

Where are we heading?

Introduction

The paper in Appendix 1 was presented to the Methodist Council and published in the Methodist Recorder in February 2003, to stimulate a process throughout the Church that would lead to the identification of key priorities for the work and mission of the Methodist Church as a whole over the next few years. In particular, the paper encouraged churches and groups throughout the Connexion to support representatives from the Districts to this Conference to prepare for this conversation.

Exploration of key priorities for the Church takes place always within the Our Calling process, which is gradually giving greater focus to our core purpose as a Church and releasing energy in churches, Circuits, Districts and connexional bodies as they review regularly what they currently do in the light of the Our Calling themes.

1. The process

It is important to win wide ownership of key priorities that will shape our mission, stimulate new thinking and initiatives in many contexts, and focus our resources accordingly over the next few years.

The aim at this Conference is to discern some provisional themes about the direction in which God is calling the Church as a whole as we take stock of the society we are in and the Methodism we currently have.

These provisional themes can be widely debated and refined throughout the Church this coming year, so that at the Conference in 2004 we can come to a firm view of our key priorities, which will hold good over several years thereafter.

2. **Some initial reflections** from very early explorations of the question addressed to the Church as a whole, 'Where Are We Heading?':

2.1 **We need to encourage a new culture in the Church.** Talk of a new culture is not intended in a simplistic way wholly to displace what we are all familiar with - to which countless hundreds of people owe a debt of gratitude and within which we rightly salute faithfulness and courage. However, a new culture needs to be encouraged which affirms people who want to try new things, encourages the search for new ways of being Church, or supports the doing of traditional things differently. The new culture will be more innovative and less afraid of taking risks than the 'maintenance' culture that is perceived to be dominant in so many places; and will celebrate a greater diversity.

2.2 **We need to re-build confidence:**

- In what we believe and in the power of the gospel to be transformative of personal and social life; but we must genuinely believe in what we proclaim, speak it in a language which makes sense, and support at all costs honesty in preaching.
- In our worship, as a creative engagement with the deepest mysteries of life, in the midst of which the grace of God may be experienced and celebrated; but we need to find new contexts for worship and new words and music in worship, which make sense to people who have no experience of our traditional pattern of speech or of our church buildings.
- In a spirituality for our times, which helps people to develop and value their own spiritual lives, deepen the sacrificial love and celebrate it in its many forms; and connects with the search for spirituality which is a marked feature of contemporary society.
- In our vocation to maximise our skills and experience for a witness in every day life, in local communities, in multi faith contexts and in the political challenges of our society and our world.
- In our capacity to work creatively with others, including our ecumenical partners.

2.3 We need to focus our mission: We can no longer even appear to be involved in almost every conceivable aspect of Christian mission. We need to concentrate imagination, energy and resources on doing a few things very well - and thereby making a difference. We need to debate vigorously where to make a focus: is it, for example, on making disciples (of all ages and in all sorts of settings)? Is it directed to young people and people in their 20s and 30s? Is it somewhere else?

(To suggest a range of mission concerns which need to be considered here, please refer to Appendix 2.)

2.4 We need to rediscover the dynamic power of connexionalism - so that centres of creativity in worship and mission can arise anywhere, and everywhere; so that we can learn from one another because we are genuinely interested in one another - determined to share with one another, to give and receive, to nourish relationships with one another, no matter how great the differences and tensions between us sometimes - and to support one another with a strong sense of 'belonging', in which flexibility is encouraged.

2.5 We need to do all the above and at the same time face and manage radical institutional change. We need to address rising costs, inappropriate organisational structures, the burden of inappropriate buildings (or too many buildings) and the strain of trying to 'fill vacant offices' from a declining and ageing membership. How can we envisage appropriate supportive structures for the future of a risk-taking, flexible and focused mission? - Fewer Circuits? Fewer and better trained ministers? A clearer view about what we need and expect of Districts and the Connexional Team? Better training for local lay leaders? Greater diversity in the way we do things? Clearer and tougher accountability to one another?

The Conference is encouraged to discuss these and other perspectives on the theme: 'Where Are We Heading?'

APPENDIX 1

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

The local church

Has it become second nature to you yet? The Our Calling process, I mean. You recall the four themes:

Increasing awareness of God's presence and celebrating God's love (worship)

Helping people to grow and learn as Christians, through mutual support and care (learning and caring)

Being a good neighbour to people in need and challenging injustice (service)

Making more followers of Jesus Christ (evangelism)

I would love these themes to saturate our thinking about everything we do. But we can always do better. So, for example, each year each congregation is encouraged to take stock of how things are going in their worship, their learning and caring, their service and their evangelism. And sort out together a plan, a step forward, an achievable target which can develop the church's worship and mission.

