

Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

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Briefing Paper: Methodist Church

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1 Introduction

Methodism traces its origins to the eighteenth century, founded by Rev John Wesley, an ordained Anglican priest, as a renewal movement within the Church of England. Wesley understood Methodism as a movement of the Holy Spirit raised up 'to spread scriptural holiness', and the influences of pietism and puritanism can be seen in the emphasis on the inner dimension of 'personal holiness' and the outward missional orientation toward 'social holiness'—seeking the transformation of society in the light of the kingdom of God.

The earliest gatherings of those who became known as 'Methodists' were students of Oxford University who were resolved to meet together to pursue holy lives. The desire to 'journey together' in faith, 'gather' in order to discern the will of God, and be led in mission to the world, was embryonic within the Methodist movement but without the ecclesial expression of 'synodality'. As the preaching of early Methodism drew converts, John Wesley formed members into Classes, Bands, and Societies, all bound together through the Connexion.¹

As will be discussed below, the emergence of Methodism as a connexional movement, shapes its understanding of who is to be involved in discerning what the Spirit is saying to the churches and how that is practiced.

As the movement grew, Wesley had the practice of gathering with his preachers to confer on matters at an annual Conference, the focus of which was framed as 'what to teach, how to teach, and what to do,' i.e., how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice. Following the death of Wesley, Methodism separated from the Anglican Church and later divided into various streams (Wesleyan, Primitive, New Connexion, Bible Christians, and Independent). Within each expression of Methodism, conferring held a significant place as the means by which the denomination sought to discern the purposes of God. The coming together of the major branches of Methodism was enacted in the 1932 Deed of Union, and the pillars of

¹In its eighteenth-century usage, 'connexion' referred both to the circle of those connected to some person or group and to the relationship itself. It was used of politicians as well as religious bodies, and within the Revival, George Whitefield, Howell Harris, and the Countess of Huntingdon, as well as John Wesley, had their 'connexions'. This description of the Wesleys' movement, retaining its distinctive eighteenth-century spelling, has endured for nearly three hundred years. (*The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century*, Methodist Conference Report 2017, §1).

connexionalism and conferring remain core to a denomination which expresses its calling to ‘respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission’ through worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism.

In writing this paper I locate myself as an ordained Methodist minister but not speaking from a representative role within the Connexion. I write also as someone who was not born into Methodism and whose own journey has involved learning, and appreciating aspects of the style and structure of Methodist ‘synodality’ which may feel instinctive and normative to cradle Methodists. I am indebted to colleagues who are part of the Methodist group for this symposium for their contributions which I have endeavoured to incorporate. In seeking to express the nature of ‘synodality’ in the Methodist Church I draw upon Conference reports and statements which reflect the Methodist Church’s position but I also endeavour to reflect on the realities of how this is experienced and embedded in practice.

2 Vision

2.1. Key terms: *Conferring and Connexionalism*

Methodists will recognise the language of ‘**synod**’, but use it primarily in contemporary British Methodism to describe the biannual gathering of each Methodist District for worship, prayer, decision-making, and fellowship. In this context, ‘synod’ describes the gathering of lay and ordained representatives to confer on matters from local churches and the wider connexion in a spirit of prayerful listening and discerning. Language of synod and synodality, however, is not the natural parlance of Methodists, who are more comfortable with the notions of ‘conferring’ and ‘connexionalism’, as ways of expressing how Methodism journeys together in attentiveness to the Holy Spirit to participate in the *missio Dei*.

Despite using ‘synod’ to describe gathering at District level, it may seem curious that language of ‘synod’ is not applied to what externally appears our most ‘synodical’ gathering—the annual Methodist Conference. Language of ‘conference’, however, maintains the vital linguistic link to ‘**conferring**’, which is deeply treasured by Methodists as a means of ‘being church’:

Wesley called people together to confer with him and sought to establish the process of what we might term ‘Christian Conferring’ as the bedrock of the Methodist movement. Versions of this process were to take place in the Class, Band or other group which supported people in their personal faith and discipleship; in the body making decisions about the life of a particular society, local church or circuit; or in the Conference itself. The process involved what Wesley called times of ‘conversation seasoned with salt, fit to minister grace to the hearers’.² It had to be intentionally and regularly practised as a staple means of grace, or the pressures of contemporary life would seriously erode it.³

The nature of Methodist conferring is grounded in an ethos of openness, accompaniment, listening, and mutual learning. The emphasis upon lay leadership and ministry in

² The phrase is drawn from Colossians 4:6 and is used frequently by Wesley throughout his life.

