

27. General Secretary's Report

Basic Information

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| Title | The General Secretary's Report |
| Contact Name and Details | Martyn Atkins generalsecretary@methodistchurch.org.uk |
| Status of Paper | Final |
| Resolution | 27/1. The Conference receives the report and commends its contents for prayer, reflection and action. |

Summary of Content

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| 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 Standing Order 300 |
| Main Points | Introduction The direction of travel: discipleship and mission Updates on Connexionalism, God's Mission, Evangelism, Worship, Movement An update on some of the specific suggestions in the 2011 Report Patterns of Ministry, Discipleship and Mission God's properties and our stewardship: resources of discipleship and mission. A fluid mixed economy A rich landscape of partnerships Keeping faithful and carrying on |
| Background Context and Relevant Documents | The General Secretary's report 2011. |

27. The General Secretary's Report to the Conference

"A discipleship movement shaped for mission.... We desire to be the best that we can be for the God we love, worship and serve.... The sharp challenge before us now is the extent to which we are willing to continue to reshape our life together in faithful obedience to God – locally, in Circuits, Districts, regions, and in terms of the whole Connexion – for the sake of the world." (2011 report, paragraphs 11 and 12)

Introduction: Alleluia!

1. Profound gratitude to God. Deep appreciation. Humble amazement. These are some of my responses and those of my colleagues to the realisation that *Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission* in both its full and summary forms has been read, discussed, commented upon, prayed about, and begun to be applied and implemented by considerable numbers of Methodists over the past 12 months. Just as the 2011 Conference warmly received the Report and approved the 'direction of travel', affirming 'discipleship' and 'mission' as key drivers for prioritising and focussing the resources of our Church over the next period of time, so in like manner and in very large numbers have the wider Connexion. There is clearly considerable support for *deepening discipleship* and extending mission at every 'level' of our Church, and we rejoice that this is so.
2. Especially moving have been statements that conversations and prayers prompted by the report have been a source of encouragement and challenge, leading to a greater commitment to God's purposes and a deeper sense of faithful hope. New vision statements have been written, decisions taken and appointments made that embody our owned direction of travel: to deepen our discipleship, make new disciples of Jesus Christ and share in God's kingdom mission with greater resolve and intent. I particularly liked the email from a lady explaining that she was giving up a role which someone else would now have to do because she had been appointed "the Discipleship Champion" for the Circuit. She talked of a new sense of God's call and huge excitement. As one Methodist leader put it recently, "huge numbers of Methodists have 'got it'".
3. So we gratefully affirm and celebrate God's continuing, gracious engagement with us as a Connexion. We are not finished because God is not finished, either with us as part of the Church of God's Son, or with the world God loves. It is with great thankfulness then, rather than complacency, and also with an awareness that our renewed travel is but barely begun, that I present my report to the Conference of 2012.

The direction of travel: discipleship and mission

4. Some of our many 'good news stories' have been collected together and will be presented at the Conference. These demonstrate how, with proper confidence and faithfulness, Local Churches, Circuits and Districts continue to develop their work not only with our agreed focus on discipleship – life long, whole-life and world transforming – but also responding to the sharp challenges and encouragements consequential to that focus. Circuits and Local Churches are leading the way in making choices about the use of resources: about staffing, property, finance – including investments – and on what to spend finite time and energy, so as to be ever more useful partners in God's mission; costly choices in hard times. Yet, wonderfully, it is even as the hard choices are made, and holy risk-taking undertaken, that new energy, new passion and new generosity erupts.
5. Similarly, and also in hard times, the work of the Connexional Team is increasingly focused on enabling the whole Church to become an ever better discipleship movement shaped for mission. We seek to co-ordinate the work undertaken by different parts of the Team, raising our awareness of the issues and ensuring an efficient and coherent approach to our endeavours.

