

Empowering Grass Roots Methodism - A response to the Ministry Committee's proposals contained in the Fruitful Field Report

A few caveats to begin:

- This is not a Faith and Order document and I am not a staff member of a theological college affected by the Fruitful Field. I am Director of Research for CODEC which is mentioned in the report (with errors).
- This is the point of view of a presbyter who has been in Connexion and travelled under the discipline of the Methodist Church for the last twenty years. The point of view of someone involved in theological education for fifteen and someone who served on TSRE prior to its amalgamation into the Shadow Ministries Committee.
- This paper cannot contain any funding estimates because no funding estimates were attached to the Fruitful Field report nor are any funding figures in the public domain.
- The response will not reference the original report, the Liverpool Minutes or offer a counterpoint argument. It is not a systematic refutation. It reflects theologically and analytically on a number of aspects of documents within the public domain.
- This report will be made public on my own blog site in order to promote a public face to the current consultation.

Empowering the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World

Fruitful Field is a bold and ambitious report, which picks up where TSRE left off in the last round of discussions. In fact, the report picks up where TSRE started – with a major debate about the training and support of the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World. This is a good place to start and it is good to see that this time around the battle has been won for a much broader approach to the training needs of the whole Connexion. The opening letter from the General Secretary outlines the need for the report and responses to it to focus on this general concept much more than in former reports, although couched in the new language of a 'discipleship-movement shaped for mission'.

As such, this response will focus wherever possible on the need to develop a learning strategy, which will support the ministry of all within the Methodist Church. **But that is not all, it will focus on how we deliver that support to the grass roots of the Methodist movement.** How do we deliver excellent training resources at circuit, district, regional level. My main criticism of the Fruitful Field report is that its conclusions do not match the central argument of resourcing the whole people of God. Its conclusions focus on building a central hub and pouring extensive resources into this hub, rather than empowering incarnational, local-church-centred learning structures, which are at the heart of a Methodist way of doing things.

It has always been clear, from the early conversations in TSRE around the *The Future Use of Training Institutions* back in the mid noughties that change was needed. The replication and multiplication of resources for theological training provided a rich field of opportunities for training. However, the greenhouse growth of those resources has been shown to reflect some poor stewardship of our resources. The vine was not pruned as it grew and now the fruit is shown to be wanting. Change must happen and this response is not a rejection of all change nor a rejection of significant change. **This response will outline later a reduction from 21 centres to only 5. But the rationale is for a**

resourcing of the local church, which will also offer excellent opportunities for ministerial training.

Some theological presuppositions

The Fruitful Field report opens with a call to revival taken from the Liverpool Minutes of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in 1820. The report's title comes from those minutes, in which a verse from Isaiah is plucked without any accompanying contextualisation or rationale and made use of. This is not the way that we deal with scripture in the current age and the problems with following the Liverpool Minutes use of the Isaiah passage are regrettable. For example, the use of the text could suggest that current theological education in the Methodist Church is the wilderness referred to which needs to become a fruitful field (Isaiah 32:15). Are we really suggesting that our current theological colleges are wildernesses, which lack the Spirit of God? Do we really believe that the structures which we may put in place are what Isaiah is prophesying rather than the imminent return from Exile or the coming of the Messiah or the outworking of the Kingdom of God? Some detailed exegesis of the passage would have been more helpful than this form of lifting Bible verses out of their context and seeking to make rhetorical mileage out of them.

However, those minutes also reflected powerfully on the need **to empower Methodism at its grass roots** – beginning with the minister's family devotions and 'the cultivation amongst us of family religion'; his study and pulpit; the meetings of the local Societies and Class Leaders; visitation of local classes; local Sunday schools, prayer meetings and preaching in people's homes; setting up new congregations; extending Methodism through the local Circuit structures and ensuring that when our eyes lifted above local concerns we kept ourselves 'friends of all, enemies to none.'

The Liverpool Minutes hold out an offer of Methodism empowered by the Holy Spirit at its grass roots. The vision is not that there will be an outpouring of the Spirit to turn the wilderness that is early eighteenth century Methodism into a Wesleyan fruitful field. The image is much more rooted in the need to focus on the revival of secular society. The image is of Methodism moving out into the world in which we live and spreading Scriptural Holiness throughout the land. It is Scriptural Holiness that offers revival to the wilderness that is Britain in the 1820s and 1885 and 1949 and 2011, not tinkering with theological institutions. Indeed, that mission is central to what the Liverpool Minutes are suggesting. It is indeed a missiological vision where every member of every Methodist Society and Class becomes a Home Missionary. It all starts at home, in local Societies, at the level of the Circuit, our basic level of ecclesial and missional identity.

