

## The President's Address to the Methodist Conference 2022

The Revd Graham Thompson, President of the Methodist Conference 2022/2023



Graham Thompson serves as Chair of the Plymouth and Exeter District, a role which he assumed following his service as Chair of the East Anglia District. Before offering for Methodist ministry, Graham worked as an accountant. He has served in a variety of Circuits, urban and rural, both as Presbyter and Superintendent as well as serving on variety of Methodist trusts, boards and Connexional committees. He has broad ecumenical experience and is an

ecumenical Canon of Exeter Cathedral.

A girl fell into a conversation with God and, being inquisitive, asked all kinds of questions about what it's like to be God. She asked, 'What is a minute like for you?' 'Well' said God, 'a minute is like a thousand years'. 'Wow, that is incredible' said the girl. 'So, what is a penny like for you?' 'A penny' said God, 'well, that's like a million pounds'. The girl thought for a while and then she asked, 'God, can I have a penny?' God replied, 'Wait a minute'.

I tell the story not just to get this address started but as some kind of indication as to my hopes for what is going to happen in the next few minutes. Ideally, that I will speak for a long time and it will only seem like a minute or two for you! Well, I can always hope!

It does seem, however, like a very long time since I was first designated by the Conference to be this year's President. Of course, it is only been a year but what a year it has been. There have been many personal issues to wrestle with, additional responsibilities in the South West, as well as helping to lead others through the decisions of the last Conference. And, it has been noticeable in the South West that more time has been given to the implications of *Oversight and Trusteeship* than to *God in Love Unites Us* - though both have had their impact. And all of

this in a context and a climate constantly overshadowed by Covid and, more recently, a cost of living crisis.

Throughout this last year I have known the incredible and prayerful support of my colleagues - lay and ordained - and of many special friends and I am particularly grateful to those who have given time and money to be here today. My family is - as ever - a place of grounding as any balloons are soon punctured and my best friend also happens to be my wife - Alison - who is my rock, especially in shifting times. Thank you to you all.

So much love has been shown to me over recent weeks and months that I am humbled by it. My sense of not being worthy is intensified in the warmth of such love and yet it is God who makes us worthy. Whenever possible, I like to include the Prayer of Humble Access in a communion service for it has within it another dichotomy to which we cling. In the prayer, we pray 'We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table'. How true that feels and yet God in Christ has come to us, lifted us out of the miry bog, set our feet upon a rock and put a new song in our mouths. God in Christ has adopted us into God's family and made us siblings with Christ and heirs of an inheritance that will never perish. God in Christ makes us worthy not only to gather up the crumbs under the table but to sit at the table prepared for us, so much so that we are anointed and our cups overflow.

And it is love that makes all this possible. So let us turn to our reading from Matthew 22. Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment and He points the questioner to Leviticus and declares, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

We all know that there is a mushy, shallow and often unthought-out kind of love that usually doesn't last very long. It is urgent, sometimes tempestuous and usually brings out the worst rather than the best in us. There is also love that is firm, reliable, deep and worked through. The kind of love that has been tested in the fires of adversity. In one of our Marriage Services we reference the fact that we believe in a love that grows and deepens with the years and I want to testify to that. In fact, I want to give testimony to the fact that it is love that first drew me to the Christian faith.

When my parents' marriage fell apart, I was still going to a church and a youth group that often spoke about God's love. But, being a haphazard teenager, I could not see how God could really love me when my home life had been torn apart. I can - and sometimes do - go on at length as to the responsibilities that suddenly fell to me as the oldest of four siblings. Needless to say it was a tough time for us all. With hindsight I now realise that my father - who stuck with us when my mother left - my father did an incredible job over the next eleven years as he single-handedly brought us up. And it was my father who became anxious when I rebelled against church and tried to stay away. The sop to quell his anxiety was a decision to go with a new friend to Crusaders. And it was there, over three years or more, that I met with leaders who not only spoke of the love of God but who demonstrated the same love in their relationships with us outside of the Sunday afternoon Crusader meeting. They gave of themselves and it was because of their witness that I decided to take the first steps in faith. That decision was quickly followed by a change of minister at our home church - Heald Green in what is now the Bramhall and Wythenshawe Circuit. The new minister was someone who - over a number of years - invested time, faith and love in an increasing group of young people. It was through the ministry of Peter Willis that my faith began to grow and become more real. I and many friends in our Circuit Youth Group made our mistakes and, I like to think, er grew because of each one of them and because love - firm, deep, worked through love - was a reality in those years. Love that grew and deepened with the years.

Some of those who grew up with me in the Circuit Youth Group are here today and others will be watching online. I am also delighted that Peter and Chris Willis are here, providing a tangible link to the stuttering start of faith as bequeathed to the Methodist Church by the Crusader movement. My love for my long-standing friends is as real and as deep now - if not more so - as it was in the heady days that we shared together all those years ago. Thank you for being here today.

The command of Jesus in Matthew 22 is in two parts. Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is similar, we are love our neighbours as ourselves.

The Westminster Confession reminds us that the primary purpose of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. This is not some vague notion that springs from the dictates of the reformed tradition but it is the natural expression of those who truly love God. To be so in love that you can do nothing else but take every opportunity to express that deep,

abiding love which is the expression of a life given to God who has already given God's life for love of us.

A young woman was in love and she wanted to introduce her loved one to her family. As part of this she arranged to visit her grandparents on a Sunday afternoon. At the agreed time, the young couple arrived and were shown into the sitting room where they sat at each end of the sofa. As the afternoon unfolded, as tea was served and the conversation flowed, the young couple slowly gravitated towards each other along the sofa until, by the time they left, they were almost coiled in one another. Once they had left, the grandparents returned to their seats and sat in silence for a while. Then the grandmother said, 'It is lovely to see two people so much in love'. Grandad said nothing. After a bit more silence, Grandma suddenly said, 'You know, you never tell me that you love me'. Grandad thought and replied, 'I did, I did tell you that I love you'. 'When was that?' she asked. 'On the day I asked you to marry me.' 'That was fifty-eight years ago! At that, there was a bit of pause before Grandad said, 'Well, if anything changes, I'll let you know!'

