

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

Basic Information

Title	Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]
Contact Name and Details	Martyn Atkins generalsecretary@methodistchurch.org.uk
Status of Paper	Final
Resolution	<p>2/1. The Conference receives the Report.</p> <p>2/2. The Conference commends the Report and its proposed emphasis on the Methodist Church as “a discipleship movement shaped for mission” to the whole connexion for study, response and action.</p> <p>2/3. The Conference directs the Ministries Committee to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled “Patterns of ministry: discipleship and mission” and “a fluid ‘mixed economy’ ” and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.</p> <p>2/4. The Conference directs the Methodist Council to establish a working group to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled “God’s properties and our stewardship” and “a fluid ‘mixed economy’ ” and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.</p> <p>2/5. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to establish a working group to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled “God’s ‘worthship’ and our worship” and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.</p>

Summary of Content

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
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2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

<p>Main Points</p>	<p>The report seeks to discern and describe a vision of the direction of travel of the life and work, worship and mission of the Methodist Church as it responds in loving obedience to the gracious prompting of the Spirit; and to set an emphasis on the Methodist Church as a discipleship movement shaped for mission. The report sets out the consequent challenges; reconsiders connexionalism in the light of them; and outlines various recommendations for further work to address them in the areas of patterns of ministry; property and stewardship; worship; a mixed economy of traditional and new patterns of being the Church; evangelism; and partnerships.</p>
<p>Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)</p>	<p>The General Secretary's report itself arises out of wide consultation and listening, such being natural and intrinsic elements of undertaking the type of Christian ministry required by the post.</p>
<p>Impact</p>	<p>Potentially considerable.</p>
<p>Risk</p>	<p>A wide ranging number of risks involved in pursuing ... and not pursuing such priorities.</p>

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

Introduction

1. In this, the third year of my ministry as the General Secretary, I offer to the Conference and the wider Connexion a more comprehensive report than in the past two years.
2. The role of the General Secretary entails exercising leadership and ministry in several contexts, two of which are key shapers of this report. The first is my itinerant work throughout the Connexion, and this report arises from multiple conversations and experiences with Methodists and others. The second context is as a leader in the Connexional Team, a gifted and dedicated group of people charged with undertaking a great deal of work on behalf of the Connexion. In this report, when I use terms like 'we' and 'our' I am usually referring to the whole Connexion/Church, and I specify when I am referring to some part of our Connexion such as the Connexional Team.
3. My report includes a brief graphic overview of work undertaken by the Connexional Team and other groupings over the past two years. This makes clear how, in the providence of God, our focus on *Discipleship | whole life · lifelong · world transforming* has been expressed in a variety of authentic ways in recent times and will continue to do so. A fuller account of the work of the Team is found in the Connexional Team report to the Conference.
4. I also indicate the intended direction of travel for the next few years in respect of my role as the executive officer of the Connexion and leader of the Connexional Team, and as a colleague in leadership with many others. In particular, I signal some issues and policies that I believe require to be engaged, resolved and implemented so that, in obedience to God, our Church becomes an ever more effective discipleship movement shaped for mission in the 21st century. I believe that such an aspiration is widely owned among Methodist people, even as we acknowledge the continuing costliness of the changes we believe God calls us to make. These issues and suggestions are not so much 'mine', nor are they Connexional Team initiatives attempted to be imposed on the Conference. Rather I use this report to 'mirror back' some of the themes which we are rehearsing and reflecting upon together throughout the Connexion, with the strong recommendation that they should be explored as a matter of urgency and if approved, quickly implemented.
5. I am therefore inviting the Conference to both affirm and encourage the continuing pursuit of the direction of travel signalled here and the suggestions I outline, which I believe will enable Methodism to become a better discipleship movement shaped for mission today.

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

6. In describing contemporary Methodism as a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' I am not claiming that this is a complete ecclesiology for our Connexion. It is not. It is however an appropriate ecclesiological statement and one consonant with recent declarations of the Conference. For example, the 1999 statement on the nature of the Church in Methodist experience and practice, *Called to Love and Praise* encourages "the Methodist people to deeper discipleship, as reflection about the Church properly carries with it a review of our personal commitment to Christ and to the Kingdom of God" in which "God's mission and kingdom are the primary 'givens', from which all derives and on which all depends. As agent of God's mission, the Church is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom" [*emphases added*]. It is also fully consistent with the themes and reflections that produced *Our Calling* and the *Priorities for the Methodist Church* and beyond (see paragraphs 8–10 below). This report therefore does not seek to provide a carefully balanced account of every important theme possible. This is not to deny the significance of themes not found or insufficiently acknowledged here. Rather, the themes I focus upon this year are those I suggest will best help the chosen direction of travel and will enable Methodism to become a better discipleship movement shaped for mission in the immediate future, and I am proposing that that description or strap-line is the key

ecclesial theme to be prioritised and emphasised at this time, throughout the Connexion and by its Team.

The direction of travel discerned

7. I share with many Methodist people a desire to grow in Christian hope, passion, witness and kingdom focus. I believe we could and should grow in these Godly ways. Like many of us I long for Methodism to be a better Church in the sense that it is a more effective vessel for use by a missionary God and that includes 'turnaround' – and I am not ashamed of desiring that. I am convinced that God desires a healthy, more vibrant Methodism, offered anew to God as its proper 'owner' and as a fruitful and willing part of the One Church of Christ, for the sake of the world God loves and in Christ redeemed.
8. God has not been silent in our unfolding discernment over recent years. We have (re)stated that *Our Calling* is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out our discipleship through worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism.
9. Following continuing prayerful listening to God and to each other we have identified *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, declaring that in partnership with others wherever possible, we would concentrate our prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority: *To proclaim and affirm our conviction of*

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

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. We also identified key ways of expressing this priority, such as giving particular attention to underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer, and supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor – in Britain and worldwide. We committed ourselves to 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, and nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible.

10. The *Team Focus* processes of 2005/2008, and our embarking on the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative in 2007 can be seen as discerned proper responses to our *Priorities*. As can the statements made at the *Holiness & Risk* gathering in 2009, presented in my report to the Conference in 2009, where participants from every District in our Connexion reasserted our continuing desire to be more courageous Methodist disciples in today's challenging contexts, and urged each other to a greater acknowledged reliance upon God. We discerned that God is not finished with us yet, but that the challenge of continuing change lay before us, as did the promise of the leading of the Holy Spirit. We urged and 'gave

permission' to each other to engage in 'holy risk-taking' and to inhabit a new and Godly narrative about who and what we are by God's grace. We confirmed we are a people of lay and ordained Christians, in partnership in leadership, worship and mission. We reasserted our intention to continue to speak humbly, but boldly and prophetically into our culture, to live out an engaged, 'hands on' spirituality and to live on a big map as part of a worldwide Church in a time of enormous changes. We declared that we are not yet ready to give up being 'in connexion' with each other, and are desirous of working out what this means for us today.