6. Over the next connexional year the particular discipleship theme is, '*Reconciling Discipleship*'. Practical and risky ventures of love, acts of mercy, are an important means of grace. This theme is picked up in the next prayer handbook entitled, *Crossing the Chasm*, and is a challenge prayerfully to build bridges across the chasms of language, race and culture, drawing in the threads of the Belonging Together project. It is also a challenge to address personal chasms in our own difficult relationships and those of the communities we belong to.
7. Alongside and enabling this work focussed specifically on discipleship themes is the vitally important work of the Team in those many areas where things are undertaken uniquely or best by connexional staff on behalf of the whole Church: some of these are discussed in the Connexional Team's report to the Conference. Consequently the Connexional Team seeks to resource the wider Connexion in terms of discipleship and mission, exploring ways of helping the Local Church improve the offer it makes to and with the community. We seek to release time and energy for the key foci on discipleship and mission throughout the Church by undertaking necessary work on behalf of the whole Connexion. I am proud to lead a team so full of committed, professional, hardworking and visionary people.
8. The 2011 report contained several themes which express and resource a direction of travel focussed on **discipleship and mission**. I offer here a brief update on some of these themes.
9. **Connexionalism**. How contemporary Methodism understands and embodies the nature of its connexionalism remains a work in progress and regular occasions must be found in future years to revisit and reflect on what a Conference report in 2007 described as a "vital truth". It is clear that the connexional principle is understood and applied in a variety of ways by Methodists – not all of which lie easily with each other – though usually light as well as heat is produced. It is also increasingly clear that our connexionalism is not subject only to our own conversations and decisions, but is affected and impacted by decisions of government and legislation.
10. Nevertheless our continuing commitment to being 'in connexion' with each other is rooted essentially in our conviction that we are better together in our discipleship of Christ and our sharing in God's kingdom mission in God's world. So connexionalism remains an essential dimension of the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative, now increasingly involving "bigger than circuit" considerations. A particularly sharp issue in some places is the consideration of what connexionalism means in terms of shared resources as circuits join together. The report from the review group of the Methodist Missionary Society contained in volume one of the agenda reminds us that connexionalism includes being part of a worldwide family of Methodist disciples.
11. **God's Mission**. The focus on mission is welcomed by the Connexion. Christian mission is rooted in the nature of God who seeks and serves, loves and saves to the uttermost. Sharing in God's mission and working for God's kingdom aided by the Holy Spirit is best understood as a natural consequence of being a disciple of Christ and as a core purpose of Christ's Church.
12. Wonderful though this notion of 'God's mission' is, there is a constant act of translation needed. We are challenged to work out, "what mission means" in the present context, as Methodist Christians alongside other Christians and those of other faiths and no formal faith at all. It's really exciting, as many of us are discovering. One very helpful way of working out what sharing in God's mission means in our local context, now, was outlined by the Revd Vernon Marsh, the Chair of our Sheffield District, and I share it here.
13. Vernon invites us prayerfully to reflect on:
 - what sort of world we think we are and will be living in?

- what sort of Christian people we think we need to be, to be the best for God we can be in such a world?
 - what sort of Methodist Church do we need to be in order to be that kind of Christian people, together with others?
 - what decisions – some hard and costly – do we have to continue to make in order to help shape and enable this view of the world, people and Church?
14. **Evangelism.** The intention to make a priority of evangelism including the ongoing assessment of the amount of resource needing to be given to it, has been widely welcomed. Lots of our good news stories relate how we are seeking and finding more apt and appropriate ways of inviting people to become disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is happening in a multitude of ways, but nearly always it involves time, prayer, deep interest, ‘movement’ to be alongside others and a community of Christians who speak, act and live out the reality of the gospel, rather than merely inviting others to journey across ‘space’. Always such encounters change not only the lives of others, but our own lives and the lives of our Local Churches - and for good. We are realising that apt evangelism is not only a call, a priority and a responsibility, but is also enriching and arises as a natural consequence of seeking to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission.
15. In spite of this encouragement, there remains a continuing need of an apologetic for and yet more examples of ‘apt evangelism’, authentic and contemporary ways of inviting people to receive God’s love in Christ and seek to live a Christian life. What a new Christian disciple ‘looks like’ remains a key issue: theologically, ethically, practically and in terms of the degree of resources we offer to creating and sustaining such new disciples. Encouraging evangelism so that an even larger number of Methodist churches and people can engage in and inhabit it is critical over the next few years and requires a combination of local vision and initiatives, fertile partnerships with others and connexional input and resources in order that this becomes a point of increasing strength.
16. **Worship.** We have begun to reflect and work on how our public worship might bring earth and heaven together more authentically and closely, how our whole-life discipleship, personally and collectively, is offered to God and so enables “wonder, love and praise” while making meaning and sense of our complicated lives. We have remembered and rejoiced that our gracious Lord is interested in all of life, and wants to transform it all – including us. We remain committed to planning, preparing, training for, leading, attending, and participating in worship, and shall continue to do so. Some of the material before the Conference continues to work this out. We seek the Spirit’s help in all this and are not disappointed.
17. **Movement.** The term ‘movement’ as a descriptor of contemporary Methodism has energised many and frustrated some. Those who welcome it talk about becoming and being a Church that is being moved by God and the needs of the world, a Church that ‘moves’ in that it is more flexible, dynamic and responsive to changing times and circumstances. ‘Movement’, in contradistinction to the inflexibility, slowness and habitual responses associated with dry institutionalism. Others have understood the emphasis on ‘movement’ to be at the cost of understanding ourselves as a Church with the consequences that ‘marks’ of Church such as ordained ministry and sacraments are downgraded in significance. Still others seem quite content to weld the language of ‘Church’ and ‘movement’ together without these associations. The conversation will no doubt continue and is welcomed. The crucial thing is not to permit our commitment to discipleship and mission to falter.
18. One of the areas where issues such as mission, evangelism, worship, church and ‘movement’ come into sharp focus is where Fresh Expressions and those exercising pioneer ministry have brought an increase in those meeting together and impacted on local communities. Questions of leadership and the relationship to inherited church become urgent as we make a real difference in people’s lives. Those people, who are Methodists because that’s the place where they encounter God’s life-