Recommendation 1: *Empower Methodism at the grass roots to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the Land*

The Vision

The General Secretary has asked the Connexion 'for your prayerful, analytical and prophetic reflections' on the vision which has been offered from the Ministries Committee – a vision which emerges not just from a short-lived Committee, but from the longer deliberations of the officers of the Committee and the work of the Shadow Ministries Committee and, of course, from the conversation and deliberation about Methodism as 'discipleship movement shaped for mission'. We also need to remember that the General Secretary refers to that as a partial statement of our ecclesiology and so it would be

somewhat short-sighted to rest the future of theological education within the Methodist Church wholly on this phrase, however important it may be for our current deliberations.

The vision is set out in three sections – pathways, people and places.

Pathways

The concept of pathways is a conventional metaphor in educational and organisational development documentation in the 21st century. Most institutions focus on learning pathways, albeit with more attention given to learning aims, expected learning outcomes, competencies and strategies for assessment.

For a document which focuses on the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World, there is a intriguing focus on ministerial training under the detailed consideration of existing pathways. It might be worth considering how we prepare our people for mission in the current church, as the Liverpool Minutes do.

Such training and preparation is often carried out by our preachers, Sunday school leaders, class leaders, housegroup leaders, training officers, development officers, safeguarding officers, Connexional Team members and through both formal processes (e.g. Local Preachers, safeguarding) and informal (housegroup, class meetings, retreats). In other words, Methodism as a learning institution is already seeking in many ways to prepare the people of God for their ministry in the world. It is not just about initial ministerial training and local preacher training. **A lot is happening on the ground, at the grass roots, already – and this could be appreciated more within the report.** Informal training is a huge element of educational practice and for a voluntary organisation, such as Methodism, the informal training structure of the Church is absolutely essential. We need to encourage this aspect of the good work that we already do.

Recommendation 2: *Encourage the informal learning structures of the local church!*

A report reflecting on the current configuration of training institutions might have reflected on how well our current RTPs and colleges are encouraging the informal learning structures of the local church. This could become a criteria for inspection of any future institutions and a criteria which is related to financial support. The concept of the Regional Theological Centre should be re-opened to see how a regional centre could support and encourage the development of local informal learning structures and empower local preachers, class leaders and ministers, indeed all of our members, as theologians and theological reflectors within their own circuits and situations.

People

One limitation of the report offered to the Connexion is the preponderance of negative imagery about Connexional Tutors and Colleges (see page 15, 25, 28-29). The resources outlined are seen to be monotone and architectural rather than diverse and human! Rather than explore the rich opportunities which are on offer through the people we, the Church, have appointed, the only image is of a group of serious looking men from the 1930s.

However much society is moving into a distributed and extended learning environment, people are hugely important. People develop learning resources but more importantly they enthuse learners. We need a team of theological educators who will fill the local Methodists within an enthusiasm for learning more about the Christian faith; who will

equip people with tools for exploring their own theology; who will encourage people to live out their discipleship so that all might be home missionaries! It is essential that such people are locally situated. In other words, that they live out being theologians in the local context and not just educational experts in a separated world. The current proposal to have a distributed team but 'tutorial staff based in a central hub' removes from the local context the very people who need to be there. To suggest that such staff could not liaise across a rather small Connexion and act in collaboration with one another would be an insult to their abilities and a denial of the interdisciplinary, cross-institution paradigm which is central to all learning activities within contemporary society.

Recommendation 3: *Develop a co-ordinated but Connexionally-distributed team of skilled, theological educators*

Place

So far, we have explored the positive contributions which the report makes to the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the world. We have shown that the development of pathways, especially the development of informal learning structures in the local church, and the development of a team of theological educators across the Connexion, could assist the contemporary Methodist Church in its task of empowering the ministry of all Methodists in spreading Scriptural Holiness throughout the land.

Where the report is, in my opinion, flawed is in the concept of delivering such a programme through one centralised hub.

The central hub has become a matter of controversy, although the boundaries may have even been moved away from the vision contained in the report in the various podcasts and vodcasts released through the Media Office. But what is in the report needs to be made clear:

- a hub with its own identity and resources
- a hub which can nurture links with HE
- a hub which has presence
- a hub with capacity to engage in a broad range of activities
- a hub comfortable in supporting discipleship, and lay and ordained ministry
- a hub representative of the theological breadth of Methodism and the diversity of the church
- a hub with a model to succeed over 25-35 years
- a hub which will be an excellent learning environment
- a hub which can offer accessible hospitality to Methodism and others
- a hub with premises
- a hub which helps us reduce our carbon footprint
- a hub steeped in Quality Assurance, a beacon of excellence
- a hub on a new, customised site
- a hub where we can gather connexionally
- a hub to house existing libraries and collections

That is a huge wish list. Sadly, there are no figures offered to tell us how much such a hub would cost. This is disappointing because the report makes it clear that we need a rethink of current configuration because we need to steward our resources in more efficient ways. Those outside the Ministries Committee have not been given the requisite information to

assess whether the offered vision or any alternative would do this. Would this vision help us to do that?