11. I consider that God has made our direction of travel clear. We desire to be the best we can be for the God we love, worship and serve. In this report I am capturing this rich collection of discernment and declared response in the shorthand phrase that contemporary Methodism is a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

The consequent challenges before us

12. 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. It will also involve more sharply prioritising the work the Connexional Team undertakes on behalf of the whole

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

Connexion: what is done, and what is not done, in order to 'make room' for what we as a Connexion deem to be absolutely necessary. We do not find this easy, because it isn't easy. It is costly in all sorts of ways. But I hold the conviction that it is required of us.

13. One helpful way of focusing decision-making is to ask what our desired outcomes are. What would we like to see happen and therefore what decisions shall we make to best bring those things about? If we desire to be a better connexional movement of Christian disciples shaped for mission then that shapes what we choose to do and not do with the resources we have available to us. For example, if being a lay and ordained movement is crucial to us, then our outcome might be to see many more lay people exercising ministry and leadership throughout our Church. In which case we prioritise the wherewithal to help bring that about. This gives us a mechanism for making hard decisions when we don't have the resources to do all we would like to do. In other words, what we choose to be like, in response to the revelation and call of God to us, is a matter of strategy, decision and action rather than simply aspiration. The suggested prioritising in this report, which involves the whole Connexion and the Team as a part of it, is an attempt to identify a *first* grouping of decisive intentions that give clear expression to our desired outcome to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission. Of course if we resolve to continue this

direction of travel there will be further changes required of us.

14. There is always a fertile period for making hard choices which must not be missed, a finite season in which the varied resources and energy needed to implement necessary decisions are available. Sadly what often happens in organisations, including Churches, is that decisions are not made at the point when resources and energy are sufficient to enact them, but are then made, usually reluctantly and as a last resort, when the required resources and energy to implement them are no longer available. Thankfully we are not yet in that deadly and disillusioning place, but I judge that the fertile season when we are able to properly implement the kind of decisions we need to make is fast coming to an end. The suggestions and recommendations contained in this report involve further changes to our life, and greater focus of our limited but still considerable resources.
15. In terms of our Conference as a proper place to reflect on the work of God there is another challenging theme I want to rehearse at this point. We rightly declare the essential grace and love of God, of God's mercy and forgiveness. We often experience our wonderful God in these terms. But as every human parent knows, these qualities do not mean that God may not also be disappointed with us, saddened that we are slow to hear, to follow and obey; that we have not

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

fulfilled our potential. We often think of ourselves as generous, open and hospitable, but what if, in God's view, we are not sufficiently so? What if our frailty and decline, our oft-times lack of passion for God's justice and God's world are not merely the consequences of the secularisation of modern times but also our reluctance to change profoundly in order that we become what God would have us be today? Though it might not sound it at first, all this is good news, not bad! Good news because it makes plain that God has not given up on us, and still longs and calls for our response of deeper love, repentance and faith. And in that is our life, future and hope.

16. Love, repentance and faith are proper responses to God by a discipleship movement shaped for mission, seeking its pilgrim way. Love means that God's will, not ours be done. It means that we recognise what we state in our Covenant service, that we are no longer our own, but in trust joyfully yield all things to God. Repentance means turning around, having a new mind, permitting God to reshape and renew you, and travelling with God. Faith means that we trust God for our very life as Church, and in profoundly real and concrete ways. I also believe that good leadership, strategy, management and governance are for us signs of our love, repentance and faith. Consequently, though the suggestions and proposals in this report are necessarily 'organisational' they

nevertheless embody the desires and intentions of a people resolved to do the discerned will of God.

17. The partnership between God and God's people is marvellous. God does not need human input, but chooses it. God in Christ takes our form, lives among us, and calls us to follow, to be and become like him. Partnership with people, in willing covenant, is God's preferred way of being about the things of God's kingdom. So there is a key part that God's people play in God's purposes. Gardeners tend the soil to help the harvest. Sailors raise the sail to catch the wind. I believe the wind of the Spirit is blowing and our varied Connexion is being asked to put the sail up once more.

Connexionalism reconsidered

18. The big theme of connexionalism sets the context in which all the remainder of this report must be read. We are a connexional Church and from time to time we revisit how we embody and expound the nature of our connexionalism. I consider this is one of those times.
19. It is crucial to realise afresh that our commitment to connexionalism is primarily a *spiritual* commitment before it is a descriptor of our structures, processes and systems. It is essentially how we feel that God has shaped us as a faith family and planted into us values of mutual dependency, inter-relatedness and accountability. From this arises our

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

instinct to live on a big map, to engage with God's world, through word and deed, to share life and ministry with others – particularly others in need. For some of us this is at the heart of being Methodist Christians. We possess an almost instinctive conviction that we can be better disciples shaped for mission together rather than apart, that our sum is greater than our parts. At our best we know that being in connexion is not a static or repressive thing, but a dynamic and evolving thing, because it changes in order to be a better expression of what it is. It enables our greater health as a discipleship movement shaped for mission today, while at the same time shaping us for apt service of our communities and society in the challenging contexts of the twenty first century. The word 'connexion' might not be as well known among us as it once was. However the rich spirituality the word embodies continues to express 'who we are' under God's call and, intriguingly, is articulated almost instinctively by many people – Methodist or not – seeking whole-life and world-transforming discipleship today. In short, it could well be that the golden age of what being a connexional Christian is, is not passed away as much as just arriving!

20. By describing ourselves as a Connexion of itself suggests that we understand our origins in terms of being a 'movement' rather than, primarily, a 'Church' as classically

understood. We were originally a 'People called Methodists' because we were 'in connexion' with Mr Wesley, and so readily entered into the sharing of doctrines (and doctrinal emphases), 'discipline' and the deploying of resources for the common good. We have always stated our readiness to change our 'rules' in obedience to God's leading about our calling and purposes. We have adapted in order to meet mission imperatives in the past and can and must do so again. At our best we do permit grace, not law, to guide us. Our present focus on discipleship and mission is a proper expression of our mutual connectedness today.

