

THE BEST OF ALL IS, GOD IS WITH US

Carolyn Lawrence

VICE PRESIDENT OF THE METHODIST CONFERENCE, CAROLYN LAWRENCE, SHARES SOMETHING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL THEME AND CONSIDERS THE RELEVANCE OF THE LIVERPOOL RESOLUTIONS OF 1820.

The Methodist Conference of 2020 will go down in history! It was the first, and hopefully last, conference to be held virtually. A handful of us gathered at Cliff College, carefully socially distancing in a studio to lead the Conference, aided by an awesome team of technical staff, and the rest of the members of conference joined the sessions via Zoom. It will also be remembered by me personally, as it was the Conference at which I was elected and inducted as the Vice President of Conference for 2020-2021. What was supposed to be a celebration with a gathering of friends and family, actually became a quiet, virtual event and, instead of speaking to a large congregation, I had to deliver my speech to a lone camera man in the chapel at Cliff!

The theme that Richard Teal, the President of Conference, and I myself chose for our year of office is from some of Wesley's last words: 'The best of all is, God is with us'. Never were those words more encouraging than whilst we were engaging in this surreal experience at Conference. Knowing God was with us when so many couldn't be physically

present, brought a ray of light and hope to the proceedings.



Carolyn's induction in a socially distanced studio.



Grandchildren watching induction online.

During our year of office we want to look at growth; both personal growth in discipleship and also church growth. Owing to Covid-19, some things that were planned will now necessarily need to be very different. The theme, however,

is still timely and quite prophetic as we learn how to be church in a different way and seek to encourage people in all their fears and uncertainties as they continue to build resilience in their walk with Jesus.

The verses that I believe God gave to me for this year are Isaiah 43:18-19:

'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.'



Little did I realise just how prophetic those words would turn out to be as we all seek to do new things and find new ways of being the church of Jesus Christ in our communities!



My daughter Jo, painted an image to reflect these verses, showing the streams of water refreshing not just the physical creation but also symbolising a person reaching out to receive the



refreshing of the Holy Spirit for those dry and desolate situations we all face.

My friend Anne Middleton also created a reflective video based on these words which was used as part of the service for Reception into Full Connexion for our ordinands at Conference. Anne shares this on pages 12-13.

I had the privilege of visiting Brazil before the lockdown where the church is growing at an amazing rate. The church there has grown from 167,000 members in 2010 to a current membership of 275,000 and growing. Over the coming year, I hope to share some of the key principles of growth that I learned from the Methodist Church in Brazil and to encourage churches here that growth is possible and that God still has a good plan for the Methodist Church in Britain.

LIVERPOOL RESOLUTIONS

Part of the reason for this theme of growth, is inspired by the fact that 2020 marks the 200th anniversary of the resolutions made by the Methodist Conference in Liverpool in 1820. The Conference that year was facing the unprecedented situation that Methodist membership was in sharp decline.

What was to be done? Enshrined in the minutes of that conference was a set of resolutions which were seen as being vital for the health and holiness of the church. They give us a wonderful example of how a declining church can turn around and begin to grow, enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The members of that Conference were determined to reverse the trend and it is said that other business was subjugated to the concern of charting a more fruitful course.

The full resolutions can be found in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline

of the Methodist Church or on the Methodist Church website. I have seen many of these resolutions reflected in the strategy of the Brazilian Methodist Church. Some of them are also reflected in the 'God for All' and 'Methodist Way of Life' projects that have been launched in the Methodist Church this year. I pray that we as individuals, local churches and as a Connexion can once again learn from these resolutions and their impact.

The resolutions can be grouped into seven main headings:

1. RENEWING THE PREACHERS

The preachers resolved to devote themselves afresh to God and to focus on their personal growth and discipleship as they sought to care for the flocks entrusted to them. They vowed to eliminate any distraction from the work of saving souls and spiritually shepherding God's people. They prayed for spiritual gifts that would allow them to minister more effectively and recommitted themselves to the study of God's Word. The solution to decline, they believed, would begin in the hearts of the leaders.