And if anything changes about God's love - eternal love - if anything changes about the love that God has for us, you can be sure that I and others will let you know! For God has given and provided all for love of us, generation after generation. . . . . from before time itself existed, as the first records way, way back in Genesis show, right through the judges, kings and prophets of the Old Testament until that moment in time when God set aside the glory of heaven and came among us as Jesus. In self-giving, all-embracing love, God in Jesus gave up His life and became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, through the cruellest of deaths. And yet God defeated evil and sin and death and rose again on the first Easter morning to announce new life for all those who put their trust in God. Such love that invites us to die with Christ that we might rise with Him. Such love that offers us the abiding presence of God's Spirit if we will invite God to share our living with us. Such love as does not impose but offers and invites and encourages and enables and transforms. And, in such an abiding relationship, who cannot help but be in love with God and want to engage in worship.

In his report to the 2011 Conference, Martyn Atkins expressed some disappointment with Methodist worship when he stated that, having travelled around the country for a few years, he had picked up a prevailing view that Methodist worship 'neither reaches the heights nor plumbs the depths'. I can only agree whilst, at the same time confessing my own failures and my own part in this. But what I find increasingly disturbing

about many current acts of worship is the way in which the focus has shifted away from God and onto the worship leader, preacher or congregation.

Our recent visit to Belize and Guyana at Easter reminded me of the value of liturgical worship. Its great value is that it doesn't require any intervention from the worship leader. Instead, particularly over the Easter Weekend, we heard the authorised words and prayers of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas. Now, please do not think that I am against extempore prayers - far from it - my low Methodism prefers it. But what I do not prefer is continual self-referencing. For me the three most important persons in our worship should be Father, Son and Holy Spirit rather than the 'me, myself and I' approach that we all too often hear today. Self-referencing should, in my opinion, be limited to telling stories against yourself rather than using phrases that imply greater closeness to God than might be available to the rest of us. That is my first hobby horse, duly ridden!

We should be those who so love God that we give of our whole selves to worship, service, loving care and faith sharing. We should be so in love that our love is seen and known. We can learn much about this from the Early Church and I am indebted to the insights of Carl Trueman who writes that when the Church of the second century gathered together they offered a powerful witness to the Gospel by simply being the Church and going about the business of worship. For, when offered to the glory of God in a spirit of love and generosity, worship can be a transformative experience for whoever happens to share in it. I covet that kind of experience and that kind of engagement for the churches of our Connexion. And it begins by loving God with our whole selves.

Love of God should be front and centre of our worship and it should be an expression of our relationships one with another. For, as Jesus declared in our reading, as He ran the two commandments together, the second is like the first, we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

The best thing about being part of the church is all the lovely and fabulous people that make up the Body of Christ. Being part of a loving community is the best thing in the world. And the worst thing about the Church is being part of a community that has forgotten how to love, forgive, accept difference and live peaceably with one another. And, sadly, I have been told more stories about churches who are in dispute than stories about churches who love God and love one another and get on with the business of being Gospel-sharers where they are. This year, can we correct this

imbalance? Let us do all we can - as I commit to do all that I can – let us all do all we can to share positive and good stories of church life. And, I wonder, if we cannot properly love the neighbours we have within the Body of Christ, how are we going to love our other neighbours, colleagues, friends and all whom we encounter beyond the life of the church? For love, like charity, begins at home but then it should spread to the whole world but we are really in trouble if there is no locus for our love.

And who is my neighbour? We know that Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan in response to this question. In 2022 we probably don't want to reference someone travelling alone from Jerusalem to Jericho. Instead we should reference the person without a home, the person who has been on an NHS waiting list for too long, the person seeking a new life as they flee from warfare, violence or economic uncertainty. Our neighbours are those who are struggling with long Covid or who remain fearful of Coronavirus. Those whose island nations are threatened by the effects of climate change on sea temperatures and rising waters. Those who do not have enough to eat because we eat too much and participate in an economy that sells food to the highest bidder. People such as these and so many others - and my apologies if I have missed someone you had hoped I would spotlight - it is people such as these who are our neighbours because it is our lifestyles and the choices we make that have an effect on those who are as loved by God as we are. For we are all equal under God - if only we were in reality.

The phrase 'global village' epitomises our world today. The development of global communications and, particularly, the internet means that my neighbour can live in a different time zone on another continent. My neighbour can speak a different language and be of a different faith. My neighbour can identify themselves very differently from me and yet they are still my neighbour and I am called to love them. And I gladly love because God has created us all in God's own image. God in Christ has died for all - whether they know it or not - and it is God who, in response to my love for God and God's love for me, invites me to love my neighbour as I love myself.

I always thought that I didn't want to go to India. When, about fifteen years ago, the idea was first mooted, I was deeply uncomfortable. I had heard all the horror stories about the sanitation, the food, the insect life and of violence between various political and religious groups. Other people had been to India and told me what a magnificent country it is but I preferred to listen to the negative stories and resist the idea of going. In 2012 I found myself as Chair of Churches Together in Cambridgeshire and it was

time for Churches Together to renew their covenant with the Diocese of Vellore in the Church of South India. It was expected that the Chair would be the one to sign the covenant and so in January of that year I found myself in Tamil Nadu. I could say that I went very reluctantly to Vellore but there my heart was strangely warmed. Yes, it isn't straightforward for a Brit to visit India but it is the most wonderful experience in the world. For what I experienced was a depth of friendship and love from my neighbours in Tamil Nadu. I was back again a year later and have been delighted that the Plymouth & Exeter District has a strong and developing partnership with the Diocese of Cuttack in the Church of North India and I long to see my beloved friends from there again very soon.

I tell this story against myself because I could have allowed my own instincts and self-imposed barriers to deny me a life-changing opportunity. Please do not limit yourself to what you know and feel but - as God invites through God's people - respond in love to your neighbours and both you and they will be changed.

