

3. General Secretary's Report

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Resolution	3/1. The Conference receives the report and commends its contents for prayer, reflection and action.
Subject and Aims	To present to the Conference a report relating to the roles of the General Secretary of the Methodist Church as outlined in SO 300

A discipleship movement shaped for mission.... in partnership with others

"What we need is not ever more new initiatives year on year but several years where, in each and every part of our Connexion we... focus on what it means to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission, and rigorously pursue such policies and priorities as help bring that about." (2012 report, paragraph 40)

1. The Priorities of the Methodist Church (2004) begin with these words: "In partnership with others, wherever possible, the Methodist Church will..." This, my fifth report as the General Secretary, seeks to offer to the Conference information updating several issues outlined in my previous reports, together with other topics collected here under the general theme of 'in partnership with others'.

Wider Methodism

2. The remainder of this calendar year sees Britain playing host to some significant Methodist events. The 13th Oxford Institute meets in August, gathering together Methodist scholars and leaders from many parts of the world, around the theme *Wesleyan Communities and the World beyond Christianity*. In September the World Methodist Council meets in London. Its agenda will include the continuing promotion of education and understanding about issues around HIV and AIDS, and addressing issues relating to world hunger and promoting tax justice. The ministry of the shared liaison office in Jerusalem, the evolution of the ministerial exchange programme and significant ecumenical dialogues with other worldwide churches and communions will also be subjects before the Council. Then in October 2013 we will gather in Leeds to celebrate 200 years since the beginnings of the Wesleyan Missionary Society and use that opportunity to declare our continuing understanding of and commitment to God's mission outlined in the *One Mission* report before the Conference last year. I am deeply aware of and thankful for the considerable work undertaken by many Methodist people in planning, hosting, organising and administering these rich and valuable events, each of which serves to remind us of our humble and thankful place in a large, growing and vibrant Methodist family reaching around the world.
3. I reported last year that our relationship with the United Methodist Church (UMC) continues to deepen and that further work on our historic concordat is in progress. Over recent months significant strides forward have been made. Positive meetings with Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, the new Ecumenical Bishop of the UMC Council of Bishops relating to our Conference, and several senior staff in some of the General Boards of the United Methodist Church have taken place. It is my hope and expectation to bring to a future Conference an affirmation of the existing Concordat and, significantly, a number of newly worked and contemporary commitments which will further enable and enhance our mission and ministry, both bilaterally and as two different but complementary Methodist partners in a global context.

4. A significant and stimulating partnership among wider Methodism is our participation in the European Methodist Council. Amid disappointment about the cancellation of the third European 'Festival' in Poland last year the Council has begun to focus with renewed enthusiasm on what it means to be Methodist Christians in Europe today – in both 'British' and 'United Methodist' traditions, together with growing immigrant Methodist communities rooted in either, both or neither of these traditions. It is generally recognised by leaders in European Methodism that this is a fertile time for exploring an ever greater unity of identity and purposes. We are resolved to work towards those objectives.

