

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN SCOTLAND

CONSULTATION PAPER: THE DEVELOPMENT OF METHODISM IN SCOTLAND

1. Why a Development Plan for Methodism in Scotland?

The Methodist Church in the United Kingdom is going through a time of change. Across the Connexion there has been a period of “Mapping the Way Forward” and “Regrouping for Mission”. At local level this has involved Circuit Reviews in which we have sought to establish whether our resources of people, buildings and finance are appropriate for the mission to which we feel called as a church. The experience of these review processes has led to the conclusion that a more radical development process is required, in particular to include the mission and structure of the Scotland District as a whole. Our goal is ensure that Methodism retains (or returns to) the emphases of a mission-shaped movement.

2. What’s involved?

A lot of work has already been undertaken within the District. Synod and the District Policy Committee have on a number of occasions discussed options for development; each of our Circuits has been through a period of initial circuit review in 2009 facilitated by the regional Learning and Development Officers; and the Superintendents have held three separate meetings reviewing the structure of circuits, the deployment of resources and, in particular, the stationing of ministers within the District.

In some ways we have had too many different groups looking at too many overlapping subjects. While the need for change is well-recognised, this approach has made it more difficult to achieve consensus on the vision and the approach. As a result a special Synod was held in April 2010, at which each Circuit was invited to send additional representatives. We asked ourselves the question: what shape should Methodism in Scotland take in 2015 and beyond? Martyn Atkins, Secretary to the Methodist Church Conference, attended the Synod and helped to shape our thinking about how to ensure our future as a broad, evangelical mission-shaped movement.

To progress things further, Synod appointed a 4-person project team to undertake a year-long consultation process so that the District might discern and commit to its future vision and strategy. The project team has been briefed to provide a “root and branch” review, and to formulate proposals for the April 2011 Synod that have broad support across the District. This consultation paper provides one of the ways in which anyone interested in the future of Methodism in Scotland can contribute to the process. All views are welcome and will be taken into account by the project team. Responses can be in writing or on-line and from individuals or groups. If you would prefer to talk with one of the project team directly, this can also be arranged via the Methodist District Office in Dunblane.

3. Who are we?

The key to understanding our future is in understanding our past. What is it that makes Methodism distinctive, particularly in a Scottish context? Martyn Atkins provided a perspective on this question in his address to Synod, identifying the “charisms” (giftedness to support a current need and a common goal) of Methodism as:

- missionary, rather than theological or doctrinal
- broad, evangelical, mission-shaped doctrines: “for all”

- a big Holy Spirit, a catholic spirit ... bigger than the (Methodist) church
- life-long discipleship ... e.g. the pursuit of Christian perfection
- whole of life discipleship
 - overcoming sacred-secular separation
 - pursuit of personal and social holiness (wholeness)
- world-changing discipleship ... not primarily personal.

These charisms may be traced through Methodist history from Wesley's time, but it is questionable the extent to which they are visible in practice in Scotland today. The Methodist churches of Scotland were largely established in local areas to serve specific sectors of society (e.g. fishing or mining communities), were often populated with migrants from the South, and were largely working class. Nowadays all of these distinctions are largely invalid, and it is doubtful that many outside the church have any idea what it means to be a "Methodist" church. Also, when going inside and encountering the people, the forms of worship, and the theology, is there anything that clearly distinguishes a Methodist chapel from, say, the Church of Scotland? If there really is nothing distinctive about the Methodist Church in Scotland, then we have to ask ourselves why we continue to exist in our present form, and/or what changes are needed to recapture our distinctive Methodism charisms.

Perhaps, if there are distinctive features of Methodism in Scotland today, it lies in two areas:

- church governance – our Connexional structure is distinctly different from a congregational or Episcopalian model, and arguably more suited to the post-modern world in which interconnectedness is valued and hierarchy devalued. However, it could be argued that in Scotland, where our churches are so dispersed, we think and act more along the lines of the congregational model.
- local preachers – the fact that we have so many lay worship leaders and preachers sets us apart from other denominations, and provides a distinctive feature that we can bring to the ecumenical table, especially when other denominations are struggling for such resources. However, reliance on what Martyn Atkins called "hit and run local preachers" can make it difficult for any Methodist church to present a consistent and coherent message.

4. Where are we now?

The work already undertaken in reviewing the life of the Methodist Church in Scotland presents a clear picture of an organisation under stress. For example, the following three approaches all point to the decline and duress:

- Superintendents Forum. The superintendents were asked to provide snapshots of their Circuits, and to provide adjectives to describe the present situation of the Methodist Church. The vast majority of the adjectives were negative, e.g. dying, diminishing, uncertain, confusing, fearful, disconnected, honest, imaginative, challenging, struggling, diverse, stretched, fallow, pessimistic, traditional, stuck, unstable, dispirited, disproportionate, disparate, incomplete, lacking strategy, hopeful, enabling, foggy.

- Synod. Representatives to Synod were asked to choose a picture that for them summed up the state of the Methodist Church today. Most chose pictures that spoke of hard times and challenges and struggles, but these were balanced by a very optimistic view when pictures illustrating the visions of the church in the future.
- Statistics. The latest membership statistics show that there were 2681 members of the Methodist Church in the Scotland District in October 2009, down from 3165 in 2005. There has been decline in virtually every circuit and every year during that period. The Synod Directory for 2010 records that:
 - There are 22 Circuit ministers - one every 122 members compared to a Connexional average of 140 members per presbyter (based on 2007 published statistics).
 - There are 46 churches – average membership is 58.
 - There are 236 District Officers (including a few vacancies) – almost 1 in 10 of our membership.

None of this is to deny the real love, care and compassion that is to be found in churches across the District. There is much good work going on in Christ's name, and this is to be celebrated. However, increasingly Methodist people are operating under strain and achievements are against the odds. Is God telling us to do things differently?

Rev. 1. 30MAY10.