The establishment of such a hub (institution), it seems to me, would require a massive amount of both investment and disinvestment.

Investment would be needed on the purchase or renting of an appropriate site; the customisation of the site; transfer of resources to the site; the upkeep and management of the site. But those issues are merely financial. There is investment in the transfer of people to the site from other institutions; identification of validation partners; engagement with ecumenical partners; liaison with local circuits, districts and regional institutions. In other words, everything that is needed to set up an institution *de novo*. All of this activity would necessarily involve a huge investment of resources and time from the Connexional Team which could, therefore, not be given to other satellite institutions or teams. **Such investment would be to short and medium-term detriment of the informal training structures of the Methodist Church.** Moreover, there seems no guarantee that such a *de novo* institution would be viable in the current economic, ecumenical or ecclesial context.

Disinvestment would be needed in our current sites. It is clear that to provide the resource for the central hub, we would need to make major sales of land and property (in a current climate of austerity where property prices are under negative pressure) and the report clearly suggests the closure of all other sites. The one central hub would probably involve disinvestment from validation partnerships with major universities such as Durham, Manchester and Anglia Ruskin along with a withdrawal from engagement with such centres by the core tutorial team now located in the central hub. Closure of the current colleges would also be a disinvestment of ecumenical relations with the knock-on effect to partner colleges and institutions – withdrawal from the Cambridge Federation; withdrawal from the Cranmer/WSC partnership; withdrawal from Queens Foundation; withdrawal from Luther King House. Such disinvestment is too high a price to pay when the success of the investment is so uncertain.

Recommendation 4: *Do not establish the central hub.*

The current list provides the specification for the hub but not for the network

This point is crucial.

If, as a church, we are going to develop the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World, that strategy has to be developed and delivered across the whole of the Connexion. What is offered in the current reports offers some scant detail ONLY on the central hub. There is no detail given of the various satellites that may or may not be needed to support the work of the central hub or to enable its work out into the Connexion. As such, the central hub becomes the central priority and failing of the report as a whole. It is my fear that the development of the hub will absorb all the necessary funds for such a process to the complete neglect of the network of which this hub is supposed to be the centre.

There are many questions raised by this vision:

- Where in the vision is the detail for the network?
- Where is the exploration of how the regional staff liaise with the hub?
- Are students located regionally or in the central hub?
- Do tutors leave the central hub to travel out to students?

- Or, as the report suggests, are students expected to attend the central hub for block release weeks of training?
- Is formation achieved well through block release schemes?
- Where are the regional teams located?
- Are we thinking of regional satellites in a kind of star network?
- How are these regional satellites to be resourced?
- How would such regional satellites relate to the hub?
- How would the hub and the regional satellites be governed?
- What are the governance structures of the central hub?
- To which university will the central hub be linked?

An Alternative: A Connexional Learning Network

Many of these questions could be answered more appropriately, the investment/disinvestment and the resourcing of the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World secured by a different process. Moreover, the alternative here proposed has to be cheaper and more cost effective than the proposal to create a new centre in that it maintains existing relationships and plant without divesting within a currently poor economic climate and makes the best use of existing resources. So, for example, let's assume that £20million were to be invested in the central hub. That same £20million could be invested instead in 5 regional hub institutions which could deliver more incarnationally everything which the central hub were to offer by providing a learning network much more akin to current educational thinking than a somewhat antiquated centralisation process:

- a Connexional network with its own identity and resources
- a Connexional network which could build on existing and new links with important Higher Education centres of theological and practical training
- a Connexional network which has presence across the Connexion not just in one place
- a Connexional network with capacity to engage in a broad range of activities
- a Connexional network already ready to support discipleship, and lay and ordained ministry
- a Connexional network celebrating the theological breadth of Methodism and the diversity of the church
- a Connexional network with a business model to succeed over 25-35 years
- a Connexional network encompassing several excellent learning environments
- a Connexional network offering accessible hospitality to Methodism and others – across the Connexion as a reflection of Wesley's own multi-centre Connexion
- a Connexional network with premises where appropriate
- a Connexional network which helps us reduce our carbon footprint by reducing student and tutor travel to and from the hub
- a Connexional network steeped in Quality Assurance, beacons of excellence
- a Connexional network to house existing libraries and collections