Jack Martin was a Supernumerary in Southwell, Nottinghamshire when I served there in the nineties. Jack had some wonderful one liners. The one I often quote is, 'Generally speaking, Methodists are generally speaking'. But he also used to say, 'Every encounter with another person changes you.' The first quote was about the use of silence in worship and the second is about pastoral visiting. But, it is more than that because every meeting, every conversation we have with another person changes us. Just as, almost imperceptibly over time, a drop of water falls into a lake, the lake is never the same again. Every drop makes a difference.

So, what am I trying to say? Love your neighbours as you love yourself. Our neighbours are worldwide. However, such love will not only enhance and enrich their lives but every encounter we have with our neighbours will change us too. We miss out on so much when we fail to do what God asks us to do!

Love God, love your neighbours and love yourself. If we are to love our neighbours as much as we love ourselves, there is a prior requirement to love ourselves. We all have an inbuilt desire for self-preservation. We eat when we are hungry, we drink when we are thirsty, we sleep when we are tired, we run when we are frightened and we fight if we are threatened. But self-preservation is different from love. There is much about myself that I don't like but, you will be pleased to know, I am not going to use this occasion to air my uncertainties or lie on the counselling couch of the Conference! But what I do want to remind us all is that God

created us and God loves us. God also created us with the capacity to love and be loved because we are created in God's image - the image of a loving God. And if we are good enough for God, surely we are simply 'good enough'. Good enough to love and be loved and that includes loving ourselves.

When I was Chair of the East Anglia District, I lived in a part of the country that had one of the best provisions for people suffering from problems with their mental health. The Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust won many awards for its innovative and responsive approach. Then along came cuts in health provision and what was once a flagship trust is now consistently one of the worse performing in the country. We have a mental health crisis in our land that has been exacerbated by the pandemic and our inability to respond effectively to those in great need. Add to this the fact that many of us still prefer to hide or ignore our own mental health problems, as well as the problems of others.

I say all this because I am very aware that it can seem impossible to love yourself if you are not well in mind or body. And it is all very well for people like me to spout on about being made in the image of God when the image we bear is cracked, even broken. It is at such times that I find some consolation in a short phrase to be found in 1 Peter 5, 'The God of all grace mend you'. It reminds us that Jesus can and does take the broken and shattered pieces of our lives and mends them. He stretches out His hands on the cross and all things are made new. He gives up His life and we are made whole. 'He died that we might be forgiven, He died to make us good - He died that we might go at last to heaven - saved by His precious blood.' For, on the cross we see the carpenter at work - forgiving and restoring but, more than anything, mending - mending our broken lives.

As well as a cost of living crisis, we are facing a mental health crisis in our country. Today we need to put ourselves and our resources into meeting the needs of those who endure so much because we need to join with God in the work of mending. And we need to play our part in helping the Government and those responsible for meeting the health needs of our nation to see that we need more resources to meet the current crisis and we need them now.

Even so, we continue to believe in a God who loves us even when we cannot love ourselves. We believe in a God of love who calls us to love with all our heart and soul and mind. We believe in a God who calls us to love our neighbours and we believe in a God who calls us to love



ourselves as much as God loves us. And how much is that? If you need an answer, look again at the cross and see the self-sacrificial, unconditional love of God at work. For there God in Christ stretches out His nail-pierced hands and embraces the whole world. There, victory over sin and death is accomplished and announced in the resurrection. There, on the cross God, is at work mending a sin-filled and broken world and that includes you. For all, for all my Saviour died. Have no mistake, that includes you.

When Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment, He declared, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Let us be those who hear and do what Jesus says. Let us be those who fulfil the greatest commandment of all.

Amen.

## The Vice-President's Address to the Methodist Conference 2022

### **Anthony Boateng, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference 2022/2023**

Anthony Boateng is a Local Preacher from the London District, with a passion for social action, politics, church unity, spiritual revival and creative ways of worship. He has been a member of the Conference since 2014.

Anthony serves on several committees across the Church including as a convenor of the London District Social Responsibility Commission and member of Church Action for Tax Justice management committee. In his 'day job' Anthony is a caseworker for Ingeus - a government Work and Health Programme.



### **My journey so far**

This will be the eighth consecutive year I have been attending the Methodist conference, dating back to 2014. I remember receiving a call from my then Superintendent Minister, the Revd Cathy Bird to attend Conference. I remember how I felt - excited but nervous. It's a little like today. I remember what Cathy said to me as a word of advice, 'Anthony, do not waffle!' No pressure I thought. I hope I do not waffle today.

Friends, let me briefly share a little about my journey with you. Around 2014, I was encouraged to train as a Local Preacher. Through prayer, I sought direction from the Lord about whether this was what He wanted me to do. Just as I did before allowing my name to be put forward for this role. It was on a seemingly normal evening when (through a dream) the Lord offered me confirmation that I was to commit to training as a Local Preacher. In 2015, I started my training.

During the early part of my studies, I received some life altering news. It was around this time that I obtained a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit and how He can manifest in our lives. I had to learn experientially what it meant to trust totally in God's plan, in spite of my own turmoil and suffering.

After six years of rigorous study, I am pleased to say that I finally completed my training last year, not long after my election as Vice President, under Methodist Central Hall Westminster, and had my accreditation service at the beginning of this year. It was a joyous occasion for me, and one that I hold dear to my heart, as again, the Lord's grace and mercy prevailed. It was only through His divine guidance that I was able to accomplish this.

### **Acknowledgements**

On this note, Conference, I would like to thank the almighty God for bringing me this far and for His faithfulness in my journey. I thank Cathy, for giving me the opportunity to attend conference for the first time, for handing me my note to preach, for encouraging me and nominating me to become this year's Vice President. Thank you to the Hackney and Stoke Newington Circuit where I began my ministry, and my home church, Methodist Central hall Westminster, for all their support. I would like to thank all who have played a role in helping me to get to this position including my support groups, the tutors and mentors I have been privileged to have had over the years. A big thank you to all who have travelled here to support me including my support groups.

