

## An Open Letter to the British Methodist Church

For a long time, many in the Methodist Church have been crying out for a radical transformation of our mission and ministry, a crystallisation of our identity, and the articulation of a longer term vision that goes beyond increasing our membership, getting more young people through our doors and encouraging more people into ordained ministry.

This message puts some flesh on the bones of that vision, asking the same question that is being asked in wider society at this time; can we seize this opportunity – this liminal space between the pre and post Covid-19 world - to take on board all that we have seen and learned, to commit to not simply returning to the way things were before, but rather embracing a new and more hopeful future? A future which is rooted in all that has been but seeks to be honest about where we are now and creative and courageous in offering a pathway into the immediate and forthcoming years.

A future which prioritises justice above all things, by which we understand deep listening and caring, partnership and co-operation, genuine inclusivity, honest transparency rather than soundbite and rhetoric, and a total re-evaluation of who and what is most important.

We believe we must.

### What are we seeing?

- An awakening to the damage which has been caused by valuing wealth accumulation, status and celebrity over and above our service industries and key workers who play such a vital role in our society. There is a rejection of the notion that such workers are unskilled and dispensable.
- An awakening to the deep inequalities in society, finally revealed in the statistics behind the Corona Virus and their disproportionate impact upon poor and BAME communities.
- An awakening to the truth that less traffic, less global movement and less production results in clearer skies, fresher air and healthier lungs.
- An awakening of empathy; suddenly that which was 'other' – mass preventable death and trauma, commonplace in other parts of the world – has become a reality on our own doorstep.
- A discovery of the joy to be found within caring for others. No longer is it possible to deny the truth that what is at the heart of humanity is the quality of our relationships, our capacity to show love and kindness and our innate need for good contact and touch.

The wider media narrative at present is concerned with whether or not these things can be sustained beyond the immediate crisis. Can they flourish and grow and lead to authentic and long term sustainable change for the better?

***Similarly in the Methodist Church, it feels as if we have a very narrow window of opportunity to engender real systemic and cultural change and to ensure that we do not go back to where we were before. How can we take these challenges which are facing the wider world and translate them into a critical mission response? In short, can we re-imagine church, just as society is being re-imagined?***

There are several places in the gospels where the writers present Jesus reflecting upon the end times. He postulates about various crises and apocalyptic events, but Jesus is very clear that these things are not the end in themselves but things which precede it. The writer of Mark's gospel describes them as being 'birth pains'; in other words, they are a wakeup call to say that something is happening, and that we need to do something very urgently in response. The intention of Jesus' prophetic words is to stimulate change and repentance, in order to bring something new to birth. They are a description of the reality of his day, and of ours, and in the midst of it all our calling to respond is to witness to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of justice which is at the heart of his message. We are called to witness by giving voice to, and acting in the pursuit of, the sort of Kingdom that is very different from the Kingdoms which put their identity in the constant need to rise against one another in a perpetual search for wealth and power. Our Christian gospel compels us to say that once Covid-19 is under control, we cannot go back to a life of self-interest, in which the poverty, degradation and death inducing systems which are entrenched across much of the world are considered to be beyond our sphere of concern and control. If we hadn't known it before, Covid-19 is showing us the utter connectedness of the human race. Rowan Williams has said that people should recognise that our good is bound up with that of others. It is the notion of 'Ubuntu' – I am because we are. If we are to reap the benefits of globalisation then we must also be prepared to place ourselves into the heart of the devastation which it creates and reveals, standing in solidarity with those who are its victims. Once we have placed ourselves there, we must be prepared to look, listen, comment and act. This can be understood as a modern calling to disciple the nations, in which the only good news worth sharing and which makes any sense is the good news of justice, peace and the restoration of God's created order.

How church will look as we emerge from the crisis is not totally clear. Yet there are some definite signs and pointers that we can pay attention to and which can guide our thinking.

If those aged over 70 are encouraged to remain in isolation for a much longer period of time, if congregations are asked to maintain social distancing, to meet in smaller numbers and not to sing, then long standing trends will be escalated; the inevitable demise of the familiar church in the UK, which has been predicted for many, many years, will be upon us even sooner than we might have imagined. The battle to keep the show on the road will be lost.