This Connexional Learning Network could be centred on the regions which are developing in current thinking around the Connexion. In other words, there could **regional nodes in London/SE; S/SW; Midlands; North; Scotland/Wales**. These nodes would be responsible for working as a Connexion-wide network to deliver the necessary encouragement of informal learning structures and the various levels of ministerial training (lay and ordained) required across the Connexion. In other words, we would

develop Connexional Policy for Local Preacher Training, delivered through local circuits, facilitated by the appropriate Regional Node. The same could be rolled out for safeguarding, youth work provision, junior church, stewarding, etc. Each regional node would also be the centre for training for trainee ministers within the region.

Recommendation 5: *Create a Connexional Learning Network*

Some of the nodes for the network could develop in existing centres although some may well need to be moved from current sites to incorporate new areas of development or because of problems with existing plant/operations. However, there would necessarily be a reduction from 20 current learning centres to 5, with a significant amount of change needed and possible opportunity for investment in new sites or old.

A Connexional Learning Network would require attention to a number of issues:

- Governance structures which allowed proper collegiate/inter-site responsibilities – c.f. CYM and other network agencies working across multiple sites to deliver same training packages
- Connexional Learning Outcomes and Aims
- Connexional Learning Curriculum
- Engagement with Regional Structures to support local informal learning structures and grass roots Methodism
- Freedom to develop specific charisms within each node without competing with one another (although competition does not need to carry with it the negative connotations it has within the report).

Clearly a good deal would depend on developing collegiality across the network and institutions which were strategically local-church facing. Both of these aspects would be good for ministerial training through the development of training circuits and engagement with the local church. The Connexional Learning Network could be governed by the existing Ministries Committee/D&M provision without the development of a massive central administrative/QA hub which is currently unaffordable within the Methodist Church.

What are the benefits of the Connexional Training Network concept:

- Builds on the best of what we already have
- Focusses on grass roots, local, engagement with circuits, districts, regions
- Distributes excellence across the Connexion
- Removes the expense of creating/establishing a centralised hub
- Allows investment of resources at the local/regional level rather than in one prestige glamour project
- Allows Methodists in a region to determine learning priorities for that region rather than forcing a one-size fits all training strategy
- Brings together ministerial training with circuits and districts to enable more engaged training while also encouraging development of theological resources
- Maintains relations with some existing Higher Education institutions
- Enables the encouragement of informal learning structures across the Connexion by offering local rather than national support – e.g. for Local Preachers' tutors, worship leaders, safeguarding, theological conferences, housegroup resources.

Conclusion

In this response I have made a number of recommendations which seek to build on the Liverpool Minutes and on the basic concept of empowering a discipleship movement shaped for mission – or to enable and encourage the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World. The recommendations, I think, offer a better, more coherent package for the Methodist Church and avoid many of the risks/negatives inherent within the present proposal. The proposal seeks to build on the best that we have rather than to destroy what we have to set up, at extraordinary cost, something which seems beyond what is feasibly possible for a modest-sized denomination currently facing the realities of an aging membership and declining congregations.

Moreover, it seeks to encourage the informal learning structures of existing Connexion and empower normal Methodists to embrace, equip and live out their discipleship in the local community, rather than develop a costly centralised structure which will have minimal impact of the lives of Methodists up and down the land.

My recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: *Empower Methodism at the grass roots to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the Land*

Recommendation 2: *Encourage the informal learning structures of the local church*

Recommendation 3: *Develop a co-ordinated but Connexionally-distributed team of skilled, theological educators*

Recommendation 4: *Do not establish the central hub.*

Recommendation 5: *Create a Connexional Learning Network*

In closing, I refer not to the Liverpool Minutes, nor to an Isaian prophecy about exile and return but to Paul's letter to the Ephesians which talks about the equipping of God's people for work and witness (Ephesians 4:11-16):

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Note what Paul is proposing here – a collaboration of (lay and ordained?) ministers working together to equip God's people for works of service. A collaboration of resources and different aspects of the work of the Church – the Ministry of the Whole People of God in the World. That collaboration is to develop whole-life, Christ-centred discipleship – just the kind of thing that we are seeking to develop within the Methodist Church. But that collaboration is not a centralised concept but rather is seen in the metaphor or image of the

body with different parts working together to achieve the whole. Such an image is of course also found in Corinthians and became a key metaphor for the life of the local church and the catholic Church. It is my conviction that this model and image provides a much more holistic and Methodist understanding of a learning community than the centralised imagery of the learning hub contained within the current report.

Yours in Christ

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