Thank you to my family, especially my mum Naana who has always been by my side through the highs and the lows. To my partner Dr Melissa Butler, thank you for your love and unwavering support. Church and Conference, I want to say thank you for entrusting me with this honour and privilege to serve as your Vice-President; not for one moment did I imagine that everything would pan out the way it has. It has been like a dream.

### **Introduction**

Friends, in preparation for this role, similar to my first ever sermon preached at Dalston Methodist Church in 2016 as part of my lay preacher training, it has been challenging at times, but God's grace has prevailed.

In all honesty, I have felt nervous during my preparation. The last thing I want to do is disappoint God or let the church and conference down. And so, my sincere prayer is that God will be at the Centre of everything I do. Nothing else matters because after all this is not about me, it is about the Church, the body of Christ of which we are all part of.

Friends, I am acutely aware how challenging this role must have been for my predecessors. And therefore I am immensely grateful to all the past Presidents and Vice-Presidents for their service to us over the years and

for the ways in which they have helped to shape us as a Church and helped me to discern my theme for this year's conference.

I will continue to put God first, you have my word. As encouraged in 2 Timothy 4:2, I am confident that through the power of the Holy Spirit I will continue to be bold in proclaiming the gospel as I journey on in my servanthood for Christ. I kindly ask that you all support me in my endeavour by raising me before the Lord in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to continue working through me for the betterment of His kingdom.

Since being elected for this role, I have been asking myself, what does God want me to focus on? I have been going back and forth in my mind. I have come to the conclusion that there is no perfect way to do it and the best I can do is to let the Holy Spirit speak through me to the church.

But how does one do this? For me it is by using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – using scripture as the first authority, with the aid of tradition, reason, and Christian experience as part of my theological reflection. Also, I am keen to incorporate the voice of the church within my presidential year which is why I have utilised a questionnaire to get a snapshot of people's views towards revival, worship, and discipleship. In order to get a sense of what is working and what requires improvements. I will come back to this later.

And so, on that note, as previously mentioned by Graham during his address, this year's overarching theme we have chosen together to explore is the Greatest Commandment ("you shall love the Lord your God with all your Heart"), which encourages us to focus on God's self-giving love and the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 22:34-40 and Acts 2.

For my part, I will be majoring on the theme of revival, by engaging in the worship and evangelism part of our Methodist calling, using Acts 2:2-21. This is a reading many of us will be familiar with, especially when we think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which marked the spread of Christianity. With your support and the Holy Spirit, I hope to unpack this a little more during Conference and over the coming year.

For today I want to humbly add to what my predecessors have said and done by adding my voice to what I think God is saying to us as a Church at this time.

## **Why revival**

Revival can mean different things to different people. For example, in my questionnaire people describe revival in terms of bringing life and taking action through the power of the Holy Spirit. For the purpose of this address, one definition has been proposed by Martyn Lloyd Jones, Welsh Protestant Minister: “Revival, above everything else, is a glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is the restoration of him to the centre of the life of the Church.” In the heart of every committed Christian, there is the longing to know that quality and depth of spiritual reality, and the presence of God in one’s personal life.

In every era the church needs revival – certainly now more than ever. This sentiment appears to have been reflected within the questionnaire data as the feedback suggested that, without revival, the church will not survive, due to division and spiritual dilution. We having to grapple with countless issues including church decline, the cost of living, war in Europe, the long-term impact of COVID, the new asylum bill and the virus known as institutional racism. On a positive note, I believe the offer of hospitality by the general public for those fleeing the war, and society voicing their concerns regarding the new asylum bill gives us hope. Conference, it is time for us strive to revive the Wesleyan fire in our everyday life.

If we go far back to 1807 during the Primitive Methodist days, under Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, revival was apparent during the Mow Cop camp meetings. More recently, as early as the 1980s there were indicators that suggest revival was happening until the 90s through the charismatic and ecumenical movement – the gift and empowering of the Holy Spirit was a regular occurrence through churches and congregations. There was collaboration and unity in churches including different denominations. It seemed, in some ways, to be a repetition of the Day of Pentecost, resulting in church growth. Those who were open to the work of the Holy Spirit became a part of it and those who failed to recognize it did not.

Some may say that the Methodist Church was, as a whole, not open enough to the work of the Holy Spirit. This idea appears to have been reflected in the questionnaire data. This suggested that, for some, the prospect of revival might invoke fear, which could go some way to understanding some people’s reluctance to seek revival.

### **Stand up for justice**

Conference, we need to revive the Wesleyan fire now more than ever in all areas of our church. This is the time for the Church to stand up and

show the world why social justice is in the DNA of Methodism. This is the time to strive further with some of the good work we've already made through our EDI toolkit. Now is the time to find the remedies and creative ways to solve our common problems. Friends, through unity, guided by the Holy Spirit, let us embrace those who feel marginalized and voiceless within our church, challenge the status quo, and act as an agent of change. Let us remind ourselves of the benchmark Christ has set for all society, because God is Lord of every society and nation. This means no one is inferior and there should be equality in opportunity and treatment for all. There must be no room for tokenism or fear of being silenced. The principles of our values and most importantly actions must be able to stand up to the judgment of God.

### **Statistics for Mission report**

Conference, I am acutely aware that some of us feel disheartened by the current state of our church, but let me assure you that through Christ all things are possible. I am sad to report that according to our statistics for mission report, active membership has fallen by over 20,000 between 2013 and 2016. Unfortunately, this trend continued as data from 2019 suggests that active membership fell by a further 18,000. Even when taking into account the deaths of members, there still remains a large deficit of members unaccounted for. I am concerned that at this rate of decline we're going to go out of existence.

It pains me that, last year, only 25 people candidate for ordained ministry, after which 15 were recommended. Out of that 15, only 4 were of an ethnic minority. It pains me, the rate at which our churches are needing to close due to numeral decline and income. It pains me that there are long-standing Methodists leaving the church, especially those on the margin.