³ *The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (report received by the 2005 Conference), §2.13.

contemporary Methodism engenders an expectation that all members of the church are invited to engage prayerfully with listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches and to discern how to act upon it.

Christian Conferring is therefore a process of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue to which there are two important, complementary strands. As they confer, people intentionally, prayerfully and thoughtfully seek to describe and analyse their experience and to listen to others doing the same, and they give and receive guidance, advice, challenge and support. In this they are exercising both mutual accountability and supervision. These complementary strands are two sides of the one coin.⁴

This vision for conferring is enabled by the context of what Methodists refer to as ‘Connexionalism’:

With regard to the Methodist understanding of ‘Church’ in which belonging, mutuality and interdependence are key, and responsibility for decision-making is shared...

The welcome at the Lord’s Table and ‘reception into membership’ together indicate how the individual’s commitment to Christ is surrounded by, and relates to, that of the whole Church – first the local ‘society’, but essentially linked through Circuit, District and Conference into a web of interdependence in which gifts, decisions and responsibilities are shared.⁵

The image of the church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12) where parts of the body are dependent upon Christ and mutually dependent upon one another, all given gifts by the Spirit for the building up of the body, is key to underpinning the Methodist understanding of connexionalism.

In *Called to Love and Praise*, the essence of connexionalism is identified and defined in terms of belonging, mutuality and interdependence. All Christians are essentially linked to one another; no Local Church is or can be an autonomous unit complete in itself. This understanding of the essence of the Church is grounded in the New Testament. It is vital for effective mission, and it is expressed in apt structures of oversight, balancing authority and subsidiarity. Where these insights have become part of the ethos of the Church, connexionalism is experienced in a way of life which assumes that all contribute to and receive from the life and mission of the whole Church.⁶

For Methodists, the vision of synodality is expressed through journeying with others within the connexion and gathering in worship and meeting to confer to seek God’s direction and empowering for mission in the world.

⁴ *ibid.* §2.15

⁵ *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (a Conference Statement adopted in 1999), §4.4.7.

⁶ *The Gift of Connexionalism* (Conference report 2017) §5.

3 Synods, Structures, Style

3.1. Synods

Despite all that has been noted about Methodists valuing their belonging within an interdependent Connexion, when it comes to a global picture, Kenneth Howcroft notes:

[T]here is not a single, world-wide Methodist Church (or ‘Connexion’ to use the term much favoured by Methodists to describe their way of being ‘church’) to which all the Methodist individuals in the world belong and of which their local churches are constituent parts. There is a World Methodist Council, but it is not a body exercising oversight and jurisdiction over any of the range of Methodist or Wesleyan national and international churches, still less over all of them. It sees itself as working like the United Nations, a consultative body and association for some 80 member churches.⁷

Whilst the conferences of the World Methodist Council may appear to fit the category of a synodal process or event ‘convoked by the competent authority, according to specific procedures determined by ecclesiastical discipline’ their absence of oversight and jurisdiction limits the sense in which they may be termed ‘synodal’.

Confining discussion to the Methodist Church in Britain, our practice is to use the structures in place for regular conferring and discernment in order to seek God’s leading on particular matters of doctrinal or pastoral significance. The most recent example of conferring about Marriage and Relationships can be traced back over 30 years, during which a number of working parties were convened, reports written and discussed at Church Council, Circuit Meeting, District Synod, and Conference in a process of listening, reflecting, and ongoing conversation, leading toward specific proposals which were made, discussed, and enacted. In many places, additional gatherings were convened for specific discussion and discernment, but ultimately the ‘synodal space’ of prayerful listening, journeying, and deciding was the established structure and processes which exist as part of our way of ‘being Church’. Whilst Methodism uses its existing structures for conferring on matters of doctrinal and pastoral significance, the processes for making these major decisions may require greater assent in terms of the length of time given to conferring and the number of people to be consulted.

