are my disciples, that you....' What would you have liked to put in there? But what Jesus actually said is that it was the quality of our relationships that should distinguish us to other people.

The New Testament's vision of the church is a unique bringing together of people with God and with and each other. A friend described it like the big spider bungee that my dad used to put on over the roof rack on top of our old mini – reaching out in every direction, sometimes flexing and tensing, but with a centre that holds. Yeats says 'the centre cannot hold' and there were times when you looked at our well-travelled luggage and said, 'How does it stay together?' (in fact you would say the same of the car!). Around us, we see it is true – we live in fractured times. It's not that we shouldn't differ (indeed you can't have the quilt without variety) but we don't always know – or desire - what it takes to hang together. But for the spider bungee of the church, the centre always holds because the centre is God. We are 'rooted and grounded in love', gathered around the table of grace, where we can be open and brave and gentle with each other.

This is why am 'evangelical' – we have something to say! I'm not very good at remembering sermons – but I always remember a brand new Local Preacher, in her first sermon, ending with striking clarity 'Jesus never said 'Go, and invite all people to come and see what it's like at your church'. The invitation is to join us on the journey to that place where love is. To come and sit with us at the well, and draw deeply from the healing and wholeness which is the glory of God and bridges our disrupted and fractured being. To hunker down with us, amongst the well-travelled luggage of the world, and be covered by the bungee of grace. In the quilting world, one of the oldest patterns is the log cabin – at the centre of every block there is a red square which represents the warm hearth at the heart of the home. The invitation is to come and find a place by the fire which is love, and for those of us who are there already to be prepared to 'budge up a bit' to make sure there's room for everybody to be '(strangely) warmed.

Talking of burning hearts, I'd particularly like to consider what room there is in the quilt for our Methodist story I don't know what the future is for denominational Christianity, though I am confident about the future of God's church. A friend describes 21st century Methodism as 'dying embers'. Maybe. But I've got a coal fire and I know that what looks like dying embers can still ignite a mighty blaze. Let me be quite clear: I am certainly not urging everyone to go brand-crazy on Methodist identity! (Though a full range of merchandising is available in Vol 3 of the agenda!) Except, maybe, the Methodist Way of Life. But I am urging you, my sisters and brothers, to see that we still have something valuable to bring to the church's table and to be confident about the colour and texture that we add to make the ecumenical quilt richer. If the church is called to be a sign to the world, then we are raised up as a sign to the sign.

Roy Hattersley says that Wesley's stand out contribution to the 18th Century being 'the triumph of his belief that thought should be followed by action'. Thought and action. Anchored in informed discipleship and intentional spirituality, we are a people who believe that change is possible, for ourselves and our world. Like Jesus, Wesley scandalised the authorities of his day (and sometimes shocked himself); he took the church beyond inherited forms and buildings; he allowed that woman and lay people might have an authoritative voice in ministry; on the trending issues of the day he and his brother were on the right side of history; he sat with people who were considered an affront to the mores of polite society; he was a faithful servant of the poor. This is our DNA. And, particularly for us, Wesley's signing of 'social holiness' – that turning to God is always re-turning to people. To 'love alike' even though we will not 'think alike'. Make no mistake, this is hard work. We all need to be aware of Jeremiah 6:14. But it is ours to do. And it is our witness to the world.

Of course, when Wesley wrote those famous words, he was thinking about relationships with churches with other branding. Ecumenism makes our quilt richer. It's a changing world, and not

always an easy one. Not everyone, it seems, has read Mr Wesley's sermons! But it is one to which I am deeply committed. I am also deeply committed to interfaith working. I am not sure how to 'theologise' how other faiths fit into God's quilt: it was a question asked in my viva, 40 years ago when I had barely met a person of another religion, and my answer was tentative, positive but theoretical. 40 years of life in Wolverhampton has fleshed that out wonderfully and my biggest disappointment of today, actually, is that none of our friends of other faiths can be here. Amandeep, Parveen, Rabbi Debbie – my sisters – this shout out is particularly for you.