Friends, I submit to us that, if there was ever a time to depend on God for revival, now is the time. Now is the time to strive to rekindle and revive the Wesleyan fire in our everyday lives. It's now or never. Survive or perish. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Glimmers or revival?**

On a positive note, it pleases me to report that there have been glimmers of revival. We're witnessing growth with our cultural fellowships. Just last month I had the privilege to witness the inauguration of the first Ghanaian Methodist Church in the UK. This is a significant milestone that should be seen as a real opportunity. As highlighted by the response to my questionnaire, we need strong leadership, connection, clear direction, alignment and seeking of God for the Holy Spirit to flow. Under my Vice-

Presidency, I will do everything in my power to encourage initiatives such as this across the whole church and I urge you all to do the same.

As I have prepared for today, I have felt a burden to address not only this conference and our wider Church, but also that section of the great cloud of witnesses who are our spiritual forbearers in the Lord: John and Charles Wesley, their mother Susanna, Hugh Bourne, William Clowes and many others, many of whom will be known only to the Lord. Dear Forebears, I am deeply grieved to report our decline. I confess, at times, we have been guilty of squandering our inheritance. I am sorry. Susanna, we desire a return to the intimate devotion to the Lord which you knew in your Epworth home. John and Charles, we need an abundance effusion of the Holy Spirit just as you received in your own day. Hugh and Williams, we long to see again a move of the Holy Spirit as you saw on Mow Cop. We need all the inspiration you can offer to slow the curve of decline.

Conference, I submit to you that the only way we can slow down the curve of decline and experience revival is through a repetition of the day of Pentecost. We need an encounter of the Holy Spirit in our worship, a deep sense of the intimate love of God which then flows into the lives of others through evangelism, Christ like-living, social concern and renewal.

### **The backdrop**

Friends, I want to draw our attention to the reading we have heard from the book of Acts. The overall message of this passage is about discipleship, our relationship with God and our worship of Him To offer a bit of context, prior to this event, Jesus gave his disciples a commandment:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” 8 ...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 13 ....they went upstairs to the room where they were staying..... 14 They all joined together constantly in prayer.....” – Acts 2:4-14

Fast forward, during the Jewish festival of Pentecost, all of Jesus' disciples were gathered together. The City of Jerusalem was alive with people from all walks of life, including Jews who had settled there from all over the empire. It was a special day, but Jesus' followers were separate

from the festivities. They knew about Jesus and the Prophet Joel's prophecy. They wanted to be found in the presence of God. They were determined not to leave the same.

### **Jesus Culture - Gold:**

Find me here in Your presence  
I'm not leaving the same  
Let Your refining fire  
Purify me again  
Let the weight of Your glory  
Bring me back to my knees  
O God come with revival  
You can start it in me  
You can start it in me (x3)

### **Personal relationship with God**

The disciples wanted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit came like a mighty wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. They discovered that God seeks an intimate relationship with us.

The question is, as a church do we nurture intimate relationships with God enough? Like on the day of Pentecost, we need the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit. I thank God there were some circuits during COVID who held weekly prayer meetings via Zoom and still continue to do so today.

### **Our worship of God**

Conference, what is the focus of our worship? Do we really allow space for the Holy Spirit to operate? Do we allow space to hear God's voice? The questionnaire responses suggest that, in some of our churches, our worship of God lacks depth and does not incorporate the Holy Spirit. It was also suggested that there is little room for spontaneity and dynamism, which might make it difficult for us to appeal to the younger generation. Regular Bible studies and prayer meetings have become a thing of the past. We need regular fellowship and prayer groups during the week. We need to find ways to revive the things that were the bedrock of Methodism. We need a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The questionnaire feedback also revealed that people feel something has got to change within our style of worship. Generally, people would welcome greater flexibility in our worship, which could enable more space for the Holy Spirit.



### **Candidates outcomes 2021 - 2022 report**

According to the Census research in 2019, over half of those aged from 20 to 29 reported No religion. It worries me that, in our Methodist churches we could only attract 2 people below the age of 39 last year into full-time ministry. It begs the question, why are our young people not interested in our ministry? Is our current Candidating process fit for purpose? Perhaps we need a radical change?

It pains me when I think about the missing generation in our churches. Where the young Wesley's of our generation? Where is the spirit of Mama Susanna and the Primitive Methodist movement of our generation? It worries me that we appear to be fixated on the old ways of doing things when clearly they are not working. We need to challenge the status quo of our church.

### **Creative and collaboration**

We need ideas and decisions that give hope to our future. Every church or circuit needs a decent size collaborative team of preachers and worship leaders every week or rotating regularly to help provide consistency, and give the church the confidence to try new songs. I can almost hear Charles Wesley saying to us, what has happened to our worship? We need to revive and rekindle the Wesleyan fire. We need manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to invest more into our worship. We need a cluster of churches to come together to form a team ministry, in order to provide services in strategic locations to reach a missing generation. Sustainable, Spirit-filled, creative – this has got to be a key focus over the coming year. We need to inspire more young people to get into ministry and leadership and this may just be the way to do that. A church that does not put young people at the forefront of their worship is a dying church.

### **Church unity**

Notice that on the day of Pentecost, the people in the upper room were of one accord – there was unity. Boundaries and walls were broken.

### **Jesus Culture - Gold:**

New hope, new life, new wine  
We come together with  
One breath, one voice, one cry  
Jesus our Saviour (x3)

Friends I submit to us that we need to come together with one voice.

Revd Lorraine Mellor said during her presidential address in 2017 that:

“Our role is to be Connexional as that is our gift, and to use the resources of each other, each church, each circuit, each District, and to stop reinventing the wheel.”