21. After John Wesley's death Methodists became 'in connexion' with and through the Conference. This assumed an understanding of discipleship in which individuals accepted their part in contributing to the life of the Connexion within local societies and so making plain from the beginning that Christianity was no solitary or simply 'personal' thing, but was lived out on a big map. 'We' and 'us', at least in terms of our rules and practices, took primacy over 'me' and 'I'. In similar ways, trustees of Methodist church premises held those resources in trust on behalf of the whole Connexion – and still do. Though we love the place wherein God's honour dwells, and lavish love and care upon our church properties, they were not, are not, and never can be 'ours' in the local sense. Our churches 'belong' ultimately to God,

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

but also constitutionally in the vast majority of cases to our Connexion rather than simply or only belonging to the present local congregation worshipping in them.

22. Alongside our origins as a movement, we are clearly now also a Church. We are 'church' in different ways within our Connexion. Our local unit of discipleship and mission was first the local 'class' or 'society', then 'the chapel', and now what we usually term 'church'. But we Methodists deploy our resources strategically within Circuits, whose key role is to facilitate and enable the deepening discipleship and increasingly effective mission of the Local Churches within it. This is why a missional and discipleship agenda must continue to drive our *Regrouping for Mission* initiative rather than any other rationale or aspiration, whether in Local Churches, Circuits or Districts. Of course it is the Conference that determines the Circuits and Districts each year, and so has the existing power to make such changes if it so chooses. The Methodist Council has already formed a working group to examine possible models of 'bigger than circuit' entities in our Connexion and in due course the Conference will be presented with its recommendations and invited to decide the continuing extent of our regrouping for mission.
23. Itinerancy was an early example of being a connexion. Churches were 'sent' a minister and instinctively accepted them because 'our ministers' were in Full Connexion with the Conference and therefore able to be deployed in our Circuits as a powerful strategic demonstration of our belonging together in discipleship and mission. Consequently our ordained ministry was always in a mutually enriching partnership with Methodist lay disciples working out their discipleship and responding to God's mission in their locality. Partnerships in ministry are expressions of our connexionalism.
24. Our understanding of connectedness also helps us to explore the 'world-transforming' dimension of our discipleship. It entails and enables a recognition of mutual dependency and inter-relation that goes beyond the walls and relationships of our Local Churches. It forces us out, as active disciples, seeking God's mission in the world where we are located. Consequently Methodists, working with others within and beyond the Christian Church, have long been committed to action for justice and the betterment of society and humanity.
25. The impulses that produce our connexionalism therefore have shaped us and continue to do so. The emphases and expressions of being in connexion with each other have changed mood and tone over the decades and centuries, and I suspect that we are moving into another era of fine tuning about what we mean by it and how we resolve to

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

live together in a mutually acceptable and nourishing way. Different and varied patterns of being connected are now needed. Occasions when that very significant conversation can proceed in the near future as a matter of urgency have already begun, and must continue, increasingly including the full range of ages and groupings found – and largely missing – in the twenty first century Methodist Church in Britain.

26. *In different ways, each of the strategic suggestions below not only expresses a prioritising of being a discipleship movement shaped for mission, but also relates to our being a Connexional Church.*

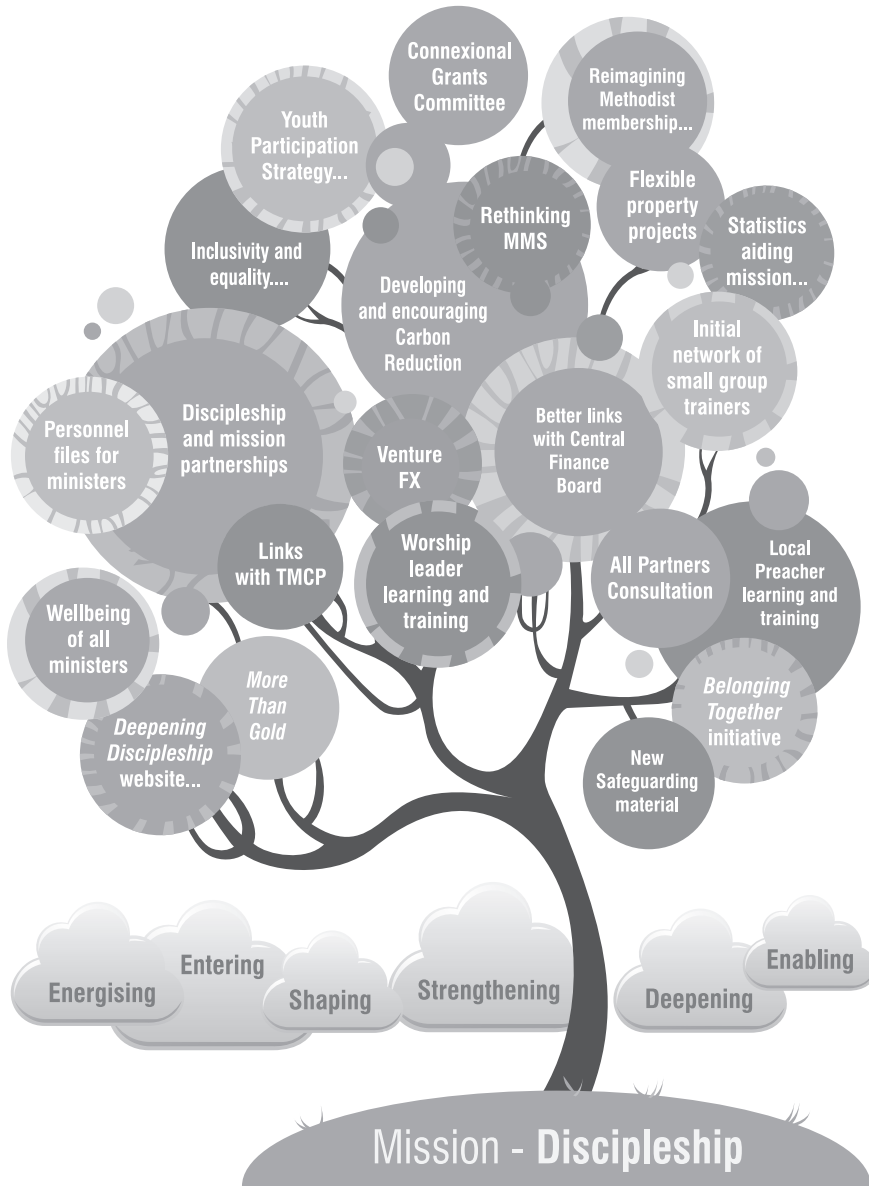
What has The Connexional Team been doing on behalf of the whole Connexion?

27. Over the last eighteen months the Connexional Team has increasingly

worked in a way that expresses the direction of travel we have discerned as right under God at this time, and which enables Methodism to be a more effective discipleship movement shaped for mission today. This work is both a response to decisions made by the Conference and other governance bodies in our Church, and also expresses the responsibilities that the Connexion gives to its Team to provide apt resources and to work with others to offer Godly direction, vision, leadership and management on behalf of us all.

