

58. Managing Trustees of the Methodist Central Hall Westminster

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Introduction

This report from the Managing Trustees gives an overview of the varied activities and events that have been part of the life of Methodist Central Hall Westminster during 2024-25. The trustees oversee the building on behalf of the Conference. Letting and related income generated through our wholly owned trading company is used for the upkeep of the Grade 2* listed building, to support the worshipping community based there and the mission of the church.

The main task facing the Trustees is to bring Central Hall onto a path of financial sustainability. Historically the finances of the Trust have been wholly dependent upon the profits generated by the Company and these are still way behind the pre Covid levels. We are now repurposing some of the spaces in the building to increase the Company's capacity for commercial hiring from September 2025, which should provide a significant financial boost. It will also be important to use external grants to finance major expenditure on the building and this is currently under investigation by the Trustees.

Ministry of the Church

In October 2024, MCHW celebrated our 112th Church Anniversary. The Revd Dr Reynaldo F Leão-Neto, the World Methodist Council General Secretary, was our guest, and a successful church anniversary lunch followed the morning services. Leão now has an office at MCHW. Our multi-cultural congregation continues to grow following the pandemic with our 11 am Easter Day service drawing over 400 people. Church membership fluctuates at about 420. This year, we have, to date, received 11 new members through confirmation and seven by way of transfer from other churches. Our popular weekly live-streamed services from our Chapel continue to average 700-800 views each week from across the Connexion and globally: approximately 190 watching live every Sunday morning and the rest tuning in later. We look forward to marking our 300th online service. We have recently installed new cameras and projection equipment in the Great Hall to capture content from our 11 am service. Other online initiatives include Alpha, Bible studies, and other short courses. Our choir and musicians, led by our Directors of Music, continue to offer a wide range of music to enhance our worship. Our Organ Matinee concerts are greatly appreciated by those who attend.

The Revd Lansford Penn-Timothy has entered the stationing process and will leave the Circuit towards the end of July 2025. Unfortunately, a successor will not be appointed for at least a year. The Revd Gordon Newton (Supernumerary) has been an active team member but, for health reasons, now needs to step back. Mark Williamson, our Young Adults Leader, has also stepped down from his role to concentrate on his mission work with One Rock International. We will hugely miss Lansford, Gordon, and Mark and their enormous contribution to our life, worship and ministry. We wish them well and assure them of our love and prayers. Our probationer, the Revd Dr Joyce Popoola, is progressing well, and her ministry is greatly appreciated, albeit with limited deployment. We are reviewing our staffing needs and functions due to financial challenges and our losing a presbyter. We will be stretched next year. However, we are blessed with a vibrant engagement with children, teenagers, and young adults. We were delighted to receive a District Advance Fund grant to enable us to advertise for a Children's and Families Worker, which will significantly support the Superintendent, the Revd Tony Miles, Deacon Ali McMillan and the rest of the staff team.

Recent new initiatives include a Men's Fellowship. MCHW is also working towards Eco Church registration, and we have established a Neighbourhood Evangelism Team. We continue to engage with our local community, social justice issues, and support local charities: these include The St Vincent Family Project (hosted on site), The Westminster Food Bank, The Westminster SWEP Night Shelter, The Passage (helping homeless people), the London Prison's Mission and our work alongside Parliament. The Revd Tony Miles is working in Parliament with Lord Leslie Griffiths of Burry Port, seeking to build relationships and offering pastoral care and support. The Methodist Parliamentary Covenant Service enables us to host a service for MPs and Lords. This year, the Very Revd Dr David Hoyle, the Dean of Westminster, preached a very relevant sermon. There was also an interview with Lord Leslie Griffiths. Other participants included MPs, Lords, and members of the Connexional and MCHW teams.

Our small Visitor Services team serves us well. We can host some building tours (usually on Thursdays), and we seek to resource our Archives for Mission. We endeavour, where possible, to partner with other organisations, like Premier Radio and the BBC. Highlights among our special events continue to include

Daffodil Day (about 700 attending), a Traditional Carol service (about 1200), Jazz Carols, and Jazz Vespers (about 600). We look forward to our forthcoming Healing Conference in May.

The Circuit Meeting and the Trustees have permitted the Circuit Stewards to sell our Battersea manse, jointly owned by the Westminster Circuit and the Trustees. The Circuit then aims to buy a more suitable, strategically located manse. Despite hugely diminished resources in both the church and Circuit due to the pandemic, we have launched a £150k 'Church Anniversary Mission Investment Appeal', and we thank God that we managed to raise the £100k required to reach our Easter target. God is good! We press on with faith, imagination, courage, and expectancy.

