



FROM THE CHAIR

The Revd Dr David A. Hull

Dear Friends,

Happy New Year! I have the privilege of writing twice with new year greetings, both here and also in the renewal letter included in this mailing. Do please read that letter alongside this – not least for the very kind and encouraging comments from our members about a range of our work throughout the past year.

At our October meeting, I shared with the executive committee that I don't remember ever enjoying the changing of the seasons as much as I did as summer changed to autumn last year. There could be all sorts of reasons for that: perhaps the pace of life at that time of year is slightly less intense in my current role; perhaps we are now feeling more settled as a family after a number of house moves. It did, however, seem strangely prophetic. With the decisions of last year's Methodist Conference, we have now, I believe, arrived in a new season within the British Methodist Church. The implications of those decisions are still being outworked for many people. There is no doubt, though, that the old season has passed and a new season has come. Though I believe the outcome is highly regrettable, I for one am somewhat relieved that we no longer have to engage in the debates around the Conference report, God In Love Unites Us.

As we have begun a new year, I have noticed that a variety of people in a number of different contexts have spoken and written about the 'one another's of the New Testament: 'love one another ... serve one another ... encourage one another' etc. They serve as wonderful reminders of the actions and attitudes that should characterise both the body of Christ and the lives of individual Christians that form the body. They remind me also of the commitment that Methodist presbyters make at their ordination, to 'watch over one another in love' – a concept, in the Methodist understanding of discipleship, that is at the heart of Christian fellowship for all believers.

It remains to be seen whether this will be the hallmark of the new season within the Methodist Church. Concerning signs have already begun to appear with reports of Circuits being obstructive towards local churches who feel they can no longer continue in connexion with the Methodist Church and who seek to buy their buildings: withholding information; seeking to drive up costs through obtaining outline planning permission; refusing to sell to local church members, even when the due process of bidding on the open market has been completed; preferring, it seems, to sell church buildings for housing or business use, or even for use by other religions, than to continue to be used for Christian mission and ministry.

What is even more concerning, perhaps, is the standard of debate and engagement within the Methodist Church. When 'The Runaway Train' was published last year, as could be expected, I received a significant amount of feedback. I was deeply grateful that so many wrote warmly to express their appreciation. The nature of disagreement was, however, disturbingly insightful, with a noticeable generational divide. I received some responses from ministers who have been retired for, say, more than a decade or so. Though some disagreed with my conclusions, their correspondence was civil, thoughtful and engaged seriously with the points I had raised; it made stimulating reading. By way of contrast, much of the correspondence I received from disagreeing ministers who are a decade and more younger was emotive, shallow and even silly, making no attempt to engage with the points I had made. It does not bode well for the future.

Perhaps the opposite of the 'one another's of the New Testament is the contemporary concept of 'othering' – objectifying those with whom you disagree, denying their innate dignity and treating them as unworthy of respect. It is the modern form of what the philosopher John Stuart Mill described two hundred years or so ago as 'the worst offence': 'to stigmatise those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral' (see his essay, 'On Liberty', chapter 2). Let us hope that this is not becoming a characteristic of the new season within the Methodist Church. When I hear of a desire to depict those who now struggle to affirm the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church, though they have held significant positions of responsibility within the denomination, as a 'lunatic fringe', I have my concerns.

There is still much to be outworked within this new season. It is clear that many of our members feel that MET is needed now more than ever. I am so grateful that we stand together, and I look forward to loving, serving and encouraging one another as we each seek to serve the Lord and 'do whatever he tells us' throughout the year ahead.

Rejoicing in our partnership in the gospel,

David