28. In pursuit of this discipleship and mission foci the Connexional Team and other groupings have undertaken the following, to name but a few... .

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

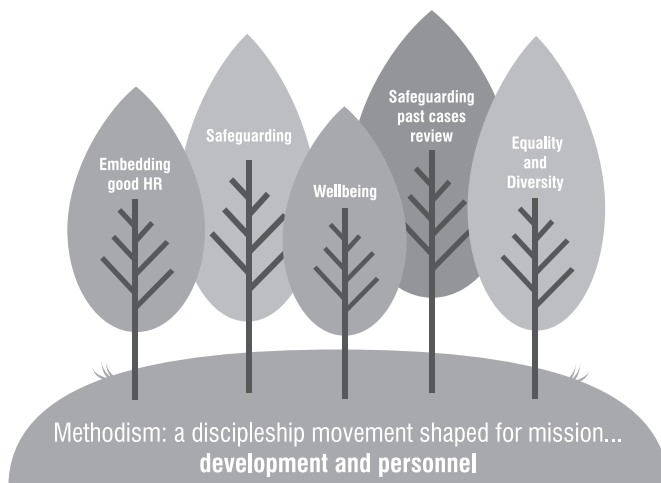
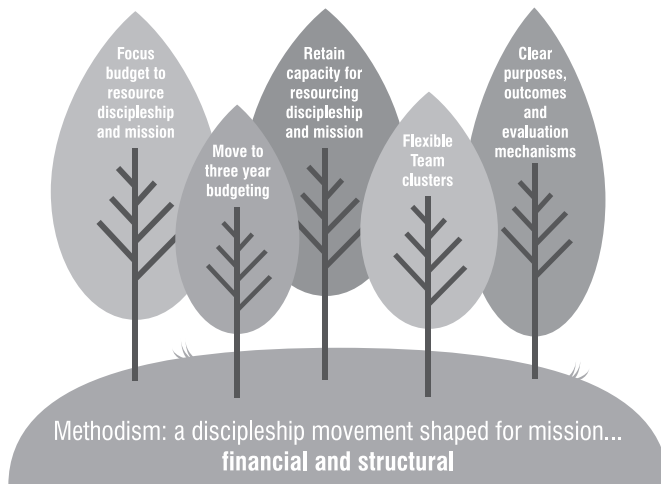


2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

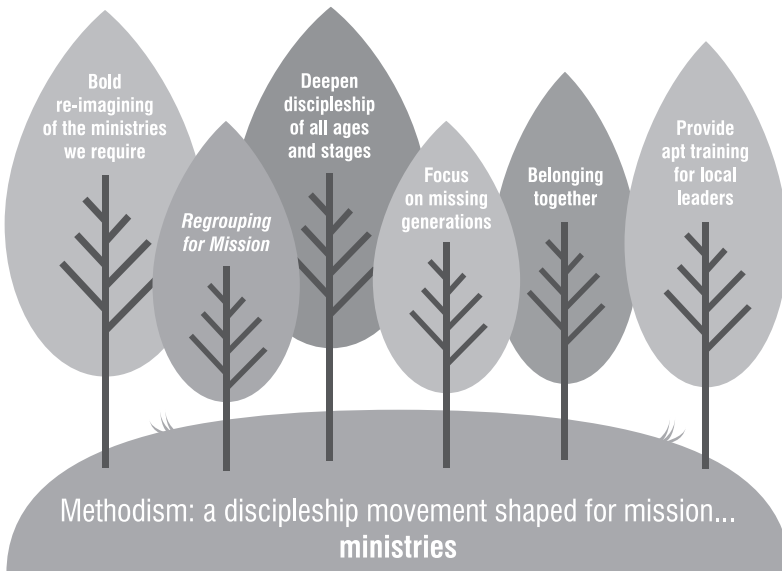
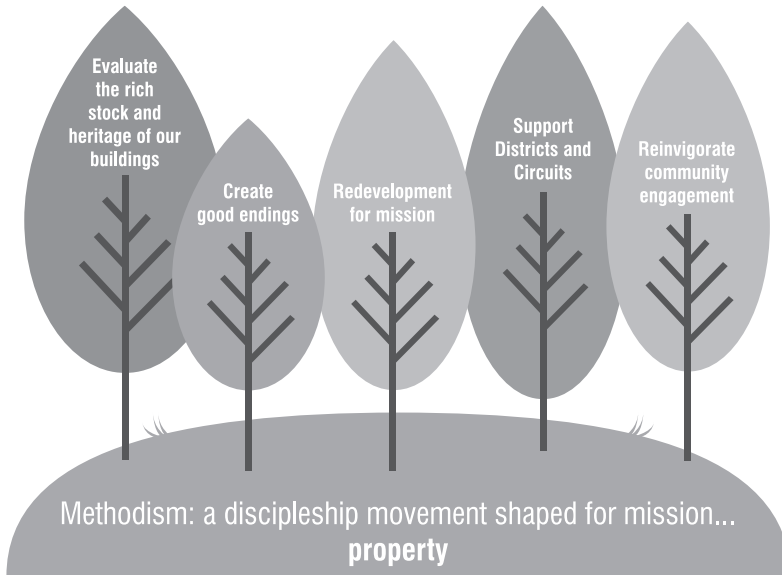
What will the Connexional Team be doing on behalf of the whole Connexion in the immediate future?

29. Unless the Conference determines otherwise the Connexional Team will continue to proceed in the same direction of travel, seeking, on behalf of the whole Connexion, to implement those things which will enable contemporary Methodism to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