Conference we need a collective mind-set. We need teamwork. It is imperative we share our resources. I believe this is one way to achieve church growth and take some of the load off our Local Preachers and ministers. We need to release our ministers to be ministers and not become bogged down by property maintenance. We need to shift the focus of our Church from committees to worship. We need to change the culture of how we do things. Why are we not getting a group of young people who are on fire for God to fill the gap in our preaching plan or evangelism? Why not trust them to bring something new? Why not invest more in them? This is just my view and you may disagree. We need to be more creative. We need to trust our Lay workers and people more.

Notice the process that led to the day of Pentecost: From Salvation to Transformation and then to Empowerment. In the 2019 Census, an estimated 51% of the population reported their religion as Christian, this represents a decline of 8.3% since the 2011 Census. Also, in 2019 38.4% of people reported having no religion – meaning an increase of over 13% since the 2011 Census.

## **Evangelism**

We need to develop a more authentic message about the gospel. We need to revive the band and class meetings (or at least modernize them), apply the Methodist Way of Life in a non-prescriptive way through house groups and not just in the pulpit, to help disciple and transform individuals to transform their community. We need to create more leadership programs to equip new leaders to run house groups. What is the point of planting churches if we don't have the core foundations in place?

After the day of Pentecost, the disciples went on to evangelise and many as 3,000 became followers of Jesus on a single occasion. So what is evangelism? “Evangelism” comes from a biblical Greek word that literally means “good news”. All Christians – not just some – are called to listen for, speak of, and live out the good news.

You see when God wants to bring salvation to a community, the first thing he does is bring it to individuals. He then uses those individuals to become a symbol of salvation through transformation in the community. Lastly, He empowers them through a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Manifestation of the Holy Spirit is evangelistic. Conference, I propose that we need this in our evangelism.

As a church and society, we have become over dependent on the strength of the flesh – Over dependent on our human wisdom – over dependent on books instead of the Bible. You see any church that ignores the power of the Holy Spirit will plunder into dissolution.

Conference, how is our worship helping us to develop as disciples? Is there evangelism when we meet together? Is our evangelism inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit? Is it deeply rooted in the word of God? As a church we feel inadequate in the area of evangelism and the impact on our Christian witness is very apparent. We need to connect to Christ in such a transformative way that His light burning through us will draw others from all around. Conference, we must be people of worship. We must be a church of sound teaching.

We have much to offer the world, but we need the power of the Holy Spirit in everything. You see, mighty works have a voice and it is very loud especially when it comes to evangelism.

“Set yourself on fire with passion and the whole world will come and see you burn.” This is one of the most famous things that John Wesley appear never to have said but still holds true today.

## **Conclusion**

I look forward to the day when fasting with prayer at conference will be the norm. I look forward to the day when churches and circuits will hold regular prayer meetings. I look forward to the day when we will have a bold message about the gospel. I look forward to the day when we will revive the band and class meetings and meaningfully commit to our Methodist Way of Life. I look forward to the day when our worship will help us to develop as disciples. I look forward to the day when our evangelism will be inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit and deeply rooted in the word of God. I look forward to the day when there will be unity in churches, denominations and endless cooperation.

I look forward to the day when God’s prophecy will be fulfilled again. When God will pour out His Spirit on our church; when our sons and daughters

will prophecy; and all will see visions and dream dreams. Amen and God bless you!

## **Pastoral Address to the Presbyteral Session of Conference 2022**

**Below is the text of the Pastoral Address to the Presbyteral Session of Conference 2022, given by the Revd Sonia Hicks, President of the Conference 2021-22**

### **Worshipping the God of Impossibilities**

In order to be an effective tool in the hands of God, it is important to know oneself. It is vital to have some self-awareness about the things that we are good at and the things we are not so good at. It is the Holy Spirit who accompanies us on this journey of greater spiritual consciousness. Therefore, a recognition of our own strengths and weaknesses is part of the criteria and competencies at every stage of formation, for church leaders, as we seek to grow more into the likeness of Christ. For instance, before receiving a note to preach, it is expected that a person already has an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. It is also expected that they are willing to embark on a journey of discovery about what it means to lead people in worship. Before entering their first station as a minister, that awareness should be deepening and be grounded in the acceptance of God for them as a beloved child. Furthermore, there is an expectation that the individual is already learning ways to be as resilient as possible in ministry. The complete list of competencies, for each stage of ministry within the Methodist Church, can be found on the website and is, I feel, a useful tool to reflect on as we journey together in ministry and in love. In my own journey towards greater self-awareness, I know that I am a pessimist. I am pessimistic about my own abilities, and I am often pessimistic about the ability of others. Why is this? Why am I a glass half-empty sort of person? I know that personality and background have a part to play but so do the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is difficult to be an optimist as the workloads we carry increase and the people to take on roles in the church, decrease even more rapidly. I find myself looking at my own meagre resources and I say: 'It's impossible', 'There's no way that can happen', 'That is way too difficult to achieve'.

And it is important to be a realist. Should we not aim for the achievable, the attainable, the do-able? Perhaps in that way we won't disappoint others or ourselves. We should not set unrealistic targets but we need to still aim high. After all, we are dealing with the things of God. When I was in ministerial training, I can remember another Methodist student telling me not to get too stressed about essay marks. 'Sonia,' he said to me, 'If the pass mark is 45%, then everything over 45% is wasted effort'. Now, I am all for being a realist but that did not make sense to me. How could I guarantee obtaining exactly 45%? What if the essay was graded at 40% or 44%? Just to say, I never did follow that piece of advice! But what is achievable for the British Methodist Church? What should we pursue as we seek to be faithful disciples of Christ?

Over this year, I have sat with different groups of Methodists and sensed the exhaustion hanging over them. Each goal that is set by the annual Methodist Conference is laudable but the overall effect on our diminishing membership and colleagues is crushing. There are, after all, only so many impossible things that can be achieved before nightfall! As I return to Circuit ministry, I am under discipline to help the Wembley Circuit ensure that its Safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose, that

every person's pastoral needs are being met, that the Local Preachers are being supported, that Ministerial Development Reviews and Reflective Supervision are being attended to, that the spiritual needs of Christ's flock are not being neglected, that the properties within the Circuit are being properly maintained. It is my task to ensure that I pay proper regard to the standing orders that govern the life of our church and that I remain diligent in my studies and personal prayer life. No wonder so many of us are feeling exhausted, burnt out and constantly under pressure. But perhaps we are looking at this the wrong way. What if the resources we need are not my resources or your resources but the resources of God? What if?