Together with others... in these Islands

5. It is properly acknowledged that local ecumenical commitment and expression - what local Christians do together in their churches, communities and networks - is hugely important. The 'Think Speak Act' conference in January organised by the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) noted a tension experienced by many Christians. On the one hand we are seeking to establish ever more food banks, hostels for homeless people and other apt responses to the effects of ever deeper cutbacks in social welfare and benefits, while on the other hand protesting vigorously at the need for having to do so at all: both responses are rooted in our understanding of the gospel.
6. Then there are the opportunities and challenges presented by our ever more religiously diverse nations and islands, in which are situated increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse Christians and their churches. In Methodist terms a modest but significant response to our greater diversity is an increasing number of ministers appointed to language congregations and fellowships of Methodist Christians. Another response of some promise is to harvest and find apt ways of implementing the key outcomes from 'Belonging Together', thus embedding an ethos of inclusion as a lasting legacy of the three-year project which culminates this summer.
7. Informal conversations with leaders of the Pioneer Network have continued over this past year. There are a growing number of partnerships arising with members of the Pioneer Network and Methodist circuits and churches, and energetic projects involving properties and ministries are being explored and formed.
8. Of equal significance to local ecumenism is ecumenical expression and commitment undertaken in regional, national and international contexts. The Methodist Church remains deeply committed to covenants, special relationships and memberships that are proper expressions of our commitment to be contemporary disciples of Jesus Christ committed to God's mission in partnership with others.
9. Key among these is our Covenant with the Church of England, entered into a decade ago in November this year. Proposals from the Joint Implementation Commission about a process for discerning the way ahead and building upon considerable progress are found elsewhere in the *Agenda*.
10. In 2008, both the Conference and the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church (URC) resolved to pursue closer working between the two Churches. On behalf of the Methodist Church, the Methodist Council was directed to lead on that. Two significant meetings have taken place since the last Conference. In October last year the Methodist Council and the Mission Council of the URC shared joint sessions for a second time. The Councils explored some similarities and differences in our traditions, identified some of the blockages to further collaboration and shared ministry and mission today, and assessed the level of appetite to further tackle and engage them. These themes were revisited when the meeting of the Connexional Leaders' Forum in January was shared with leaders in the URC. In a valuable time of sharing, the need for further theological exploration about our two traditions and some practical assessments of processes relating to Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEP), their

properties, resources and staffing were identified. These and other themes, including initial explorations of sharing some 'back room' functions remain on the agenda of the Strategic Oversight Committee (SOG), the group created consequential to the Conference and General Assembly resolutions referred to above. More specific pieces of work are being undertaken by the Methodist URC Liaison Group, and the Joint Property Strategy Group. It is anticipated that the SOG may bring a report to a future Methodist Council or Conference and URC Mission Council or General Assembly.

11. The work of JPIT is an effective example of being 'better together'. This dedicated team, combining resources and expertises from the Baptist Union and Methodist and URC Churches regularly provides high quality, significant and often prophetic reports to the Methodist Conference and the governance bodies of Partner Churches. *The Lies We Tell Ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty* – a report from the JPIT partners and the Church of Scotland – was all of those things. It was circulated to Members of Parliament and others, reached many thousands of people via social media and was promoted on several websites. Resources for churches were made available on the JPIT website, and many Methodists and others have preached and spoken on the report, written to their MPs about the issue, and even organised public meetings.
12. Another very positive and productive partnership has been the Fresh Expressions organisation; a partnership formally begun in 2004 with the Archbishops of the Church of England and the Methodist Council, though more recently the URC, Salvation Army and Church of Scotland have all entered the ecumenical partnership. The impact of the Fresh Expressions organisation, and fresh expressions more generally, upon Methodism today is profound. Naturally ecumenical, and producing some fresh expressions of church that positively challenge all partner denominations in many respects, Methodism is clearly benefitting from this partnership.
13. In the context of decline made plain by the headline figures of our annual 'count' (eg c3000 loss of membership; c11000 reduction in attendance at worship across the week in 2012 compared with 2011) the information coming from our Statistics for Mission in respect of fresh expressions of church is hugely encouraging. At least 1,550 'Methodist' fresh expressions are meeting monthly or more frequently, attended by c46,000 people and supported by the efforts of c8,000 volunteers. The large majority of fresh expressions are led by local preachers and lay officers rather than ministers or paid employees. Significantly, three quarters of the fresh expressions have begun in the last four years. There are fresh expressions registered from every District in the Connexion representing over 80% of our circuits. There are early signs too that our highly regarded pioneering ministry project, VentureFX, is beginning to bear fruit and produce valuable learning.
14. The connexional figures for 2012 relating to more general activities of discipleship and mission are also encouraging. There are nearly 14,000 church groups being held across the Connexion (of which over 4,000 are youth groups) attended by over 240,000 people. These groups represent the work of nearly 45,000 volunteers across the Church and over 13,000 paid hours per week of lay workers, and are a major contribution to growth in faith and Christian witness in our Church. Throughout the Connexion there are nearly 9,000 local church outreach or community engagement projects, 7,600 of which are intended for those who do not attend church and which impact on the lives of over 580,000 people. This represents the work of nearly 43,000 volunteers and nearly 17,000 hours per week of paid lay worker time.
15. All this strongly suggests that the 'mixed economy' (or ecology) spoken of in recent years is become increasingly embedded and real throughout our Connexion.
16. The Youth Participation Strategy (YPS) comes to an end this year. This prophetic piece of work has seen sixty two young people working on the One Programme, and over the five years partnerships in delivery have been developed with Christian Aid and Action for Children. More