4 Structures: Institutions and Processes

4.1. Conference

The Methodist Church recognises Methodist Conference as the gathering which agrees the policy of the Methodist Church through the adoption of reports and statements. Its meeting is comprised of a mixture of lay people, ordained presbyters, and deacons who are elected representatives from each Methodist district, along with some who have been elected by the Conference and some ex officio members and representatives of the Youth Assembly.

⁷ ‘The Methodist approach to Synodality in Church Order’ (forthcoming, 2023).

Presbyters and deacons also have their own separate gatherings before the main, decision-making session, and business for the Conference to decide upon is prepared by the Methodist Council, an elected body that meets regularly. In order to enable Conference to listen to the voices of the wider connexion, ‘Memorials to Conference’ which ask for a particular issue to be addressed, may be sent by districts ahead of time. As Conference meets, Notices of Motion may be raised by representatives pertaining to matters of immediate concern, which is one way of introducing listening to the Spirit speak in the unfolding discernment of the church through the gathered body as it confers.

Kenneth Carder expresses the hopes for Conference as a means of grace and an expression of synodality:

In a Conference that is a proper expression of Christian Conferencing the following characteristics are to be found:

1. The conversation is formed and shaped by grace, which is the presence and power of God. Responding to and expressing God’s grace is the motive, not winning an argument or advancing an agenda. The manner and spirit in which decisions are made has priority over the tally of the votes in authentic Christian conferencing.
2. The conversation is purposeful and edifying. Being a channel of grace to the hearers and building up the community is the goal.
3. The conversation (speech) is concise, thoughtful, and disciplined. Christian conference requires preparation, time consciousness, and sensitivity to those listening.
4. Christian conversation begins, continues, and ends in prayer. Indeed, it is a form of prayer!⁸

Within the workings of Conference, it is envisaged that at local church, Circuit, and District, there has been synodality operating in the conferring of Church Council, Circuit Meeting, and District Synod.

4.2. District Synod

The District Synod is ‘...the policy-making court of the District, serving as a link between the Conference and the Connexional Team on the one hand and the Circuits and Local Churches on the other.’⁹ It is comprised of all the ordained presbyters and deacons within the District as well as elected lay representatives and ex-officio members representing aspects of the life of the district. The remit of Synod to attend to the work of God in the District allows for discussion about issues of importance in the geographical area covered by the District, and therefore directs Methodists to look beyond the internal workings of the church to matters of mission, ecumenical dialogue, and civic engagement.

⁸ Kenneth L. Carder, ‘Conference That Is a Means of Grace’ (*UMC Nexus*, June 2007)

⁹ Standing Order 412, *Constitutional Practice & Discipline of the Methodist Church*

4.3. Circuit Meeting

A Methodist Circuit is ‘the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement, and help’, and it is the Circuit which resources ministry in the deployment of people, property, and finance. Guidance suggests that the Circuit Meeting includes ‘Conversation on the work of God and the development of circuit policy.’¹⁰

4.4. Church Council

The Local Church—conferring in a way which expresses the nature of synodality within the Local Church (Society) is focussed within the Church Council. The guidelines for determining the Church Council agenda include the heading ‘Conversation on the work of God and the development of local church policy’. Within this single heading is reflected the distilling of much of what Methodists recognise as Synodality. ‘Conversation’ expresses that this is about the voices of more than one person, and that there is listening and responding taking place. That this conversation is ‘on the work of God’ presupposes that those present are able to identify and articulate what they discern is the work of God amongst them. It contains within it an openness to receiving new insight from hearing the testimony of others and being challenged in thinking. It is a space held for conferring with its emphasis on listening to the leading and work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Framed in this way it challenges the local church to resist making Church Council a purely functional business meeting with votes and practical decisions becoming dominant. At its best, there is an opportunity to discern together with attentiveness to different perspectives what people are being led to recognise as the leading of God in a particular direction. That this conversation on the work of God flows into the development of local church policy signals that there should be an outcome which enables the church to journey onward together, mitigating against ‘conferring’ becoming just a ‘talking shop’. Experience suggests this is not always the reality of Church Council meetings.