And what of the shifting relationships of men and woman in this quilt. I am sure that there will be some who think that this is old news but of course, it isn't. One of our schools deals with the issues of being in the top ten areas nationally for domestic violence – what IS that about? Something still runs very deep here. But within the church, I still want to know why we allow a myth of women's silence to be perpetuated: why our programme of stories does not include people like Huldah, who 'authorises' the Book of 'Deuteronomy' and preaches on it (how did the church spend many hundreds of years struggling with the idea that woman shouldn't preach?), or Rizpah, or Deborah. (I can probably see why we don't use the story of Jael in a family service.) And within our own Methodist story, it breaks my heart that I can't even find a picture of Hannah Ball. Who? A friend of Wesley, she is thought to have started the Sunday School movement – you might have learned in school that this was Robert Raikes, but he actually took advice from Hannah Ball, who preceded him. Why the bloke gets the credit, I can't possibly imagine. And my own personal hero, Mary Bosanquet. Who? A friend of Wesley, in the social chaos of the early industrial revolution, she chose to serve in its very cradle. Wesley says of Wolverhampton, 'such a number of wild men I have seldom seen' and I can't imagine it was much better 15 miles down the road. But when she was left still a relatively young widow and Wesley invited her to come and be at the beating heart of his new movement in London, Mary turned him down and spent a further 30 challenging years in Telford. I hope that next year, when the Conference meets in Telford, we will be able to honour that. And while we're weighing the quilt, there remains for me a huge question around the place in the quilt of lay people. As someone who has yearned for ordination, and been turned back twice to live out the challenges of ministry trying to be leaven in the lump, in settings which have sometimes been very 'lumpy' indeed, I expect to look much more at this over the coming year. Thank you to those projects which have invited me specifically because the Vice President is 'lay'. (Shout out to William Pickles Hartley here!)

My own story is less worthy, but resonates with that same Bosanquet sense of finding purpose and belonging. When I was about 6, I remember going to my mum with our copy of the Methodist hymn book to ask her what a word meant. We only had 3 books in our household but I was an avid reader and you have to take your pleasures where you can. The word I was stuck on came in the heading of one of the sections, 'God's providence in creation'. I wanted to know what 'providence' meant. My mum had known a very difficult life, but she spoke to me of a God who, in all the incidents and accidents of our histories will not let us go. And I remember understanding that this was me, then. I find it difficult, and glib, to say that the tragedies of my parents' back-stories all had a purpose and that purpose was me(!). All my parents... But I do know that, by God's good grace, it led Mary and Ted finally to get the bus to a nursing home in Armley one May morning and pick the baby that was crying the loudest and bring her finally home to Cross Gates; to a tiny nuclear family (those of you who know me will understand that there has to be a shout out to Auntie Doris at this point) and to a big, and big-hearted, Methodist family who nurtured me in love and faith. God's wide open arms welcomed me into a new belonging in God's family. (Shout out to them, then and now. I am grateful to Jan, nurtured in the same church and from the next street to Our Doris, who will be helping with our Sunday worship).

Our providential way has not always been smooth and, although it would be wrong to overegg them, there's been some pretty icky bits. Paul says that, in an incomprehensible way, they are part of the quilt of the body of Christ too (although he says it with less reference to sewing). This last year has been a bit too much like Lemony Snicket's 'Series of Unfortunate Events' but I am grateful that God has been with me in the providential journey and for the people God has given me as companions on the road – and especially those whom God has given me to love – Martin, Harriet and Richard &

Laura. And I would particularly like to thank our St John's Church family for the love and grace that we learned within that rich community for the last 38 years or so.

I suppose Church has not always been a positive experience for me but, with a bit of shimmying around, it has always been a primary place of belonging. And 'church' has always been a big part of my life – 'going to church', 'singing hymns', the 'fixed point' of our traditions and rituals in a changing world. Covid has very much disrupted that. And while it has emphasised the matteringness of some of the things that we have always done, it's given us the opportunity to see what it might be like if we make the boundaries of the church more porous, if we expand our language and open up our practice. I am hugely interested in those who are making Christianity 'religionless', taking meaning-making and sign-being beyond the closed doors of the church. Our current Kairos moment sends us back to the why and not the what of our being. Here is my 'why', expressed for me by the poet, Kathleen Raine:

At the ring's centre
Spirit or angel troubling the still pool,
Causality not in nature,
Finger's touch that summons at a point, a moment
Stars and planets, life and light
Or gathers cloud about an apex of cold,
Transcendent touch of love summons my world to being.