2. RENEWING THE PREACHING

The preachers committed to renewing their preaching. The content of their preaching was refocused on the vital doctrines of the Christian faith and the method would be evangelistic, experiential (practical), and zealous.

They would strive for clarity and simplicity while applying the doctrines of faith to people's lives. When visitors were present, they would pointedly and passionately offer an invitation to receive Christ. This is a practice I witnessed in Brazil, where it is a regular invitation to offer an altar call to encourage people to respond to the preaching of God's Word. Many engage with this call to respond each week.

The practice of Field Preaching was reclaimed. Wesley had started out in the highways and the hedges and called his preachers to proclaim the gospel outdoors twice a day wherever a crowd of twenty or more people could be gathered. Wesley had called those who wanted to keep the meetings indoors 'lazy Methodists'! Today, we might have to socially distance for a while, but maybe outdoor preaching is the way to go!



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3. PRAYER AND FASTING

A special day of prayer and fasting was called across British Methodism for a reversal of the decline and the renewal of the movement. The preachers recommitted to leading quarterly days of prayer and fasting, prayer meetings and 'watch nights' (all night prayer events). This commitment to prayer is another feature of the church in Brazil.

4. CHURCH PLANTING

Extension of the work was to be the job of every preacher as they began



BEST OF ALL IS, GOD IS WITH US.

5. RECOMMITMENT TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Wesley had insisted that each preacher be personally involved in the ministry of teaching children. In light of the decline recorded in 1820, the Liverpool Conference commissioned a new catechism to be used with young people. The training of the rising generation would no longer be neglected.

6. CULTIVATE THE EXISTING MEMBERSHIP SPIRITUALLY

The preachers recommitted to visiting the sick, the 'careless', and the lukewarm. Class leaders were to recommit to visiting the members in their care weekly and to enquire personally about their spiritual wellbeing. During pastoral visits, families were encouraged to practice private spiritual disciplines. The public spiritual disciplines of worship, Sabbath-keeping and Holy Communion were to be likewise publicly encouraged.

7. RENEWAL OF TEACHING

They pledged to avoid small-minded arguments over theological minutiae. There was a 'spirit of strife and debate' that had crept in and the 1820 conference was committed to driving this out.

There was a renewed effort to make meetings 'interesting and appropriate to... the state of the people'. The need was recognized for high-quality, relevant and practical instruction that could be applied to everyday life.

WHAT WAS THE RESULT?

The first-ever Methodist turnaround strategy was a great success. The movement tripled in numbers over the next eighty years and proved it could continue without the direct leadership of Wesley. Of course, decline eventually did come to the British Methodists and has sadly continued until the present day.

John Wesley claimed not to fear the eventual disappearance of the Methodists. He famously said:

'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.'

I hope that during my year of office I will have the opportunity to encourage

people in their discipleship, especially post Covid-19, as we navigate these uncharted waters. I also hope to challenge some of the things that have hindered spiritual growth and maturity individually and as churches.

It is my hope that we can learn from these important resolutions of 1820 as well as the principles for growth witnessed in Methodist churches in Brazil and other nations, so that we can once again become a light in this land bringing people into a living relationship with Jesus and nurturing them to become disciple making disciples.

I continue to be deeply humbled and thankful for all those who have promised to pray during this year for myself and Mark, as well as for Richard and his wife Sue. I implore those of you who have the gift of intercession, to stand with us in prayer over the coming months, especially as we navigate our way through new ways of conducting the presidency and new ways of being church for the glory of Jesus and the extension of his kingdom here on earth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying! (Revelation 3:22)

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ministries in new places and classes were to be started in neighbourhoods as a strategy for involving lay leaders and reaching new people. Prayer meetings, likewise, were to be held in homes as a way of developing new societies and leaders.

In Brazil, I witnessed the cell church model effectively enabling and growing leaders as well as in planting and growing new churches. I would love to see this model once again used within British Methodism.