Also within the guidelines for Church Council Agenda is the ‘Matters referred by Conference, Synod or Circuit Meeting’. This acts as a signifier and a prompt to remind the Local Church of its part in a wider process of journeying together with other Methodist churches in connexion.

Conferring at a local Church Council may lead to the identification of an issue felt to be of connexional importance and a ‘Memorial to Conference’ may be sent from a local Church Council to the Circuit Meeting, thence to the District Synod and onward to the annual Methodist Conference. Theoretically, this allows the church regionally and nationally to discern what the Spirit is saying to the church in particular local contexts, or for the wider Connexion to hear what issues are of deep significance to ‘grass-roots’ Methodists.

¹⁰ *Guidelines for the Business of District, Circuit and Local Meetings, Constitutional Practice & Discipline of the Methodist Church*

4.5. *Style*

Some of the workings of the structures and processes outlined above demonstrate the ways the Methodist Church in Britain seeks to practice synodality in journeying together and gathering to discern the nature of participating in God's mission. Perhaps the clearest articulation of the ethos or style of Methodist synodality is derived from the Methodist understanding of its ecclesiology.

The Methodist understanding of authority and Church government derive from the character of Methodism as a 'connexional' Church. The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. Insofar as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. In terms of the contemporary missionary strategy of the Church, authority is vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities. Within the structures of decision-making the Church gives a special place to those who are its ordained representative persons; it also listens, where relevant, with especial attentiveness both to ordained persons and to laypersons who serve it with special expertise, but it is ultimately the whole people of God, who, through the relevant decision-making bodies, express their affirmation, or otherwise, of the strategies placed before them. (§4.6.6)

With regard to conferring being more than 'having a debate' or 'taking a vote', and the ways in which our views may be changed and transformed in dialogue with others, the collaborative nature of Methodist discernment is noted:

The various committees of the local church, supervised by the Church Council, reflect at their best the interdependence and collaboration of the whole church in the fulfilment of its task. This does not mean that majority decisions are always, and minority views never, correct (particularly if the structures of a church exclude those already marginalised). But this essentially collaborative character of ministry is all the greater in the Methodist Church because an ordained presbyteral minister normally has responsibility for more than one church. This, together with the itinerancy of the majority of ministers, makes all the more necessary the partnership between laypeople and ordained ministers, whether presbyteral or diaconal, which is implicit in the Methodist understanding of the Church. (§4.7.3)

The style of conferring at Conference is to debate reports and there are questions about whether 'debate' is a helpful term with its risk of importing an adversarial 'win or lose' overtone to what is supposedly 'seeking the mind of Christ'. The desire to embed openness, accompaniment, listening, and mutual learning in the process of Methodist connexional conferring is often found in small details. The notion of equality in conferring at Conference can be seen in that on the floor of a conference debate every speaker has an equal amount of time to speak. This focusses the words and mind of the speaker on the topic in hand, but also ensures equality of access to debate no matter who the speaker is. The 'first time speaker' rule allows those attending conference for the first time to move to the front of the queue on their first contribution to a debate as a means of seeking to listen to those who may be

younger, marginalised, or new to conference, and not just listen to the established voices who are practiced at navigating the protocols.

5 Discernment and Difference

The Methodist Church, as part of the universal Church called into being by God through Jesus Christ, has a particular call to spread scriptural holiness through responding to the gospel of God's love in Christ and living out its discipleship in worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism. Diversity of experience and understanding brings a richness of gifts, insights and perspectives to the Methodist Church today as the changed and changing contexts of the twenty-first century bring opportunities to share in and express God's mission in new ways. Discerning how we thus continue to respond to God's call is a task for the whole Church and one which we all share.¹¹