***The challenge to re-invent ourselves as the body of Christ has become immediate and critical. And this transformation must be Christ-centred, strategic, passionate, truthful and fearless.***

In many places, church activity has moved to being either online or on the frontline - Zoom services and foodbanks, live streamed services and mutual aid participation. One fascinating consequence is that those not usually interested in church have been drawn in through the domesticity of virtual worship and the connectivity of Christians - lounge on-lookers and listeners, distanced relatives gratefully reassured by the regular phone calls and food deliveries offered by church friends to their elderly loved ones. These are people who would never normally have been in church but who are beginning to recognise that perhaps there is something in the gospel of Jesus Christ after all.

The church, in a strange way, has become more visible at this time; and the truth that salvation is not just about an individual's relationship with God, but something we bring to one

another through deep sharing, listening and the meeting of people's most basic needs is being evidenced every day.

People who had hitherto understood the church and the Christian faith to be irrelevant to the culture of the modern world are seeing an engaged and active Christianity. Those who had chosen to place themselves beyond the frame of faith and organised religion because they had understood it to be self-serving and hypocritical are seeing something authentic and more in line with what they assume Christians should be doing – they are seeing a Christianity which is flexible enough to respond in a situation of crisis, which has an informed understanding of the social and political context in which we live and move, and which prioritises those things which are at the heart of scripture – love of God, made manifest in love of neighbour, the proclamation of justice for the most vulnerable (the proverbial widows and orphans) and a Christianity which stands and sits in opposition to the empires of wealth accumulation, status and inequality. This is a cross carrying, laying down of arms and uplifting of the poor type of Christianity.

An utterly evangelical enterprise which changes lives, touches hearts, offers liberation and challenges the status quo. In other words, a Christianity which reveals the Kingdom of God, which was, after all, the ultimate passion of Jesus.

Whether these 'converts' will come to church at the end of all this who knows, but is that the point, if lives and hearts are being changed, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is being recognised in the doing of justice, the loving of mercy, and the humble walking with God? This is good news indeed, both for those long-alienated individuals, and for those who had never thought the Christian faith and church had anything to say to them. It is also good news for the church because it offers a way forward – a vision, a renewed identity and a potential strategy.

So, in summary, we are seeing that mission which is engaged and active and social is an effective and impactful form of mission indeed. It could be said that the meaning of Good News itself is being re-defined.

**If societal priorities are re-aligning, then we must surely ask if it is time for the church's priorities to also re-align, along Biblical priorities:**

- **Societal ethics rather than personal morality.**
- **Genuine inclusivity rather than appeasing prejudice.**
- **Systemic change rather than the status quo.**
- **Fairness rather than self- interest.**
- **Being Christ to those who need Christ most, rather than trying to be 'all things to all people.'**
- **A jubilee redistribution of resources across the Connexion, placing money**

## **What do want to see?**

What would our Methodist Church look like if it prioritised justice, and took seriously Christ's New Commandment? Here are some thoughts.

***It will be a church which measures all we do against the sole criteria of God's justice. This is our primary calling as disciples of Christ in the Methodist tradition.***

***It will be a smaller church*** no doubt – in terms of buildings and members and infrastructure. Yet with an inherently evangelical re-imagining it will be a bigger church – in the sense that it will hold the respect (and thereby the engagement, support and involvement) of more people.

***It will be a church of and on the margins.*** We have just employed a Church on the Margins Officer - this is great. Yet the Methodist movement is in its essence and identity a church on the margins. This should not be an add-on. ALL we do and ARE must be marginal – this is our place.

***It will be a campaigning church.*** Where we are privileged to have a voice in the corridors of power and the public arena and we use that voice to challenge and subvert the status quo wherever that status quo is a vessel of oppression and injustice. We will be a church unafraid to come off the fence in matters such as tax justice, debt cancellation and the Friday School Strike for Climate protests. We have to lose our fear of upset, our fear of loss, our fear of being vilified or humiliated. The real humiliation is in being a church which does not acknowledge the contradiction between so much of what we say and do and the basic values of the gospel.