I enjoy reading The Buzz* each month - four stories illustrating responses to the Our Calling themes from local churches in all sorts of places. They encourage us with good ideas we could try in our local situation. I know that each local situation is different. That's the beauty of the Our Calling process. It empowers us to say what's needed most in our locality or what could make most impact locally.

By thinking hard about our local situation and by drenching ourselves in the Our Calling themes, we grasp a vision of how our church could change, or what we could initiate, or how the church could re-order its priorities - so that God's mission makes a difference where we are.

Lifting our sights

There's more to being the Church than supporting the local church. But we don't always lift our sights to see the bigger picture. Why don't we all search together for **the key priorities we need to focus on for the British Methodist Church as a whole?** We can use the Our Calling process for the whole Church as a way forward.

Here's how we could do that.

1. Let's aim for the Conference in **2004** to agree the key priorities that ought to shape the Church's work throughout the Connexion for the following three to five years.
2. To help get there, at the Conference in **2003** time can be found to draw up a provisional list of these key priorities for our worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism.

3. Representatives to the 2003 Conference will be helped if they can receive your ideas about what most needs to be done to take the Church as a whole forward in the next five years or so. So why not have a go at thinking about what's most needed for the whole Connexion? You could dream such a dream in your house group, or in a church or Circuit meeting. I hope space can be found in District Synods or District Policy Committees to debate such issues. Make sure the representatives from your District to this year's Conference hear your vision of where the whole Methodist Church should concentrate its energies for the next few years. (Your minister will be able to give you their names and addresses.)

4. Think about how the Our Calling process works in relation to your local church, and then apply it to the national level. So:

Saturate yourselves in the words of the Our Calling themes, until they become second nature. They sum up what the Church is for.

Talk over together the biggest challenges to the Church's life and mission from the world around us - in British society, or on the international scene. What opportunities are we missing? What makes our mission really hard?

Discuss what stops the Church as a whole responding flexibly and creatively as the world around us changes quickly. What's blocking our mission? Where are the signs of hope? What has to change to enable us to stop doing the things of secondary importance in order to invest more in our top priorities?

Confront as honestly as possible the familiar issues we sometimes overlook because they are too familiar or too painful. For example:

- The ongoing decline in the number of Methodist members, and the dramatic rate at which children and young people walk away.
- Ageing congregations and ageing church buildings.
- The rising costs of everything.
- Ecumenical co-operation - liberation or burden?
- Ministers - what do you expect of them, and what do they expect of you?
- The impact of new rules and regulations, coming from Government, on the way we do things in the Church.
- Spiritual boredom.
- How do we use the skills and experiences of lay people?

5. Keep it simple! A few short, sharp sentences are all we need. Your three key priorities for the whole Church as it moves into the future under the guidance God's Spirit, to fulfil its mission in our day and age.

What really matters is that you discuss all the options you can think of that might be very important for the future of the Church, but somehow or other agree together which you will all identify as the top three.

It would be helpful if you emailed your top three agreed suggestions to priorities@methodistchurch.org.uk, or sent them to the Co-ordinating Secretaries' Office at 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR, as well as communicating them to your District representatives to the Conference this year.

Wouldn't it be great to share a vision of what the key priorities are for the whole Church as we take seriously the Our Calling process?

Such a vision can then influence everything we do when we work as a Connexion (e.g. the Conference itself and the Connexional Team). It can affect the contributions the Districts make to the overall work of the Church in their strategic plans. It can roll on from there to influence Circuit priorities. Which brings us back to where we began: your local church - but now so much more obviously connected to the wider Church, contributing to it and receiving from it.

David Deeks, 5 February 2003

**The Buzz shares stories from around Methodism every month by e-mail. You can sign up for The Buzz by joining the E-News distribution list: www.methodist.org.uk/links/email.htm*

APPENDIX 2

OUR CALLING

Service - the Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice:

- Struggling for a just world
- Being alongside the poor
- Caring for the earth
- Becoming friends with people of other cultures and faiths

Evangelism - the Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ:

- Telling the good news of Jesus Christ
- Calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship

Learning and Caring - the Church exists to help people grow and learn as Christians through mutual support and care:

- Caring for individual people and communities

- Building partnerships with other churches and groups who share some of our mission aims
- Sharing the task of education, social and spiritual development

Worship - the Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love

- Open to God's transforming love
- Receiving and reflecting on the Gospel of God's ways in the world
- Offering itself to share in God's costly action in the world

This appendix weaves together the Statement of Purpose of the Methodist Church (1996) and the main themes of Our Calling (2000).