than just the One Programme, the YPS has led to increasing numbers of young people at the Council and the Conference, it has embedded the participation of children in 3Generate (the new name for Children and Youth Assembly) and pioneered new ways of working to hear the voices and prayers of the young. This year's Lent texting initiative for example, saw 1,067 people across the Connexion and beyond receive daily text prayers from our children and young people. Envied by our ecumenical partners, and recognised as excellent by secular youth agencies, this is a piece of work of which we should be justifiably proud. The work now done by the One Programme will continue and the participation learning will be foundational to the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network.

17. Then there is the 'Well Network' for those across the Connexion working with children, youth or families. This growing network of over 1,700 people receive training, and regular communications, together with retreats and forums, to empower, support and value our paid and volunteer workers.

Seeking to be in partnership with still others....

18. For fear of complacency, it is right to note that our commitment to discipleship of our Lord and our desire to participate in God's mission today means that still further efforts are required of us. Some fine work was done in recent years about 'missing generations'. Acute challenges remain in terms of how 'distances' of various kinds are spanned so that we might learn from, share and experience mutual enrichment with those many different people and groupings largely missing from our life as a Connexion. The oversubscription and huge success of the most recent 3Generate, nor the continuing significant ministry of the One Programme should not blind us to the challenge of missing ones. Missing - but not yet missed enough to spur us into truly sacrificial and serious strategic action?
19. Then there is the gospel imperative many of us feel about progressing what is sometimes termed the Equalities, Opportunities and Inclusion agenda, though that itself tends to obscure the fact that this is essentially about people; human beings made in the image of God for whom Christ died. To a number of the reports before the Conference each year and this year we must ask 'for whom is this good news? And who might not find it so?'
20. The rolling out of the *Past Cases Review* is another example that the natural consequences of seeking to live out the gospel of Christ are seldom easy or costless. There are those who have profoundly painful reasons for not being found among us. There are those who remain as part of us but at great personal cost. There are those damaged by past experiences for whom a safe, supportive Christ-like community is a precious, healing, much needed gift: which is why our continuing commitment to creating safer spaces is so very important. For all these people, both the activity and outcomes of this review are vital for the health and integrity of our Church.
21. Our continuing commitment to apt evangelism, and its importance, has featured in my last two reports to the Conference. There remains among us a deep desire to share and bear witness to the love of God, and sensitively invite people, by word and deed, to become disciples of Jesus Christ. A major gathering took place in November with more than 80 people nominated from Districts or invited from responses to an online survey. Task groups worked throughout the day on issues such as the nature of the gospel, the challenges and opportunities presented by our multi-faith, post modern context, and how best to seek to make new disciples today who are transformed by God's love. Materials to keep the conversation going in all our local contexts in church meetings and small groups are available on the *Deepening Discipleship* website together with short theological reflections commissioned from people throughout the Connexion and beyond. Following this event representatives from many Districts met in a lively forum to consider the nature and impact of the varied models of small groups found around the Connexion, the ways in which they help

form disciples shaped for mission, and how ever better resources might be developed in partnership with *Inspire*, Cell UK and others.

22. Our continuing commitment to partner in the Fresh Expressions organisation, and support our VentureFX programme, which it is proposed will work together increasingly, is a key means of contemporary evangelism in the sense that by these varied ministries authentic options for believing and belonging are offered to people who otherwise seem unable to partner with us.

Work on behalf of the Connexion undertaken with others....

23. In some way or other the whole of our *Conference Agenda* and conferring is work properly undertaken in partnership with others. That is the way we do it, and is absolutely right for a Christian body like ours, deeply committed to connexional principles. I outline here work that relates to my past two reports to the Conference; some of this work is found in other places in the *Agenda*, and some not.