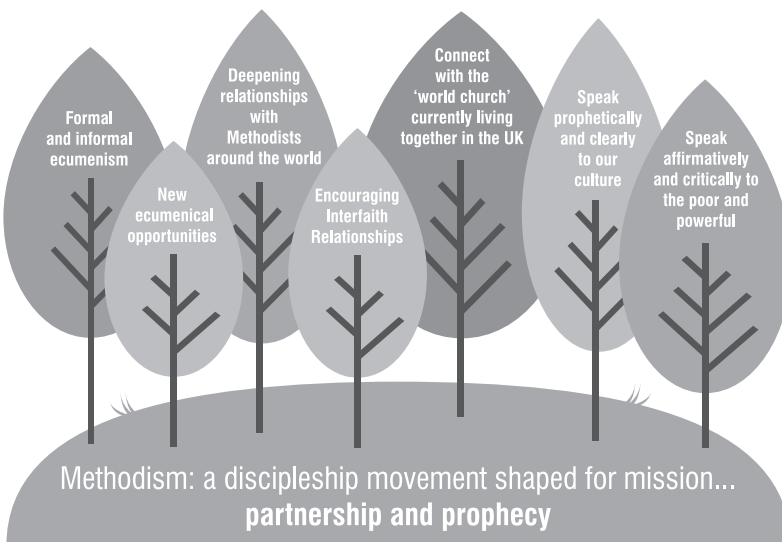
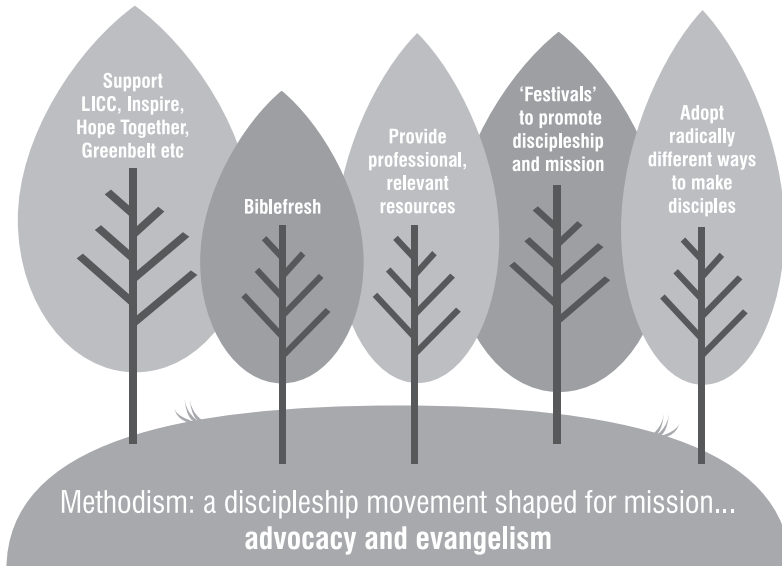
To give just a few graphic examples, under several headings:



2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]



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Specific proposals for prioritising deeper discipleship and more focused mission

30. I now outline a number of issues and proposed actions that I regard *ripe for implementation*. Before outlining these suggestions it is crucial to realise that each of these is happening already to some degree in our Connexion, and are discerned as necessary and desirable by many Methodists.

Patterns of ministry: discipleship and mission

31. The *Fruitful Field* project is working to enable a new, visionary, realistic and sustainable shape to our learning and training patterns. What comes to the Conference this year is an outline of the drivers of the project so far. Further recommendations will be brought to the Conference of 2012. The direction of travel is clear, but like all major policies, it will require the repeated support of the Conference else it becomes merely a part or almost-finished initiative and thus inevitably fails to deliver its potential.

32. Within and beyond the *Fruitful Field* project are a number of convictions about the future patterns of resourcing and ministry in our Church that I believe to be widely-held among us and required with some urgency.

33. One key theme is that the ministry of the whole people of God must now increasingly shape the way we actually use and prioritise our resources. I offer some examples.

34. The resourcing of circuit ministry/ leadership teams. These teams of lay and ordained leaders have, in many places, already begun to engage the new opportunities and challenges presented by local contexts, changing patterns of resources and by implementing the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative. In many places circuit teams are taking seriously the commitment to outward-facing, world-transforming discipleship beginning in their own locality, resulting in a host of healthy ministries, projects and initiatives. Encouragement, training for and support of such enabling leadership in our Church are now discipleship and mission fertile and therefore a priority.

35. Similarly, I consider that it is strategically vital that we put greater investment in small group leadership in our Church at this time. Our origins are classes and bands but today we are not very good at prioritising small, safe places where together we share faith and life, encourage one another, 'watch over each other in love' and deepen our common discipleship of Christ. How marvellous it would be if we were to discern and identify, train and help to resource those who have a gift and calling to lead small groups in our Church in a wide variety of contexts and venues. Say, several hundred over the next few years?

36. Another area that we are realising to be of ever-increasing importance is ministry among children and young adults, the numbers of whom

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

participating in the life of our Connexion has fallen hugely over a century for a variety of complex social, cultural and religious reasons. In light of the undisputed fact that a sizable majority of those who choose to follow Christ do so in childhood or as young adults, the longer term consequences of such 'missing generations' are plainly evident. We are not lacking responses to the needs of children and young adults, as – to mention but a few – the arrival of the Youth Assembly, its President, some elements of the exciting Youth Participation Scheme and the VentureFX project – our pioneer ministry scheme among young adults – and a significant rise in children's and youth workers throughout the Connexion all make clear. Nevertheless many Methodists feel that more extensive and focussed participation and shared ministry with children and young adults is required, whether it be through a re-imagining of local 'Sunday school/ junior church' leadership and a greatly increased recognition of its importance and need for support, or seeking to respond positively to the insights and challenges posed by the 'Missing Generation' report before us in relation to those who are often younger parents. We must continue to seek positive and possible ways forward in respect of such crucial groupings.

37. As the nature, number and size of many Circuits changes, the identification, stationing, training and resourcing of those appointed to be Superintendent ministers is also strategically significant and acutely urgent. We are

fast moving into a new world, where 'pastoral charge' is also necessarily 'missional charge', greater team building, collaborative working and multiple partnerships are normative and indispensable, and vision, spiritual leadership and organisational change management are all vital and closely interconnected. Consequently I consider that much clearer expectations and resourcing of Superintendency is necessary, even to the point of *requiring* dedicated training to be undertaken both *prior to* and whilst exercising this vital ministry in our Connexion.

38. I suggest too that the time is ripe to revisit the issue of more local pastoral ministry in our Church. This was mooted by one of my predecessors as Secretary of the Conference, Dr Nigel Collinson, under the phrase 'a pastor in every church'. At that time, just over a decade ago, our Church decided not to pursue that policy. Our commitment to discipleship and mission suggests it is right to revisit the issue with some rigour and urgency.
39. Recent years have seen an increasing provision of diaconal ministry and a shortage of presbyteral ministry available to the Conference for stationing: both these taking place in the context of increased numbers of lay employees undertaking an unprecedented variety of ministries in our Church. Whether or not we are now moving into a time of overall oversupply or undersupply of presbyters and/or deacons is unclear, but in either case the need to reconsider how both lay and ordained ministry is used throughout

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

the Connexion enabling us to be a better discipleship movement shaped for mission remains. Many Circuits believe that we have reached the point whereby the number of full time, stipendiary presbyters and deacons we have – and/or are able and willing to pay for – has now reached a critical point. Also, particularly in respect of presbyters, many consider that the policy of spreading essentially pastoral duties ever more thinly throughout a Circuit has now reached the end of its usefulness or workability. In respect of deacons too, their undertaking of mission and service ministries, often at the interface of church and wider community, in a time of lessened Connexional grant-giving, presents us all with challenging issues of prioritising.