transforming power, sometimes find it difficult to understand the language of historic church rules and expectation. But they testify to meeting Jesus through our people.

An update on some of the specific suggestions in the 2011 Report

19. My 2011 report also contained some specific proposals for prioritising deeper discipleship and more focused mission. I offer here a brief update on some of these proposals.
20. Staff in the Support Services Cluster have begun to align their work with this direction of travel by focussing particularly on themes of stewardship and service. Within this they have recognised the need to operate as effectively as possible in facilitating the more outward-facing parts of the Team, but also the possibilities better to equip district officers in a wide range of disciplines, such as finance, property, employment and safeguarding to facilitate discipleship and mission across the Connexion.
21. The imaginative work undertaken by regions around the Connexion for *Extending Discipleship - Exploring Vocation* has highlighted the transformative impact of short term mission or vocation exploration placements. Opportunities to explore a different ministry context, such as that of street pastors, and then be guided into theological reflection upon the experience, profoundly deepens discipleship and discernment of vocation. This learning is shaping our resourcing to become a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

Patterns of Ministry: discipleship and mission

22. The *Fruitful Field* report is found elsewhere in the *Agenda*, but its basic assertions – that we aspire to be a learning Church, formed and trained as disciples of Christ, lay and ordained alike, and that we should allocate our shared resources in new, strategic and consistent ways in order to bring this about – lie within the direction of travel we have agreed together.
23. The focus on resourcing Circuit Leadership Teams remains important and urgent. The *Fruitful Field* report begins to indicate ways in which leadership teams can be better supported by the accessible distribution of our shared resources. Significant steps have already been undertaken by district development enablers across the Connexion to equip and support “healthy circuits” and those who share in their leadership, and work is underway to gather these resources together to share learning and expertise.
24. Similarly for small group leadership, where the collection of existing (plentiful) resources is being coordinated with a view to making it available on-line, together with an assessment of revising and facilitating training for some Methodist resources, such as *Disciple* and *Step Forward*. Work is being done to explore different ways of encouraging people to ‘talk of God’ together, for example developing material for Pentecost 2013 with a focus on small groups linked to the Covenant prayer. We need different shapes of groups to meet different needs of discipleship, although all need to be intentional about not being there just for themselves but having a kingdom purpose beyond the group.
25. The resourcing of superintendent ministers continues to develop, with training officers, district development enablers, connexional tutors, members of the Connexional Team and existing superintendents involved in a project to design and produce future provision. Two additional connexional conferences take place this year – two more than in the past – and well over half of our superintendents have chosen to attend.
26. Embedding safeguarding/safer spaces in every environment in Methodism is a key objective taken up in some of the recommendations of a recent President’s Inquiry. The Conference response to the

recommendations of that Inquiry will determine how this key work will proceed. It is important to underline here the importance that we see in 'getting the basics right' as a crucial part of seeking to become a more effective part of God's mission. We thus affirm the huge importance of our developing safeguarding policies and work. It is only in seeking to be a safer place for children, young people and vulnerable adults, that the risky challenge of the Gospel can be spoken or heard with any integrity - what we do and who we are speaking far louder than what we say. The exciting and vital development of Equality and Diversity work and the 'Belonging Together' project also provide a proper back ground of our longing to be different and make a difference.

27. Similarly, connexional resources for work among, with, for and by children and young people are highly dependent upon the decisions of the Conference in relation to a challenging financial environment. That said, the most recent Statistics for Mission signal a modest but real continuing rise in work among such crucial groupings of people, and we rejoice in that.