Our Business Centre

We have continued to rebuild our client base following Covid seeing the return of many longstanding clients such as PiXL, Fever's Candlelight Concerts, and our many graduation clients. Over the past year we were honoured to be chosen to host the Infected Blood Enquiry as they announced their long-awaited findings and we welcomed other notable performers or speakers including Steven Bartlett, Katy Perry, Prof Yuval Harari, Ahluwalia and Trevor Noah.

Revenue generating opportunities in the financial year to 31 August 2024 were hampered by a closure of the building from December 2023 to February 2024 for upgrades to the sound system in the Great Hall – funded by our service partners - and delivering enhanced acoustics for all guests and MCHW. At the same time, we took the opportunity to overhaul our ageing goods lift with support from MCHW.

The annual lull in short lead event enquiries ahead of the summer was felt earlier than usual from April 2024. Despite securing some great bookings for the following year, our enquiries for summer 2024 fell short of expectations. Our overall revenues for the year of £7.5m fell short of budget. Compounded with continued wage inflation, the high costs of heating the building and ever-increasing reactive maintenance costs – a consequence of deferring £1.3m of scheduled maintenance and renewal over the Covid years, we incurred a significant loss.

We are pleased to report continued growth in our revenues during the first part of the financial year 2024/25 and are confident that revenues for the full year to August 2025 will settle between £8.5m and £8.8m. This is a significant improvement, but if we are to contribute further to the costs of upgrading the building in line with modern requirements and to build the reserves of the Trustees, we need fresh approaches in how we use our venue and reach the right audiences.

We have identified an opportunity to use the space currently occupied by Wesley's Café as an additional event space, providing an enhanced multi-purpose event/exhibition space in our light filled basement capable of accommodating up to 800 delegates. This additional space can be hired out as a stand-alone area but also allows us to pitch for significantly larger exclusive use events which will widen our potential client base.

Wesley's Café is a major part of the building's mission and offering. After consultation with Trustees and MCHW we developed designs for a new Wesley's Café, at street level opening the current Street Café into the Broadbent Room behind - improving accessibility and appeal. Work is now underway on the new Wesley's Café to accommodate up to 62 seated guests. Funding for this has been provided by our service partners Green and Fortune. We are taking the opportunity to review our menu and marketing – aiming to position Wesley's as a destination café – not just a coffee stop but a must-visit Westminster experience as well as the go-to place for our church and local community.

We expect the new Wesley's to open from 30 June 2025 and the new basement event space to receive its first guests on 1 September 2025. We are confident these developments will help us to deliver a stable income to Trustees, nevertheless we continue to explore other opportunities to enhance our contribution to the reserves of Trustees and further the mission of the Methodist Church.

The Building

The Hall Fabric Committee oversees the maintenance and upkeep of the building. We continue a programme of proactive maintenance but since 2020 our capital expenditure has been constrained for financial reasons. Our immediate attention is the recovering of two roofs that have been leaking, overhaul of the stage lifting mechanism and remedial fourth floor works. Until our finances improve, major expenditure will necessarily be limited.

Changes to the Wesley Café are outlined above and are proceeding satisfactorily.

Methodist Central Hall Westminster remains fully compliant with all health and safety, building, and environmental regulations. We have complied with the recommendations of the Quinquennial Inspection in 2022. We recognise that our operations have a local and global environmental impact, and so we are committed to reducing this as much as possible by following sustainability best practices. We are committed to innovative ideas in assisting the building to reach Net Zero within Government and Methodist guidelines.

Financial Situation

Central Hall was closed for six weeks in early 2024 for work on upgrading AV systems and refurbishing the goods lift. There was little customer business during the summer of 2024 and the financial year 2023/24 ended with a trading loss for the Trust and Company combined of around £1,000,000.

On 25 April 2024 the Trust received a connexional grant of £4million to cover historic losses and repay the ensuing bank debt. This allayed our immediate concerns and gave us a valuable breathing space. The current year has seen a better performance and the Trust and Company combined are expected to make a small loss for 2025/26 with the prospect of an overall small profit in 2026/27.

In February 2024, the Trust stopped paying a monthly cash grant to the MCHW Church which has led to financial challenges for the Westminster church as outlined above. It is unclear when this grant can be resumed.

The Trustees are committed to building up a cash reserve of £1million; due to the losses in 2023/24 and 2024/25 nothing can yet be allocated to this reserve. There is a long way to go; our immediate actions include increasing the Company's capacity for commercial hiring and investigating the use of external grants to finance major expenditure on the building.

The Trustees

On 21 July 2024 the Revd Paul Regan succeeded Revd Nigel Cowgill as Chair of Trustees. He is an independent Chair of Trustees recruited in line with a new role description to reflect the particular skills and expertise required. His recruitment followed the Nominations Committee process. The appointment of new trustees is in accordance with the arrangements for all other connexional committees.

We appreciate the work done by the trustees and record our thanks for their work.

*****RESOLUTION**

58/1. The Conference adopted the Report.