Methodism seeks to hold the tension between unity and diversity in theological perspective through careful robust conferring and a commitment to living with 'contradictory convictions' on some matters. Wesley addressed theological difference in his sermon *Catholic Spirit* and his words underpin the ethos within which Methodism seeks to accommodate plurality of understanding. 'But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may'.¹² In times where Methodism seeks to hold together different theological voices within the same debate, this forms a guiding principle about how difference is to be regarded. Dealing with difference, Shier-Jones' argues that 'Being a Methodist is a response to a calling to a particular way of life rather than an agreement to a particular set of beliefs. This has always been the case. Consequently, Methodist theology is vocational and purposeful rather than propositional or doctrinal'.¹³

Methodism does have doctrinal foundation ('our doctrines' set out in the Deed of Union) and we recognise Conference statements as being the Methodist Church's position on a matter but there is a breadth of theological perspective within Methodism which means holding diversity and difference within the Body of Christ is an ever present feature of ecclesial life.

Methodism uses the resources of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience to seek to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Using 'experience' as the fourth element is what distinguished the Wesleyan Quadrilateral from the Richard Hooker's threefold authority of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition. The understanding of what is meant by 'experience' has changed from what it once was, and most recently the emphasis within Methodism to listening to the lived experience of people has taken on greater prominence. On a practical level this has involved the sharing of individual stories within decision-making spaces (church council meetings, floor of debate on conference). This attempt to listen to the lived

¹¹ *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, Conference statement 2021.

¹² John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit' (no.34 of the 44 *Sermons on Several Occasions*).

¹³ Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Epworth Press, 2005),4.

experience of Methodist disciples of different genders, race, class, as part of conferring also raises the questions about who is present in these spaces and who's story gets told:

The 2005 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee 'to reflect upon the theological implications of being a Church that has to live or contend with different and mutually contradictory convictions.'¹⁴ The report sets out the acknowledgement that diversity and difference exist, the recognition that this has sometimes been a source of pain, the possibilities for diversity to be a catalyst for good and it identifies forms of difference and diversity which are unacceptable.

In exploring in an informed way the rich resources of Christian scripture, tradition and experience, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that different kinds of diversity exist. Some forms (e.g. diverse views on styles of worship) are part of the Church's life. Critical scrutiny of all views held, together with hard decisions and disagreements, are therefore built into the way the Church does its work. The same is true of some tough ethical questions such as temperance and pacifism, about which Christians have disagreed, and still disagree, strongly. Christian history shows, however, that some forms of diversity do not take this form. Support for racism, for example, is unacceptable for a Christian. Even though apartheid was once defended by appeal to the Bible and supported by Christians, this is not a form of diversity which would now be deemed tenable.'¹⁵

Christian faith has found expression in a vast range of worship, tradition, attitudes and actions in ministry or sacrament, and in ethical conduct. This diversity has resulted in disagreement, conflict and schism within the body of Christ. Tensions between conservative and liberal, traditional and progressive, individual and community have been energising as well as draining in the Church's history. Diversity has thus been the catalyst for growth and new life as well as pain and division. Paul's letters bear witness not only to his passion for unity but also to the divisions and conflicts arising from different convictions and behaviour within the life of the early Church (Rom. 14.1-15.6; I Cor 1.10-17, 6.1-11, 8.1-13, 10.23-11.1).¹⁶

There is acceptance that on particular matters Methodists will live with contrary convictions but still be able to remain within the Methodist Church alongside those with whom they profoundly disagree. This relies on accepting that other views are held as equally strongly as one's own and being willing to be changed and transformed in the process of conferring. What falls outside this is where there are those who do not want to dialogue or co-exist because they accept their position as the only valid one.

¹⁴ *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church* (Conference Report 2006)

¹⁵ *ibid* §1.4

¹⁶ *ibid* §2.1

6 Mission

Much of Methodism's early conferring in the time of Wesley was focussed on how to respond to the gospel in mission, particularly in relation to how to take the good news to the new colonies of North America. Doctrinal issues about the authority to ordain were inseparably linked to the call for Methodism to fulfil its purpose as a missionary movement.

Methodist historian, John Munsey Turner, notes how the synodality expressed in connexion flowed from Wesley's understanding of mission, which was intensely practical in its outworking of feeding the hungry, providing education, and seeking justice.