'Jim' took a major step in his discipleship journey while on the One Programme as an OPP. He gave his testimony to a district synod in this year. It was a real highlight. Why? Because deep down we know that the gospel is good news. Because becoming a Christian is a good thing. And following Christ remains the highest and challenging calling of human life. Our OPPs scheme is disciple-making.

28. Models of Local Pastoral Ministry have begun to be considered by the Ministries Committee and further consultation with the Faith and Order Committee is planned to take place during 2012/2013. Recognising that we need to build on good practice and on innovative work already being undertaken by Circuits and Local Churches across the Connexion, models and experiences are being gathered together, and our ecumenical partners and Partner Churches overseas are also being invited to share their learning and expertise. It is hoped that appropriate connexional models will be presented to the Conference in 2013.
29. Development of chaplaincy models which are congregationally based and involve small teams of lay volunteers, provide a genuinely missional way for Local Churches to engage with their surrounding communities. Churches in Burnley have launched a lay chaplaincy team to minister to St Peters Health Centre in the heart of the town. The Health Centre Manager has an intuitive grasp of what lay chaplains can offer and the blessing they can bring to the patients, visitors, families and staff – and the needs that exists for this love, care and witness from Christians locally. The 'Chaplaincy Everywhere' exhibition offers a range of stories like this which illustrate the far reaching effect that comes through a commitment to this kind of outreach.

God's properties and our stewardship: resources of discipleship and mission.

30. Some of the sharpest observations in the 2011 report concerned our properties, concluding that we had too many church buildings, meaning too many in the wrong places, too many unfit to sustain our life as a discipleship movement shaped for mission, and urging the need for both centres of excellence and 'fewer, better buildings'. And yet these observations have struck a chord with very many of us. Indeed a good number of the 'Good News Stories' relate how Local Churches and Circuits are increasingly reflecting on the use of their property assets, sometimes continuing as capital and sometimes made liquid to fund projects for the sake of deepening discipleship, making new disciples of Christ and engaging in God's mission.
31. The work indicated by Resolution 2/4 of the 2011 Report is being taken forward by the joint Methodist-URC Buildings Group formed as a result of the 2010 joint meeting of the Methodist Council and the Mission Council of the United Reformed Church. The Group has visionary and energetic members with practical experience of making our buildings work hard for the kingdom, where possible by sharing resources generously and ecumenically. Some of its members were involved in the recent Resourcing Mission Forum to enable it to engage more fully with those

working daily with these challenges at district level. It is clear that there is a good deal of desire and determination to remove obstacles and create fair processes to achieve the several stated outcomes in the Report. The group would hope to bring recommendations to enable the 'direction of travel' to the Conference of 2013.

A fluid mixed economy

32. This is, as yet, the least formed and implemented element of the 2011 Report but we are resolved that it is an important element in enabling our chosen direction of travel. Various expertises, skill-sets and knowledge-bases are required to enable the work of removing obstacles and distinguishing between redundant policies and those which remain valid and valuable.
33. In every sphere of our Connexion – Local Church, Circuit, District and connexional committee – we must continue to work at good governance. Good governance holds the vision and purpose of the organisation rather than holds it back. Faithful trusteeship is 'holding in trust' the vision and purpose of the Methodist Church, be that for trustees of the Conference, a District, a Circuit or a Local Church. So we seek to be, wherever and whenever possible, permissive gatekeepers, those who assume that the answer may be "yes" until it is evidently "no". It is important therefore to sustain and develop models of good governance which serve the direction of travel of a discipleship movement shaped for mission, and therefore one which is servant not master, and facilitates rather than disables. This is a long-term work, but my hope would be that such enabling measures will be seen year on year and in the next year the Methodist Council will be giving thought to how trusteeship of a Local Church can be exercised to take into account the policy of the wider Circuit most effectively.

