

Priorities for the Methodist Church

We are grateful to Revd David Deeks, General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Britain, for agreeing to share with the readers of *Rethinking Mission* this very clear statement of the priorities of the Methodist Church, so clearly related to its commitment to God's mission, and the strategy that the Church is adopting for implementing these priorities.

For several years the Methodist Church in Britain, through its governing body (the annual Conference), has been working to refocus on the heart of our calling as a Church. A key report (1985) was entitled *Sharing in God's Mission*. Thereafter came an extensive review of our ecclesiology in *Called to Love and Praise*, some important contributions from young people in the Church (*Charter 95*), and a 'one-liner' to crystallise the purpose of the Methodist Church: 'The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's grace in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission' (1996).

Our Calling

In 2000, the Conference adopted *Our Calling* – four interconnected sentences (sometimes reduced to four labels) again intended to summarise our core convictions, but this time doing more: initiating *processes of change* in the pattern of Church life that we had inherited from our history, particularly from the 20th century.

Here are the *Our Calling* themes: The Church exists to:

- Increase our awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's Love;
- Help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care;
- Be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice;
- Make more disciples of Jesus Christ.

Here is the *Our Calling* process: each year, each local church and circuit was encouraged to review its life and work in the light of the *Our Calling* themes, and agree together a target, plan or project for the succeeding twelve months which would enable the local church or circuit better to express *Our Calling*. At the end of that period, the church/circuit would review the outcomes of what they had decided to do. Then, in the light of that experience and in the light of local knowledge of their neighbourhood and of their own resources, the church or circuit would set another or revised target, plan or project, to move the church *forward*, step by step, towards the realisation of our shared vision of what the Church is all about.

Our Calling has triggered change – large and small – all over the connexion. We have attempted to garner stories of achievement and good practice, and make them widely available, to inspire churches and circuits throughout the Church.

In 2003 we decided to see where we had got to as a result of the *Our Calling* process, and to focus our energies appropriately. It was obvious that *Our Calling* had become widely known and was an easy tool to use (strengthened in many places by the use of more formal processes of church and circuit review). But we were conscious that, because we have been a reducing institution now for a very long time, we can no longer do everything we would like to do. We do not have sufficient resources, especially resources of people. We needed permission to prioritise. We cannot form 'ideal' local churches in every place, each with the full range of Christian resources and activities. Local churches need to do what they can, within their limitations, and to see themselves as complementing one another; then working together in collaboration.

In addition, we have become an increasingly older Christian community (with the involvement of children and young people in our traditional ways of being Church increasingly problematic): so we need to act urgently, before it is too late, to find radically new ways of engaging with our society, which is more and more distanced from the Christian movement. Finally, we needed to acknowledge that Methodism as a whole cannot 'go it alone' in our complex and rapidly changing society: denominational labels mean less and less; people who belong to Methodist churches come from a wide range of backgrounds; and only by ecumenical co-operation can we release the resources we need to respond adequately to the challenges of our contemporary context.

These positive fruits of *Our Calling* and the emergent needs of the Church near the beginning of the 21st century led to *Priorities of the Methodist Church* (2004):

In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church

As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:

Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer

Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide

Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Encouraging fresh ways of being Church

Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible.

The *Priorities* apply to the whole Church. Every part of the Church must now thoroughly review what it does and how it does things, in the light of the *Priorities*. The challenge, as ever, is to focus resources, prayer, reflection and action on the opportunities and issues that really matter, doing only those things in a local church that are best done there or can only be embodied there; doing only those things in a circuit that are best done there or can only be done there; and so on, for districts and for Church-wide ('connexional') activities.

A root and branch review implies at least three things: stopping many of the things we have inherited from the past that are not now central to our mission and worship; training and re-training people to develop a new, innovative, risk-taking, outward-facing culture for the Church and for Christian discipleship; and releasing locked-up resources which have accrued over the generations, to fund initiatives in mission and to empower people to be effective and confident disciples *in everyday life*. Most particularly, we need to face the challenge of communicating the gospel, of finding a language that makes sense to ordinary people in the midst of the ups and downs of everyday life, so that they discover *there* the amazing, life-transforming grace of God.

Supporting change

Not everyone is yet convinced of the need for change or of the pace of change. Church leaders have to demonstrate the utmost sensitivity for those who find change difficult or impossible. Some rural congregations find it well-nigh impossible to imagine Christian life without their chapel. But an important report, *Presence*, illustrated how effective Christian presence in rural communities can flourish without ownership of a building. Buildings everywhere, especially of a nineteenth century vintage, raise expensive and difficult questions that need to be faced with courage within circuit-wide reviews of mission strategies.

However, while bearing patiently with those who struggle with the implications of the *Priorities* for themselves, church leaders must support and guide those who are thirsting for change and those who know they cannot go on as they are but are uncertain of their next move. Inspiration by example is the most important tactic. Already such examples abound. The setting up of 'fresh expressions of church' in a variety of contexts has captured many imaginations, encouraged by the *Fresh Expressions* organisation which was initiated by the two Anglican Archbishops and which immediately became a joint Anglican-Methodist activity. Initiatives in evangelism, the year-long *Pray without Ceasing* prompted by the Youth Conference of the Church, imaginative ways of using presbyters, deacons and lay leaders, the greater use of film, video, web-resources, high quality projected images and PowerPoint in worship and in learning contexts, and committed projects to

stand alongside destitute asylum-seekers or facilitate friendships across cultural and religious barriers are all part of the mix – alongside much else.

Finally, also inspired by the *Priorities*, the Church as a whole must re-group for mission: structures and administrative and decision-making procedures need to be overhauled. They have to be reconfigured into the form and scale we need to support and hold accountable the mission of the Church as it is being re-envisaged to address twenty-first century needs.

The *Priorities*, I estimate, will take at least five more years to bear their fruit. The test of their usefulness will be a re-shaped Church working in partnership with others, engaging creatively and confidently in the name of Jesus Christ with our globalised, ecologically-threatened, conflict-ridden and secularised yet multi-faith world.