40. Into this changing context the issue of local pastoral ministry re-emerges naturally. A focus of pastoral and missional identity, even in very small congregations, is both discipleship and mission fertile. In many instances, if we are honest, this local ministry will be required to offer loving 'hospice care' for a faithful and loyal, but weak, tired and aged congregation – and many of us know how precious and blessed such care is. Such local ministry can be more focused, regular and intimate than is often possible for ordained ministry ever more thinly spread. Local ministry, as part of a circuit leadership team, also enables the better focusing and releasing of resources for new ministries discerned to be needed to be implemented.

41. However, as is the way of Christian ministry, death and resurrection belong together. The focusing of care and encouragement able to be provided by local pastoral ministry will result in many instances in new life and renewed witness. We know this because it is increasingly already happening throughout our Connexion. In such cases, we rejoice. In terms of both death and new life therefore, local pastoral ministry can assist our prioritisation of discipleship and mission.

42. There are significant issues involved in any serious exploration of local pastoral ministry that must not be underestimated. Should it be local ordained ministry rather than lay ministry with or without numerous dispensations to administer Holy Communion? We may have to revisit what it means to be in 'pastoral charge'. And what are the relational and operational issues of local pastoral ministry with ordained circuit staff and circuit lay leaders? Other Churches have explored models of local ministry from which we can learn and benefit. However, notwithstanding these real and complex issues, sufficient numbers of Methodists have suggested that the Holy Spirit is urging us to reassess our situation in this respect, and I recognise the significance and potential of that.

43. We are all aware of the continuing, significant role of Local Preachers and increasingly Worship Leaders in our Church. A review of Local Preacher

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

learning, training and continuing development is well under way and is integrated into the wider challenges and opportunities of the *Fruitful Field* project. The review itself takes place in a time of fast change. Now several years into a commitment to train and deploy worship leaders, how are these lay ministries to best relate to each other for the leading of worship of the people called Methodists today? How do these lay ministries relate to ordained presbyters, particularly in contexts where numbers of such are reducing, or where presbyters (and some deacons) focus their leading of worship very regularly in particular churches in the Circuit? What opportunities and challenges do bigger Circuits present to Local Preachers, and 'local preaching' more generally, throughout our Connexion? And how can the future of local preaching and worship leading connect with the other ministries identified as priorities in this section, holding out real possibilities of greater coherence, health and strength to our Connexion when relationality and continuity seem to be highly desirable for very many people?

44. Crucially all these expressions of a greater embodiment of the ministry of the whole people of God throughout our Connexion must take place in a context of increasing commitment to embed safeguarding and creating safer spaces for all in every environment in Methodism. For such is understood properly as gospel grace rather than simply 'law enforcement' and is entirely proper for a discipleship movement shaped for mission.

45. We must not be under any illusions about the implications of prioritising such ministries and pursuing this direction of travel. To prioritise such ministries as these inevitably impacts on the overall learning budget sustainable by our Church at this present time. To choose to spend a greater proportion of our budget on such ministries and resources inevitably reduces the resourcing of other ministries, learning and development than has been the case in the recent past.

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

46. One has to be careful how it is said, but many of us think and state that we still have too many church buildings. I agree, and because of the understandable sensitivities of the subject, some further comments are necessary.
47. Although possibly as many as a thousand of our buildings have fulfilled their gospel purpose and been sold off in various ways over the last decade or so, we still have well in excess of 5200 church properties. This, for a denomination with an overall 'roll' of c582000 people, c8500 local preachers (active and 'sat down'), c1750 active presbyters, c125 active deacons and several hundred lay employees is a huge number. Nor, in the light of what I stated above, is the single remedy or response to appoint a local pastor to each and leave everything else as it is! A several pronged engagement is required of us.

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

48. Given this broad context it is hardly surprising that when travelling extensively around the Connexion as I do, one is led inevitably to the conclusion that we spend too great a proportion of our finite resources of people, time and money on maintaining our many buildings. The loyalty of Methodist people is incredible and our faithfulness astonishing, but we do have an understandable tendency to too readily associate the sustaining of the life of our chapels with the work of God's kingdom, which while not antithetical are not actually synonymous.
49. This isn't to say that our church buildings are not a great treasure, rightly to be loved and cared for. Our renewed focus on heritage as witness and mission is absolutely right for those properties that especially embody our diverse and impressive history. Some of our chapels are magnificent and most of our growing numbers of new rebuilds and refurbishments are imaginative, enhancing our worship and enabling more effective Christian mission and service.
50. Nor is the assertion that we have too many chapels a statement simply about size or sociological location: the big survive and the small close down; town and suburban churches remain but rural and inner city properties go to the wall. It is far more nuanced than that. For example, many very small churches have crucial roles in communities of various types.
51. Consequently a better assertion is that we almost unquestionably have too many church buildings, meaning too many in the wrong places, too many unfitted to sustain our life as a discipleship movement shaped for mission today. Our buildings are assets – both capital and liquid – for God's kingdom, our communities and our congregations. We are at our best when we regard our 'plant' as resources for God's mission rather than an inheritance to be preserved at all costs like the family silver. A more sacrificial, strategic approach is needed. What kind of spaces do we need to be the discipleship, missional movement God wants us to be in the twenty first century? Do we need to own them all? Will we readily enter an ever-wider range of partnerships if we discern that the mission of God is thereby enhanced? Are we willing to be rigorously connexional about what we do with the resources released when our church buildings reach the end of their life? Can we encourage each other to release God's resources for the calling of discipleship and mission today with glad and thankful hearts? How do we enable each other to not regard each closed church building as a failure, rather than the Christian cycle of death and resurrection? Are we able to put a 'mission accomplished' sign on our closing premises and allow ourselves to hear the whisper of the Spirit, 'well done, thou good and faithful servants'?
52. A further aspect of this issue is a hard choice about resources. Many of us

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

are convinced that we must continue to identify and resource 'centres of excellence' throughout our Connexion. These can and will be large and small and located in a number of contexts. What they will share in common is a wide recognition that God is doing something that requires the Connexion to focus resources that help fan it to even greater life, rather than effectively try to spread the fire over large areas of damp grass and wonder why it is quickly extinguished!