A rich landscape of partnerships

34. We continue to relish and nurture our wider Church partnerships in order to be more effective disciples in God's world. In August 2011, the World Methodist Council met as a family together in Durban, South Africa and we found that we were not about survival but about flourishing together in tough times. We listened to one another deeply and faithfully for God's grace to be infused within us and for this love to be shared widely. Our partnerships are shaped by culture, history and politics but our faith brings us into a deeper and stronger engagement in the world. Before we can talk about peace and reconciliation we need to talk about faith; and the language of faith – faith literacy – is key.
35. The growth and development of language and cultural based congregations and fellowships is continuing to expand throughout the Connexion. The links between our overseas partner Churches and this growth is crucial and enhances our understanding of ourselves as part of a growing family worldwide; a new connexion. We are learning what it means to be together and to coexist in deeper fellowship, building our understanding of diversity and embracing the challenges that it brings.
36. This diversity is also reflected in the membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and in the wider ecumenical family of which we are a part and in which closer bi-lateral partnerships are developing. The reality of changing patterns of membership and a challenging financial climate is giving rise to some creative and constructive conversations with partner churches in Britain. Alongside our covenant with the Church of England, we are exploring how to work more effectively with the United Reformed Church through wise use of our financial and people resources. Later in the year we will have a joint meeting of the Methodist Council and the URC Mission Council to progress this work. We are also discovering the challenge and excitement of less formal partnerships with church networks such the Ground Level Network in Lincolnshire and the Pioneer Network based on the South Coast. These are early days but perhaps we are discovering God's desire for us to work with partners as together we seek his will for mission and discipleship in new ways.

37. In this broader context we are increasingly working with other faith traditions to speak to the needs within our society and in the world. In this context we are choosing to speak out against unjust structures and challenging policies and practices that deny human community from flourishing. To do this we need to be articulate about what our faith means and how this shapes our lives and this means deepening our discipleship.
38. Our relationship with the United Methodist Church continues to deepen and further work on our concordat agreement of 1964 is in process.

Keeping faithful and carrying on

39. Increasingly over this coming year thought and time will be spent on a communications strategy enabling the advocacy and evolution of the main themes of the Report, and an overall emphasis upon the direction of travel towards deeper discipleship and effective mission. Enabling Methodism at every 'level' to have the courage and confidence to take repeated hard decisions is a key task over the next few years.
40. There are no new, long lists of aspirations or work proposed in my report this year. That will disappoint some, but I judge it is right. 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 walk in a direction of travel and 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. There will inevitably be a time to change a focus and broaden a direction, but not yet. Our focus on deepened discipleship, on making new disciples, on sharing in God's mission is not a fad but a normative requirement of followers of Christ. As Bonhoeffer put it, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."
41. Indeed what we are about, and need to continue to be about, is one of the hardest, most challenging things of all. We are seeking a culture change, so that in deep and significant ways we become more truly ourselves as Methodist Christian disciples today. We are seeking, under God, to alter the default settings on the Local Church, Circuit, District, and the whole wider Connexion.
42. It is in this broad context of reliance upon the leading of the Holy Spirit and holy risk-taking that we will be enabled to make the challenging and costly decisions facing us, including here at our annual Conference. Some of those hard decisions are about things very dear to us, others a recognition that some of our financial assets are fast disappearing. In recent times I have been inviting people to engage in an exercise whereby we imagine a time in the near future, say in 2017, and by this time how would we describe a picture of the communities and the Church that we would wish to see and experience. I invite us to reflect on how we got to where we are, what we are glad we did and decided however hard it seemed at the time. Because we must look to the future to live properly in the present, and we believe in the future because of what God has done in the past and continues to do now, here, among us.
43. But there are new challenges, because I know that many of us desire such. I offer three which I invite us as individuals, congregations or Circuits to take up.
44. For each building we close, can we resolve to start two new things: a church plant, a new act of worship, a new partnership in ministry and service, a new ministry, particularly among those 'missing' from our churches?
45. As Christian disciples ourselves can we dare to dream that every member of our congregations takes the time to walk on a journey of faith with at least one other person this coming connexional year?

46. Can we prayerfully identify one area of the life of our Local Church that needs to change or stop altogether? Then, carefully and sensitively change it or stop it. I feel this challenge acutely as the leader of a Connexional Team which, on behalf of the whole Church, simply does too much. I was reminded of this challenge by Bishop Raphael Opoko, Secretary of the Conference of the Methodist Church, Nigeria. He talked of the inheritance and life of his own Church in terms of expired drugs. They did work, once. But now they have expired and their continued use is in some cases dangerous, either because they are counter-productive or they mislead us into thinking they are making us healthy. If I have heard one response over the last year, it is our realisation that we cannot stay as we are and thrive.
47. Debra Meyerson writes of the best culture changers “Their ends are sweeping, but their means are mundane. They are firm in their commitments, yet flexible in the ways they fulfil them. Their actions may be small but can spread like a virus. They yearn for rapid change but trust in patience. They often work individually but pull people together. Instead of stridently pressing their agenda, they start conversations... And in the face of setbacks they keep going.”

*****RESOLUTION**

- 27/1. The Conference received the report and commended its contents for prayer, reflection and action.**