***It will be both a top-down as well as a grass roots church.*** The increasing congregationalism of the Methodist Church allows for an ‘anything goes’ approach which undermines the unique identity of Methodism as a radical social movement. This will need to be addressed through deliberate, strategic and resource-based decisions at a Connexional level which prioritise this ministry of justice.

For example:

- It will be a church which distributes financial resources in a way that prioritises mission with a social justice emphasis.
- It will be a church which prioritises matters of equality, diversity, and inclusivity (which are all matters of justice) along the same lines as Safeguarding – enshrining them in the constitution of our church as a manifestation of a broad commitment to a gospel of justice.
- Work with TMCP and the Charities Commission will need to continue and be intensified to allow the release of resources in a way which radically re-defines the idea of ‘best-value’.

At the same time, whilst all this emerges, local churches and circuits can be encouraged and guided to focus on mission activity which best reflects the deep values of the gospel, working with like-minded partners in the community – voluntary organisations, broad-based community organisations such as Citizens UK, ecumenical and other world faith communities.

***This is the time to renew and strengthen our ties with and support for Action for Children, MHA, All We Can and The Fund for Human Need.*** These front line organisations with Methodist origins deal with some of the realities which are once again at the very heart of our conscience – care for older people, the economic marginalisation of so many children and families in the UK and our responsibility for the planet (and those most negatively impacted globally by climate change, war, and poverty). Such organisations, rather than being seen as the ‘caring arm’ of the church – as they have been in the past – become key partners and expert witnesses in a church which is caring in ALL that it does.

***It will be a church with a renewed integrity in theological training***

As the focus of the church shifts from the maintaining of church buildings and the making of new members, towards the building up of the Body of Christ, the encouragement of discipleship and the revealing of God’s Kingdom of justice we will need leaders with a high EQ who are able to offer oversight within teams of volunteers and paid staff. Training institutions must prioritise the development of ordained and lay leaders who are theologians and practitioners, committed to the principles set out in this paper.

***It will be a church offering a truthful Christian voice in a sea of narrow and often hateful rhetoric.*** To take seriously the questions – what would Jesus do, where would Jesus be, who would Jesus be alongside and what would Jesus say? We might also, as Methodists, want to ask the same

questions with John Wesley as a focus. They are non-negotiable questions for those who claim to be disciples of Jesus and part of the Methodist movement.

**Worship, learning, caring, service and evangelism are not in themselves the end; they are the means to the end, which is the revelation of God's kingdom of justice; they are not discreet activities that can be addressed separately, rather they flow from and are intrinsically connected to each other in pursuit of our primary calling:**

**Authentic **worship** is  
learning, caring, serving and evangelical.**

**Authentic **learning** is  
worshipful, caring, serving and evangelical.**

**Authentic **caring** is  
worshipful, learning, serving and evangelical.**

**Authentic **service** is  
worshipful, learning, caring and evangelical.**

**Authentic **evangelism** is  
worshipful, learning, caring and serving.**

**Rather than social justice being a single strand or element of 'Our Calling' - represented by one line within the 'Service' section - or any issue of justice being designated as the remit of JPIT, social justice becomes the driver for all we do and are.**

## **A call for urgent conversation and action**

At this time we stand on a shaky bridge, with a Methodist Church entrenched in its pre-Covid systems at one end, and a new future at the other. We believe that many, many people are already facing towards the new future end of the bridge and are hoping that we can cross together, as a whole church, hand in hand (when social distancing will allow!) fully aware of the potential challenges but ready to take the risk for the sake of a sustainable and gospel driven church. We may lose some people in the crossing, but we stand to gain many, many more – those who have already made it to the other side of the bridge and who are wondering when we will arrive, and others currently standing on the banks, looking at the bridge and wondering which direction we will go in. We cannot and must not go back. We can and must transform.

***This letter is an invitation to join this urgent conversation. To offer to those in Connexional Leadership the confidence to see that there are plenty of people out there who are ready for seismic change. Prepared to back it. Longing for it. Willing to take responsibility for it.***

***This letter is an invitation to dream some dreams. It does not pretend to have all the answers, or the whole of the vision, but we offer it as a starting place, as those who love the Methodist Church with its grounding in social justice and revival.***

Signed By (as of 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020):

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