53. One probable consequence of this in some instances is that the 'dependency model' of poorer chapels being helped by wealthier ones to the extent they have been in times past cannot be sustained. Though a proper expression of our connexionalism, in cases when long-term dependent chapels are unresponsive to the discipleship/mission priority of the Connexion and yet require continuous resources to enable their simple survival, we may have to decide that they should not be sustained.
54. We also need to recognise, in the spirit of our *Priorities*, our commitment to work in partnership with others wherever possible, that partnership may be the way God calls us in relation to some beloved but underused buildings. Visionary plans and new partners may require us to take more risks than would a quiet death, but disciples of Jesus are risk-takers. The recent conference in Manchester *One church: 100* uses illustrated the range of exciting

possibilities for church buildings, even in a time of financial stringency. These return some of our tired buildings from being worship centres empty for most of the week to being vibrant centres of community life, social engagement and contemporary mission – with worship at their heart. We must continue to seize the moment, as it will not be with us forever, or even very long.

55. In order to strengthen our ability to act in a more profoundly connexional way about our church properties, many of us think that we need to revisit the suggestion made by past President of the Conference, Tom Stuckey. Namely, that decision-making about the life, ministry and future of local chapels could and should not remain primarily in the hands of those chapels. This is contentious. It is technically already possible of course. But I consider that further clarity about where decision-making lies is required and that further changes would benefit our Connexion, while recognising the anger and hurt such suggestions may well generate to members of local chapels, and therefore the need to properly engage with those responses with grace.
56. To summarise: many of us believe that we need fewer, better buildings. Better in the sense that they are located, configured and enabled by our polity to shape contemporary Methodism to be a better discipleship movement shaped for mission. This is, of course, a key driver of the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative.

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

God's 'worship' and our worship

57. All the reflections in this report arise from an almost unspoken assumption that worship is the highest calling of the Christian Church. Worship is everything that the Church offers to God in response to God's love: its wonder love and praise and therefore its ministries, property and resources, all as an offering of worship to God. Consequently, reflection and action about how Methodism becomes a better discipleship movement shaped for mission is always located in the privilege of worshipping God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

58. I include here brief comments I hear often among us about the nature of our formal public worship.

59. I hear many declare ruefully that our contemporary Methodist worship touches neither the 'heights' nor the 'depths', and I confess to having some sympathy with that view. Our formal worship often seems to lack the exuberance, vitality and easy spontaneity of some acts of worship of other Christian groupings. Nor, often, does it seem to convey a deep sense of God's presence and peace, the profound sense of awesome nearness of some acts of worship. In a society like ours today which gravitates towards what best fits or meets discerned needs (whether or not thought to be shallow or selfish by others), much Methodist worship today seems to fall between a number of stools, and appears to provide

adequate spiritual nourishment for very few people other than those already committed to and participating in it. This is both worrying and strange. Worrying because such a sober view of our worship poses questions about our being the people of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. Strange because Methodist doctrines are laden with possibilities and hope, as is Methodist ecclesiology as a part of our doctrine, and consequently providing no evident reason why our worship should not leave us all 'lost in wonder love and praise'.

60. So we need to take special care about reflecting on our worship as 'God-bearing', near and transcendent, vital and majestic, challenging and enthralling. We need also to hold in healthy balance the synergy between our gathering and our dispersing, ensuring that each nourishes the other. For without such, our desire to be a better discipleship movement shaped for mission falls at the first hurdle. But I also suggest that an honest pursuit of the kinds of deliberate policies in the direction of becoming a discipleship movement shaped for mission, such as those made in this report, are themselves intrinsically connected to the nature of our public worship, rather than distinct or separate from them.

A fluid 'mixed economy'

61. The increasingly 'mixed economy' of our Connexion demands a more

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

strategic and fluid approach than we currently possess in terms of *both* ministry and property. Praise God that there are so many fresh expressions of Church and new communities flowering among us! But if the special is to become normative, as I believe it must in order to help us to become more rooted in discipleship and mission today, then new patterns of ministry and new policies regarding our premises must be permitted to grow up and enabled to flourish.

62. This requires a long, hard look aiming to bring about as light a touch as is proper to the rules and regulations pertaining to our local churches, but which inadvertently paralyse or render stillborn some of the new congregations emerging among us.
63. In this and other ways we require to reassert our commitment to pursuing governance that enable what is discerned as the leading of the Spirit. Our CPD, which is in many respects a permissive document, must be presented so that it is realised and increasingly experienced to be so.
64. Ministry and property are the two main factors in our annual spend and budgeting as a Church. Our resolve to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission today, and our intention to move to longer-term and better budgeting processes requires, I believe, a further commitment. Namely that

the whole Connexion chooses deliberately to use our giving, budgeting and spending processes to facilitate what we feel God is calling us to become as *the priority*, rather than simply choose to sustain what we have. Without this critical change in mindset and the prioritising that results from it, my fear is that the lessons learned from and signs of hope offered by fresh expressions, lay ministries, the creating of new disciples among un-churched, de-churched and never-churched people whom God loves, will not become rooted and established so as to reshape us to be more fully kingdom focussed.

Evangelism... . making more disciples of Jesus Christ

65. Evangelism is part of our calling, and is identified as a priority for us. Making more disciples of Jesus Christ is an essential driver of the *Regrouping for Mission* initiative properly understood, and the desire that others experience the love of God in Christ is key to the aspirational statements of the *Holiness and Risk* gathering. Given that our original connectedness lies squarely in 'offering Christ' in appropriate and apt ways, it would be odd if this were not so.
66. Yet for all this, we Methodists openly acknowledge that making new disciples in appropriate and apt ways is what we feel least good and confident at. Some of us wonder if we

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

should engage in evangelism at all, and others question that we could. I believe we could and we should. That said there is proper emphasis on 'appropriate' and 'apt' ways of offering Christ today, clearly, graciously and intentionally seeking and finding ways whereby many may come to love God in Christ.

67. A key to evaluating contemporary patterns of evangelism is to ask the 'outcome' question: in offering Christ to someone what do I expect will happen? What will the person who says 'yes' to Jesus be expected to become like? A feature of poorer evangelism is always to suppose that we are recruiting for the Church rather than inviting a person to experience God's supreme love which shapes, reshapes and fills their life, and so transforms the world for good. To be sure, Christian discipleship takes place in a community and we would contend necessarily so. But this simply reinforces the point that essentially our Christian communities (churches) do not exist to perpetuate their status quo but rather to provide a mutually fertile environment for growing in Christ, with permeable membranes that enable others to join and do likewise.
68. Evangelism is therefore transformative, containing within it all the passion of piety *and* social justice inextricably connected together. It relates directly to the invitation to live out whole-life, life-long and world-transforming discipleship. It is

both fuelled by and enables worship, and expresses itself in service and learning and caring. These are manifest in dozens of proper and fruitful ways by hugely different people, which is all to the good. It is no 'narrow' thing. New disciples more easily enable others to become disciples and so nourish Christian communities both established and new. A Christian discipleship movement inevitably includes a commitment to making new disciples of Christ.