In the Gospel reading, Jesus has just heard of the death of the Baptist. Herod acquiesced to the demands of Herodias' daughter. **"Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." [Matt. 14: 8]** Jesus tries to withdraw to a deserted place but there is no let up. The crowds seek him out. Ministry has a way of claiming our attention whether we are tired, sick, or grieving. Like Jesus, our attempts at self-care often fade as we face the demands of God's people. Compassion often consumes us. As evening approaches, the disciples come to Jesus: **"...This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." [Matt. 14: 15b]** The disciples recognise that there is a problem – it will soon be too late for this vast crowd to disperse and get some food. The solution, as the disciples see it, is to send the crowd away sooner rather than later. The logical thing is for Jesus to stop feeding the crowd spiritually so that they can go and feed themselves physically. But, amongst the disciples is the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. The disciples already have all that they need if they could but see it. Jesus tries to open their eyes to the possibilities before them: **"Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away, you give them something to eat.'" [Matt. 14: 16]** St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the ministry they are undertaking is God's and that God provides what is necessary for the success of that ministry. **"But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." [2 Cor. 4: 7]** The power to accomplish the things of God is given to us by God. We are already holding all that we need to achieve great things for God. It is in our hands, today, already. Even the disciples are not empty handed: **"They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'" [Matt. 14: 17]**

Many years ago, I realised, at short notice, that it was the Methodists turn to host the annual World Day of Prayer Service. I went into full meltdown mode! "What? No way! That's totally impossible! I have no capacity to take on one more thing!" Does that sound familiar siblings? We have all been there. Into an already impossible workload yet another thing is dropped into our laps. Conrad, my husband, looked at me and said, "Why don't you ask Kathryn?" Kathryn O'Mahony was our Circuit Youth Pastor who was also one of the Circuit Local Preachers. She was very competent, but she just had her first baby, and the sleep patterns were still all over the place. "Conrad, that's silly.", I replied, "Kathryn has more than enough on her plate. I couldn't possibly ask her." A week later, I was even more anxious

The service was scheduled in the afternoon and most people, in that church, were in full-time employment. There was no one else available, except me. But I did not have

the time. I had tried to move things around, but I still did not have the capacity to get the venue ready for this ecumenical service. Conrad, hearing my anxieties at length, simply said, "Why don't you ask Kathryn?" "No way!", I protested, "Even if I could have asked her before, there's less than a week now to the event. If I can't manage it, how will a new mother manage it?" I looked at my diary again for that day. There were already two diary clashes and I hadn't finished the sermon for that week. Perhaps there was someone else who could take it on, I thought desperately. So, I rang a couple of colleagues, but they were busy with other events. As the days ticked by, I got more and more anxious. I wasn't sleeping, I was snapping at Conrad even more, I was furious with God. Why wasn't God helping me?!!

Conrad, looked at me and said, "Have you asked Kathryn yet?" By this time, I was so desperate, so filled with hopelessness, that I just dialled her number. After listening patiently to my woes, Kathryn said, "Of course I'll do that for you. The baby can stay in the vestry if he needs to sleep." I could not believe my ears. Instead of believing in the power of God to use what I had at my disposal, I kept telling myself that those resources were too few, too meagre.

I was looking at the clay jar and not the treasure within. The disciples too looked at the five loaves and two fish, at their disposal, and forgot that the Messiah was with them. They forgot that God could and would take care of God's people. Do we believe this to be true? I am not CEO of the Universe - it does not all depend on me. What God needs me to recognise is that I am God's creation and that I have God's treasure within me. Siblings, I have found that it takes all my strength to believe those two facts. I am God's creation and that God's treasure can be found within me. When we have grasped that information, then we are ready to recognise that each one of us is created by God and we all have God's treasure within us. For, if we acted as if those two things were true, imagine the potential impact on the ministry of the Methodist Church? It could also alter our view of the world in a positive way. This is what it means to serve the living God. This is how to be Kingdom-people.

Our first appointment was in the High Wycombe circuit where Conrad and I job-shared so that we could take care of our first child. I spent three days per week looking after the pastoral needs of the churches and three days looking after Nathan, our son. To be honest, it was often easier dealing with the church members than entertaining a toddler and preparing meals! One day, I was washing the dishes and Nathan asked if he could help me. I put a chair in front of the kitchen sink and lifted Nathan onto it. I stood behind him, so that he would not fall off, and I continued washing the dishes whilst Nathan played with the bubbles. He was very happy and totally engaged as I cleaned each piece of crockery and cutlery. Into that space, hearing our small child chatter away, I heard God say to me: "Sonia, this is the ministry I call you too. I will look after my people, and you are called to join in." Later, Nathan proudly told his father that he had washed up all the dishes. Of course, he hadn't – I had but isn't that the ministry we are called to? God completes God's mission and we, Mr Wesley's helpers, are called to join in.

Whenever I forget that conversation with God, ministry seems hard and dispiriting. I feel as if everything depends on me. That I am failing to be the CEO of the world. But,

when I allow myself to just join in with the *missio deo*, then I feel lighter, more free, less anxious. This is what it means to serve the living God. This is how to be Kingdom-people.

As I have travelled around the Connexion, I have heard how overloaded Methodist people feel by Conference initiatives. Yet, oftentimes those Conference decisions come before us via memorials and notices of motion. I wonder therefore are we all responsible for the 'monster' that is before us in relation to new initiatives within the life of this church? As the pandemic ebbs and flows around us, we feel that there is little space to undertake new plans. Across this Connexion, I hear Methodists saying how overwhelmed they feel. But some of these tasks are core to the mission of God that we are called to.