The mission of Wesley led to the creation of a 'Connexion', a phenomenon of ecclesiastical order, which was neither sect nor denomination. Connexionalism is a distinctive and multi-faceted ecclesiastical vision including spirituality, unity, mission, governance and fellowship. It implies a covenantal commitment of faithfulness to God and accountability to the community of faith. It 'connected' the Gospel with need—a practical, experimental style of theology.¹⁷

It could be argued that as Methodism became a church, the move to discuss matters of ecclesial theology, governance, and direction impacted the focus of conferring, moving it toward institutional development, and maintenance rather than mission.

In some senses it is within Methodist DNA/culture that mission should be the primary content of conferring and its practical outcome, and yet there is sometimes a dissonance which sees conferring as 'talking we don't have time for' and mission as 'action which will make a difference'. This false dichotomy is borne of the pressures of institutional decline which generate an anxiety to 'do something' relative to the recognition that the deep listening and prayerful attention required of synodal conferring takes time to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth was adopted by Conference in 2020 and was itself formed through a significant and wide process of conferring. It has 3 core orientations:

- Centred in God
- Everyone an Evangelist
- Transformational Leadership

and 5 core areas:

- New Places for New People
- Church at the Margins
- Every Church a Growing Church
- Young Evangelists, Pioneers, and Leaders

¹⁷ John Munsey Turner, *Wesley* (Epworth Press, 2002), 97-98.

- Digital Presence: Mission for the Digital Age¹⁸

These are in the process of being embedded at Local, Circuit, District, and Connexional levels and are therefore conferred upon in each of these structures in order to ground mission and ministry in what the Methodist Church understands the Spirit to be saying at this moment in time.

7 Catholic Learning

7.1. *Quality of preaching*

A high status is given to preaching within Methodist worship, partially down to the fact that Methodism grew from the impact of preaching and it was the language of ‘preachers’ rather than ‘priests’ who led the early movement. The first thing to acknowledge is that this culture of preaching is hard to create from a different place with a different history. The ministry of preaching is exercised by those in ordained ministry, but most Methodist worship is conducted by lay Local Preachers, who are accredited following a course of theological study, mentored practical training by a more experienced preacher, and testing of call by the Local Preachers’ Meeting and feedback from congregations. One of the core elements in training Methodist preaching involves feedback on the worship they lead, including the sermon preached. Despite the challenge to find suitably discerning people to give the feedback, it is hoped that this generates a culture within hearers of expectancy and the notion that preaching requires response on the part of the hearer. The process of feedback is also encouraged with established preachers to continue developing the gift and skill of preaching throughout the preacher’s ministry.

7.2. *Full inclusion of women*

Reflection on the impact of Methodism’s ordaining of women as presbyters since 1974 is that it takes time to move from pioneer ‘firsts’ —first female presbyters, first female superintendents, first female President of Conference—to a culture where women are fully included. Methodism gives key roles to former Presidents of Conference (chairing Methodist Council and particular committees, as well as advising on various matters) and until there had been a number of female Methodist Presidents, this was an area of notable male exclusivity. Key to moving to greater inclusion of women has been noting: where are the decision-making spaces and do women’s voices get included? Are women ‘visible’ in key aspects of church life?

7.3. *Inclusivity*

Within the past few years Methodism has been challenged not just to say all are welcome but to demonstrate that in tangible ways.

¹⁸God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth, Conference Report 2020 §31-32

This is grounded in an understanding and affirmation of ‘every member ministry’, which theologically holds together the image that we are the Body of Christ and the understanding that the Holy Spirit bestows gifts upon all for the building up of the body. The Justice, Dignity, and Solidarity strategy has encouraged a shift in perception around diversity to see difference as a gift to be received rather than a problem to be solved. The ‘enlarging your tent’ has involved considering how ways of worshipping, conferring, and mission can be exclusionary barriers to participation, noticing which voices and perspectives have not been heard or present, and seeking out why.

