

Pastoral Letter from Rev'd Jonathan Hustler, Secretary of the Conference

June 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Along, it seems, with about half the population, I am currently reading Hilary Mantel's massive new novel *The Mirror and the Light*. My daughter calls it 'a lockdown cliché' but there will be some who have, neither read any of the trilogy, nor seen the TV adaptation of the first two books. In brief, Mantel has written a series of novels based on the life of Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, told largely from Cromwell's perspective. At one point in the story, a report reaches England that the Bible translator William Tyndale has been captured and executed in Antwerp but it is difficult to verify the rumour. Chapuys, the ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor, clearly knows more than Cromwell does and delights in teasing the Englishman by dropping hints and withholding information. The episode reminded me how easily we take for granted the means of communication in the world today and how hard it was to get reliable news in an age before not only the internet, television and radio but also mass circulation newspapers. Cromwell (even in Mantel's sympathetic account a Machiavellian figure) knows this well; the story is set against the rapid development and increased employment in the 16th century of print media and he is not slow to use his authority to censure or to destroy anything that the government does not want to be read. One of the themes of the story is the battle to control what is heard and believed, be it true or false. As in the 16th century, so in our day (and indeed in every age): the power of communication is also the communication of power.

Over recent weeks, many of us have learned to communicate in different ways. I doubt that I am alone in never having heard of Zoom, Microsoft Teams or VSee before 19 March (when Methodist Church House closed its doors until further notice). Now, almost every day, I am to be found in front of a screen, forgetting to 'unmute myself' or 'lower my hand'. It has been remarkable to see how many churches have adapted to the current situation by putting worship online in some form or another. However, every medium has its limitations. Some people are unable for personal or technical reasons to engage online and churches and ministers have been careful not to forget about the need to communicate with them also. However, even those who are part of a meeting online can be subtly disadvantaged. In Zoom meetings, I am sometimes struck by the options that the host has at her or his disposal to manage the conversation and the means that those more technically proficient have to influence the discussion in ways that would not exist were we sitting in one room. The power of communication is the communication of power.

As you will be aware, we plan for the Conference to meet in virtual form at the end of this month. The timetable will shortly be published and it will be clear that the business will be limited. Online methods of communication do not create the space that is needed for conferring about the work on God in a way that will lead us to make decisions in which we and future generations can have confidence. Neither do they best enable the celebration that is a part of every Conference, celebration that is often around points of transition to a new phase of ministry. We hope that at some point, we will be able, in a different way, to celebrate those points at some point in the next connexional year, but it is not possible to say more than that at present. One

of the frustrations of this period has been not knowing when restrictions will be lifted and so not being able to plan with confidence. We in the Connexional Team along with the District Chairs have done our best to offer clear and workable guidance. I am sorry that there have been times when some feel that advice should have been issued earlier and I know that we will not always have got it right but we have tried not to confuse by saying things that later needed to be withdrawn. To an extent, we have all been powerless in this.

When, eventually, Mantel's Cromwell hears a trustworthy account of Tyndale's death it is from someone whose English is 'good but not perfect.' Cromwell finds himself 'speaking simply; a lesson for me, he thinks, a lesson for all of us.' The subject of the conversation is the life of a Bible translator who, according to John Foxe's albeit polemical account, realized that a Church in which only a few could read the Scriptures was a Church in which power was held (and often abused) by a few. He therefore determined to make the Bible available 'for the public utility and profit of the simple vulgar people of the country'. Similar questions of accessibility face us today when new communication methods are employed. Not to be alert to those questions is to risk disempowering some of our brothers and sisters.

On the Feast of Pentecost, we celebrate that the power of communication has been given to the Church, not primarily to communicate power but to communicate truth. The power to which the account in Acts 2 witnesses is the power of the Spirit of truth. This year's Pentecost will be like none we have seen before, as this year's Conference will be like none that we have seen before; as much if not more than ever before we will need the guidance of the Spirit in all our communications, that we might find the confidence and simplicity that enable us to speak clearly and to exclude no one.

With thanks for all your prayers and an assurance of mine,

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan R Hustler', written in a cursive style.

Jonathan R Hustler

Secretary of the Conference

Father, if justly still we claim
to us and ours the promise made,
to us be graciously the same,
and crown with living fire our head.

Our claim admit, and from above
of holiness the Spirit shower,
of wise discernment, humble love,
and zeal, and unity, and power.

The Spirit of unconvincing speech,
of power demonstrative, impart,
such as may every conscience reach,
and sound the unbelieving heart;

The Spirit of refining fire,
searching the inmost of the mind,
to purge all fierce and foul desire,
and kindle life more pure and kind.

(Henry More 1614-87 alt. John Wesley
1703-91)

Holy Spirit,
breathe on us, that we may think what
is holy;
move in us, that we may do what it
holy;
attract us, that we may love what is
holy,
and strengthen us, that we may guard
what is holy,
For Jesus' sake.

Amen.

(Augustine of Hippo 354-430)