Property

24. My reports in 2011 and 2012 both indicated the significance of our properties as resources for mission, whether liquid or capital.
25. From 1 September 2012 the Connexional Grants Committee transformed the use of the Fund for Property so that it gives greater effect to the vision of the Church as a discipleship movement shaped for mission. Grants have been directed to where their missional impact is the greatest. The mission of Wreyfield Drive Methodist Church in Scarborough has been enabled by a grant to extend and transform the church building, the only one on a large estate, and a significant community hub. The church works in partnership with ecumenical and community organisations in its mission to the community in an area of significant deprivation and hardship, and the buildings extension and transformation is to enable this work to flourish, providing an accessible and welcoming base and springboard to mission.
26. There are other ways in which managing trustees are being encouraged and helped to make the best use of property for discipleship and mission. Since the 2012 Conference we have launched the updated Consents website, which is significantly more user-friendly and effective than the earlier, first version. The District Property Secretaries have begun meeting together to encourage each other and build up skills and knowledge together, with input from the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, Methodist Insurance and members of the Connexional Team. *Property Matters* – as an e-letter – has been launched. Members of the Connexional Team are working together with a group of district representatives to digitise the annual property returns and develop a database that all Circuits and Districts can access to facilitate the more effective care and use of their properties. And work is also underway to make the use of listed buildings for mission less scary!
27. One of the needs identified in my 2011 Report, echoing themes the President of the Conference of 2005 made passionately, was how we release new resources for mission by facilitating a more effective process of closing churches that have fulfilled their kingdom purposes in their present place and form. Work has been undertaken on just this issue by the Joint Property Strategy Group (JPSG), recognising that our URC partners face many of the same challenges. The JPSG is preparing a report to the Strategy and Resources Committee proposing a process that will enable Districts to appoint a group that will assist with these decisions, in keeping with their responsibility under SO 962 to formulate and keep under annual review a development master-plan for church buildings and circuit staffing. The existence of a district group will enable Circuits to focus on providing the necessary pastoral care and support whilst difficult decisions are taken.

28. This is a good point to share a good news story about the new finance database. It has been a significant investment, in terms of time as well as money, but is driven by the desire to ensure that the Church's connexional funds and financial processes are all managed as efficiently as possible as we seek to help the Church make most effective stewardship of its finite resources. Though the budget presented to the Conference is challenging, the information available to those charged with bringing it to us continues to improve significantly, enabling better and more reliable decisions to be made.

Ministry matters

29. Work on local pastoral ministry has continued this year, and a workshop during the Conference will share learning so far and invite guidance for further progress. A number of exciting possibilities are being worked out, and I am optimistic that appropriate and enabling models of local pastoral ministry are being identified and will be presented to us in due course.
30. For superintendents the opportunity to meet together to worship and pray, to share practice and learn from one another, and to hear about new developments and resources, continues to be provided through an annual conference offered at two locations. Learning together is at the heart of these conferences, embodying the principle that sharing stories and reflecting together on experience is a key means of identifying and affirming good practice. Partnership is a key theme in current conversations around superintendency, as in the induction for new superintendents, where the topic of collaborative leadership in a time of exciting and challenging changes receives significant emphasis.
31. One of the greatest opportunities, but perhaps major challenges, in creating the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN) will be the enablement of local, regional and connexional priorities to inform and shape each other in such a way that the DMLN responds appropriately to a wide range of needs and opportunities. The creation of eleven new regional areas for training and development together with two outstanding centres of learning as the framework for the DMLN is a significant development with the potential to enhance a key vision of our Connexion; the discipleship and learning of the whole people of God. The Ministries Committee is overseeing work on new pathways for local preachers and worship leader training and formation and practice based formation. These truly exciting opportunities will be a key output of the new DMLN. The proposed ways of working, culturally embedding collaboration, partnership and participation among staff instinctively and profoundly committed to the aims of the DMLN, represents a more robust and connected arrangement for delivering training throughout the Methodist Church than has possibly ever existed. There will be a workshop during the Conference about future local preacher and worship leader training and development, which will enable present plans and progress to be shared and further plans to be explored and made.
32. *Connecting Disciples*, an annual event for lay people employed in many and varied roles across the Connexion, evolved from the annual lay workers conference. It is a unique opportunity for lay people from across the Connexion to come together for professional development. It is for them a time to focus and reflect on their ministry in the context of their role, themselves and their own discipleship journey. The event this year was shaped around diverse and dynamic work related workshops, a range of Bible study options, and keynote speakers, class groups, worship and prayer times. One hundred and thirty delegates came from twenty seven Districts, and one all the way from New Zealand! The largest group by role were children, family and youth workers (60%), but there were also pastoral workers (16%), outreach workers (9%) administrators (8%), pastors (4%), community support workers (4%) and project workers (1%).