The Methodist Church continues to affirm that the ministry of the whole people of God is central to its understanding of ministry. Whilst ‘ministry’ or ‘ministries’ can also refer to the particular institutional forms which this service takes, the Church’s ministry is a participation in the ministry of Christ. Ministry is therefore primarily about the witness of the whole people of God in the world. It is never merely an individual endeavour but always exercised as part of the Body of Christ. All members of the Church share in ministry and the ministry of the Church is exercised as Christians together respond to God’s call and discover and use the gifts which the Holy Spirit has given them.

All members of the Church through their baptism are called to participate in the ministry of Christ by proclaiming the kingdom of God in different ways at different times. Sharing in God’s mission is essentially a corporate endeavour and rooted in the interdependence of all Christians as the Body of Christ. Belonging to the Church involves supporting and encouraging each other, engaging in corporate discernment and making oneself accountable to other members of the community of faith. For the sake of this ministry of the whole body, all are equipped with gifts. The diverse and complementary gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit to each and every member of the Body of Christ are for the common good of the whole of God’s people so that they may support and encourage one another and engage in witness and service in the world.¹⁹

One of the key ways of seeking to embrace diversity more fully has begun with listening to the experiences of those who have often been disregarded, silenced, and marginalised:

Reflection on experience and the sharing of experience have always been important within Methodist theology. An influential strand of this has been the role of narrative and personal narrative in particular. Stories shared concerning personal experience or the experience of others are powerful. They can inspire one to respond in different ways, arouse emotion, initiate commitment, provide new insights, encourage and transform. The value and importance Methodism ascribes to personal experience has been manifest in the way the tradition has engaged with personal stories to encourage and inform both the personal and communal pilgrimage of faith. Methodism’s Arminian belief in the availability of God’s grace for all means that it places a high value on stories we tell as churches and as individuals. The tendency towards an all-embracing inclusivism which is implied in the readiness often shown to listen to powerful, personal narratives means that any person’s story has the potential to carry revelatory value as an example of God’s transforming power and steadfast love. Listening to and responding to

¹⁹ *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, Conference statement 2021.

stories can shape and influence people's understanding of themselves, others and the God who is always ready to welcome and embrace all. It is through the telling and hearing of personal stories that people reveal how they are approaching and 'accessing' the content of Scripture and the Christian tradition. All Christians 'make the tradition their own' in some way. It is both essential, but also problematic in so far as the personal nature of the links made with Scripture and tradition are then hard to evaluate and, as necessary, critique.²⁰

In order to sustain this diversity, the capacity to welcome, love, and accept everyone does not preclude the need to work hard at understanding different perspectives and experiences and for all to be willing to be changed by God:

A readiness to 'accept people as they are' and to listen to people's stories is basic Christian practice. Such readiness can, however, mask any sense that people may be changed by God. Christian practice also entails what, within a person's story, may invite change in the process of their story being read in the light of the story of God. Exploration of living with contradictory convictions within the Church means accepting that all must be prepared to change and develop in the light of what God is doing in, for and amongst us. Our main difficulty is that we are not always able clearly to see what it is in us that God needs to change. And we differ, amongst ourselves, in our interpretations of what needs changing in us and in others. As those who have been involved in inter-faith encounter have noted, however, without entering into dialogue with a preparedness to be changed, as well as to bring change in others, no real dialogue happens.²¹

7.4. Inward facing/replicating secular structures

Recent debates about changing the structures of Methodism to reflect that we are a church with substantially fewer members than a decade ago have been met with challenge. The desire to have an executive body which is nimble enough to respond to the Spirit in fastmoving times of change has been resisted by many who mourn the prospective loss of wider representation in the conferring of Conference and a diminishing of what they instinctively recognise as a synodical seeking of the heart of God. Others assert that in order to fulfil Methodism's mission, unwieldy structures need to change in order to liberate energy and release Methodists for worship and mission. The very process of seeking a way forward on this risks collapsing into being self-referential and inward-facing and, perhaps, in a spirit of Receptive Ecumenism, Methodism may gain wisdom and perspective from learning from others as we journey together in worship, prayer, and conversation.

²⁰ *Living with Contradictory Convictions* §5.1.

²¹ *ibid* §5.2