Firstly, the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity Strategy outlines a pathway of how the British Methodist Church can be a safer place for each one of us regardless of gender, ethnic background or sexual orientation. Anyone who has a protected characteristic, as defined by the Equality Act of 2010, will know that this church is working to make them feel accepted, included and listened to. For too long, certain people have felt marginalised in this church.

They have heard statements on justice but felt that the British Methodist Church remains a place where injustices continue. But if God is on the side of those who are marginalised, then every Christian is called to stand alongside those at the margins. This is not an optional extra -

It should be at the very heart of all that we are seeking to be. It is also a strategy that we will achieve together. Jesus didn't just ask the disciples to deal with the crowds' needs by themselves. Jesus didn't say to Simon and John 'Sort this out and the rest of the disciples can watch from the side-lines.' Jesus worked with all the disciples to solve the problem that they were facing. We worship the God who makes 'the impossible' possible. Together, with God, the Methodist people can deliver on the JDS Strategy. This is what it means to serve the living God. This is how to be Kingdom-people.

Secondly, how can this church grow when we have seen falling membership numbers decade after decade? We find ourselves asking: are the God for All proposals even possible? We can't seem to keep the members we have now, how can we grow numerically and spiritually? Yet, I have seen new initiatives up and down the country. Like spring shoots after the winter, sometimes these new initiatives are half buried under dead leaves but, if you look closely, the green is visible. New life is coming. The Vice President and I visited the Newcastle District where three churches in one circuit had closed. The Superintendent had stepped down, due to ill-health and the new Superintendent talked of the fragility of the situation. One of the churches that had ceased to worship in the Methodist building took the decision, because of Covid restrictions, to continue to meet for worship in a local park. They gathered outside, sang hymns and prayed together. As people walked by, some stopped and joined in. The people who stopped weren't necessarily Methodists or even Christians, but they wanted to be a part of this small group worshipping God in the outdoors. New life is



coming, siblings. Green shoots can be seen. God is calling us to be faithful as servants of God. To put our trust in God not in our own strength. I have been a Christian for over forty years and not once has God not been alongside me. Not once has God failed to provide what I need spiritually at the time of God's choosing. God has strengthened me, equipped me, filled me with the Spirit's presence. Yes, I have felt the full force of life's storms but, like many of you, those storms have not robbed me of the faith I have in God. This is the message that we need to share with every person we meet. That, for me, is evangelism. That, for me, is spreading the good news of God's love which was present in the life of Jesus and is also present in God's people today. God is building God's church because God loves each person. But church-building is risky business. It does not happen overnight. It requires commitment from the strong to assist the weak. If green shoots are to be nurtured, across this Connexion, it will mean that strong Circuits might have to forgo ministry so that other parts of the Connexion can flourish too. We cannot resource everywhere. We cannot provide paid ministerial staff to everyone. Choices will have to be made. What will be important is how those choices are made. Will the choices we make bring glory to God and will those choices help the Methodist Church to proclaim the message of God's love where it is most needed? This is what it means to serve the living God. This is how to be Kingdom-people.

As modern-day disciples of Christ, we believe that God can make the 'impossible' possible. That it is God who can give strength to the weary and breathe new life into dry bones. As the Bible says: "**...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.**" [Isa. 40:31] God gives vision to God's people so that we can see the possibilities even in the valley of the shadow of death. This is a reality to be grasped as we continue to faithfully follow where God leads. It was my great privilege to attend 3 Generate in October last year. To be surrounded by hundreds of young people, who truly believed that anything was possible, was one of the highlights of the Presidential year. I was staggered by the waves of enthusiasm. They were enthusiastic about God. They were enthusiastic about the Church. They were enthusiastic to be together worshipping and dedicating themselves to God. What is preventing that enthusiasm in my walk with God, in your walk with God? These young people had also been through the pandemic. Their school and church lives had also been turned upside down. They too had known the pain of bereavement. Yet, in that space, they were being passionate about their faith. Where is my passion for the Gospel? Where is your passion for the Gospel?

Where is our enthusiasm for God and the ways of God? When we feel that the ministry we seek to offer is lost in a sea of administration, perhaps we need to remember who we belong to; the rock from which we are hewn. The Psalmist writes: "**I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.**" [Ps. 121: 1-2]. As we fix our gaze on God, passion for this ministry can be renewed within us. For it is God who re-lights our enthusiasm for His ways and Her justice.

Over the past year, whenever my enthusiasm has begun to wane, I have felt myself borne up by all those who kept me before God in prayer. Thank you to all those who

have prayed for me. Truly, I have felt the power of those prayers every single day. I would like to thank the Secretary of Conference, Jonathan Hustler, who has enabled me to grow in the role by his confidence in me. Jonathan, you have shown, by your wisdom and your grace, that the British Methodist Church has a tireless and a faithful servant in you. I would also like to thank the Connexional Team who have provided excellent support to the Presidency particularly the Communications Team and our administrator, Rachel Tufnell. And my special thanks go to the Vice President, Mrs Barbara Easton. Barbara, you have been a true sister to me making sure I feel supported because you always had my back. It has been a great pleasure to fulfil this role, in the life of our Church, with you as my companion. Thank you, my sister.

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?" His father answered, "If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong, I can't do it." The father placed his arm around the boy's shoulder and said, "No, son, you didn't use all your strength – you didn't ask me to help." There will be many occasions when, as the people of God, we will feel overwhelmed by the circumstances before us. Just as the disciples felt out of their depth time after time after time. We will continue to feel swamped and overwhelmed if we only focus on our own resources, on our own strength. But this is God's calling, siblings, and God has already given us all that we need. Look at what we have in our hands: **"...all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."** [Matt. 14: 20] Siblings, we have treasure, spiritual treasure. For no one, nothing, can separate us from the love of God, as St. Paul reminds us: **"Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."** [Rom. 8: 35, 37] The presence of God is before us, behind us, beside us and within us. We serve the God who delights in making the 'impossible' possible. Today and always. AMEN