Partnerships of giving...

33. The people called Methodists have always been generous and, particularly when we catch a sense of God's purposes, together we put time and energy into being living expressions of God's grace. Over the past year we have been making plans for ***A Generous Life***, a way of encouraging us to have a vision of what our local church could be, and how we contribute to enabling it. Next year will see a range of resources produced for churches to use to consider these themes: media clips, reflective booklets and sermon notes to introduce and explore commitment and generosity. We will also be promoting stewardship resources to help churches fund their vision and encourage commitments of time, talents and money. Wesley Day is a particularly relevant time to celebrate all that God has given us. Consequently 24 May 2014 will be a particular point in the calendar of ***A Generous Life***, but of course it's a lifelong and life changing thing, not just for one day. I hope this will be an initiative that continues to provide a focus of generosity in response to the greater generosity of God to us.

Partnerships giving rise to thankfulness

34. In terms of the senior leadership of the Connexional Team there have been significant changes since the last Conference. Following decisions of the Council and resolutions of the Conference, the posts of Strategic Leaders came to an end. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Christine Elliott, John Ellis and Mark Wakelin for their profound service to the Connexion and the Team throughout the connexional years 2008/2012, and for being my 'distinctively Christian and highly professional' colleagues.
35. The new Senior Leadership Group (SLG) of the Connexional Team has become well established quickly and I pay tribute to the continuing hard work, high competence and deep commitment of my colleagues.
36. As with any new group taking on leadership there are bound to be changes and one of them that has affected the *Agenda* is that we have decided together not to put a Connexional Team report before the Conference. This decision was taken after examination of the evolution of the Connexional Team report which at its inception also contained the budget headlines for the year ahead. Over the last few years the Team report has been a short summary of some of the work the Team has done under the direction of the Council and it is our belief that the Council and the SRC are the right places for fuller reports of the Team's work. In October this year the Council will receive not only a full workplan for the year ahead following the Conference's deliberations but will also receive a clear update on the progress of the workplan for this year. The SLG believes this is the most appropriate route for the scrutiny of the Team's work.

Partners in ideas

37. Phyllis Tickle suggests that there is a great upheaval or 'emergence' affecting global Christianity about every 500 years. British Methodists might think significant upheavals and emergences are happening much more often than that – and we are not alone in thinking such about our life as Christians today. Tickle comments that whether the Christian Church wants to change or not, it *is* changing. That is certainly true of our life together, both connexionally and contextually. It is important that we engage with this inevitability intelligently and as a complex organisation living in a complex context.
38. I have found the work of Ronald Heifetz helpful here. Besides the need to address what he calls 'technical challenges' – for example, producing good processes and making sound decisions and the like – he states that it is equally vital to recognise the need to respond to 'adaptive challenges'. This is a period where a community experiences bad news before it becomes good news, where there is the pain of giving up a love of something that is known for a love not yet experienced. In such times, he says, the past becomes thought better or

more sustainable than it probably was, and there is a sense of disloyalty associated with breaking with the past. Critically, then, in such times new learning and leaps of faith are required together with a regular bringing to mind – re-membering - of the hoped for future, the vision that leads and inspires.

39. Over this year the President has properly reminded us that we are more than simply an organisation. We are a Church. We believe in the sovereignty of God, that Christ is our Head and the Holy Spirit our guide. Obedience, faithfulness, openness and readiness to our Triune God are our hallmarks, and our hope. In that faith let us continue our pilgrim way, in partnership with others and with our faithful God.

*****RESOLUTION**

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