69. *Natural Church Development* is one of the most highly regarded models of congregational audit in recent years. It identifies several 'indicators' which together suggest the overall health of a local church. Essentially it involves the congregation being enabled to identify both the strongest and weakest indicators in their local church. Significantly, it then suggests that better health overall comes about by focussing greater resources on the weakest elements, on the basis that the strongest elements will be sustained, at least for some time, without need for large levels of continuing resources.
70. Taken together, I suggest to the Conference that making more disciples of Jesus Christ through apt and appropriate ways is a key priority for our Connexion today. This involves committing ourselves, even in a time of scarcity, to put a disproportionate degree of resources and energy to this end, as the acknowledged

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

weakest 'health indicator' throughout our Connexion. Such a priority is the direction of travel for my own ministry and leadership, and that of the Connexional Team through its specialists of various kinds, over the next few years, and in presenting this discipleship emphasis I am inviting the Conference to reaffirm the current importance of this aspect of *Our Calling*.

The rich landscape of partnerships in the work of God

71. The *Priorities* we own together begin 'in partnership with others wherever possible ...' The Connexional Team, on behalf of the Connexion and in some cases enacting the resolutions of the Conference have entered a growing number of partnerships, some signalled earlier.
72. The possibilities of hugely fertile partnerships that deepen discipleship and enhance mission today are wonderfully prolific and various.

Ecumenical Partnerships

73. There are those long-term covenantal partnerships with other Christian Churches to which we rightly continue to commit ourselves and which still hold out fruitful and faithful possibilities for us all. For example, we should remain committed to exploring and extending the meaning of our Covenant with the Church of

England, and our continuing developing relationships with the United Reformed Church.

74. There are also growing opportunities to share in the work of God with newer Christian Church communities and with organisations that focus on specific Christian ministries which we recognise we need in order to be helped and strengthened as a discipleship movement shaped for mission today. For example, some Christian groupings are much better at ministering to generations of people which are acknowledgedly largely 'missing' from our Church at the present time. With mind to the Wesleyan 'Catholic Spirit' (which Rowan Williams drew upon tellingly to open the new Synod of the Church of England) I consider that we are right to choose to explore how to partner others in the work of God's kingdom whenever possible, rather than choose not to do so, while recognising and accepting that there are often some differences in perception and understanding between us. This includes not only formal 'Churches' but partnerships with groupings focussing upon particular ministries, and so engaging us in 'natural ecumenism' in doing so.

The Methodist 'family'

75. We also live in a time of growing opportunities for deepened partnerships with other Methodists around the world, which is a diverse and exciting faith family. The *All Partners Consultation* in June 2010

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

provided wide and fruitful opportunities of working closer together as 'People called Methodists' in many lands. We are also deepening relationships with the United Methodist Church tradition, and mutually formulating a renewed concordat between us which will be presented to our respective Conferences for decision in due course. Similarly, work has begun and is planned to continue in exploring what the Memorandum of Understanding we signed with the Methodist Church in South Korea in 2007 might become, to our mutual benefit.

76. In every developing partnership I note a Methodist commitment to discipleship and mission, evident in a passion for Christ, for peace and justice, for the healing of the nations, the conservation of the planet, and the needs of a world which grows more fragmented and divided even as it becomes 'smaller'. In this year when the World Methodist Council meets again it is my intention and that of my senior colleagues in the Connexion Team to pursue these partnership opportunities for witness and ministry with vigour, and I trust that the Conference affirms that intention.

77. Alongside these various partnerships, the nature of Methodism in Britain is itself changing fast, presenting wonderful opportunities and no small challenges to our Connexion at this time. Like most of Europe, longer-term immigration, recent migration, asylum and other factors have resulted not

only in a more pluralist Britain, but also a considerably more diverse family of Methodists living, worshipping and witnessing in Britain. In most major cities there are now Methodist fellowships and congregations based on language, ethnicity, tribal grouping and nationality. Some of them are regarded – and regard themselves – as part of 'our' Connexion, and some not.

78. I consider it a missional priority and a requirement of Christian discipleship, hospitality and mutual learning that our Connexion seeks to enable new congregations and fellowships, both language-based and ethnic/national groupings, to *belong to us and us to them* in apt and mutually enriching ways that do not currently fully exist. This is one important aspect of the work being undertaken through the *Belonging Together* project, and is of considerable urgency.

79. Then there are those parts of the Methodist 'family' – for example MHA or Action for Children – who offer to us routes of Christian ministry and profoundly important service, and from our greater mutual support would arise benefit to all.

'Wider Ecumenism'

80. Finally there are opportunities of partnerships of multiple kinds with other groupings in our communities, with and without faith bases. As a Church we are deeply committed to such partnerships and deepening dialogue, working

2. Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission [The General Secretary's Report]

together with the marginalised, for the common good and for justice in these times of stringency and cutbacks with a wide range of others who share these aims and values.

81. My report this year has not focused at any length on many 'social holiness' themes, though these are intrinsic to Methodist discipleship and mission, and are crucially important. Various demonstrations of our commitment to Christian service, community engagement, inclusion and transformation are to be found in various reports to the Conference, and demand our debate, decision and

support. Particularly given the broader social and political context in which we find ourselves I commend to the Conference the paper, "What is 'the Big Society' and how could churches respond?" and the major piece on poverty, urging that in this respect as in others, we continue to offer a prophetic and clear Christian voice into the key debates of our society at this time, together with a commitment to active engagement, health, justice, hospitality and generosity that has always characterised our movement and given expression to our understanding of discipleship and mission.

*** RESOLUTIONS

- 2/1. The Conference receives the Report.**
- 2/2. The Conference commends the report and its proposed emphasis on the Methodist Church as "a discipleship movement shaped for mission" to the whole connexion for study, response and action.**
- 2/3. The Conference directs the Ministries Committee to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled "Patterns of ministry: discipleship and mission" and "a fluid 'mixed economy' " and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.**
- 2/4. The Conference directs the Methodist Council to establish a working group to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled "God's properties and our stewardship" and "a fluid 'mixed economy' " and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.**
- 2/5. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to establish a working group to consider the issues raised in the section of the report entitled "God's 'worship' and our worship" and bring recommendations to the Conference as soon as proves possible.**