

Connexionalism in Flux

In the British Methodist Context

Nicola V. Price-Tebbutt

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN BRITAIN has been considering, or reconsidering, connexionalism these past few years, and last year the Conference adopted a report called *The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century*, which reaffirmed that the connexional principle is fundamental to how Methodists understand church and a way of being Christian.¹

The reconsideration of connexionalism came about because there were various challenges as to how connexionalism was being understood, expressed, and embodied. The report did not deny that connexionalism in British Methodism is imperfectly expressed and is misunderstood (and not always understood at all), and it was explicit about the kinds of challenges it faced in a twenty-first-century context (and these challenges are continuing); yet the 2017 Conference overwhelmingly and positively affirmed the centrality of connexionalism; indeed the title changed during the process from *Issues of Connexionalism in the 21st*

1 The Methodist Conference, 2017, *The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century*, §4, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2017-37-The-Gift-of-Connexionalism-in-the-21st-Century.pdf>. By adopting a report the Conference endorses its recommendations or conclusions but not (without so stating) any reasons given for them (SO 131[17d]). The report was also commended for study and reflection throughout the Connexion.

Century to *The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century*, reflecting connexionalism's value in the British Methodist Church.

The work of reflection on connexionalism continues: the report was commended for study and reflection, and the Methodist people were encouraged to work through issues and aspects of connexionalism in their own contexts. But I do wonder how much that has been taken up. My question highlights a further challenge: corporately, the Methodist Church in Britain affirms connexionalism as a gift, but in circuits and local churches I wonder how many have engaged with the report, wrestled with the questions, or sought to understand what connexionalism is and reflected on how to embody that understanding in practice and action.

I therefore want to say something briefly about the Methodist Church in Britain's understanding of connexionalism, drawing attention to ways in which that understanding has changed or developed over time, and then name some of the contemporary challenges before identifying five tensions, or dynamics, that have both helped to shape our understanding of connexionalism and may illuminate aspects of the continuing challenges, indicating areas that perhaps need further attention.

How Connexionalism Is Understood and Embodied in the Methodist Church in Britain

The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century reaffirms that “for Methodists connexionalism is . . . a way of being Christian.”² It builds on the understanding of connexionalism expressed in our significant Statement about the nature of the Church, which identifies that one of the distinctive emphases of Methodist ecclesiology is “an emphasis on ‘relatedness’ as essential to the concept of ‘church’, finding expression in ‘the connexional principle.’”³ The Methodist Church in Britain thus understands that the connexional principle enshrines “a vital truth about the nature

2 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §4.

3 A Conference Statement is adopted by the Conference under particular Standing Orders after a two-year consultation process with the Methodist people. Statements set out the Methodist Church in Britain's position. For the

of the Church” and “witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God.”⁴ It is a reflection of New Testament teaching and practice (e.g., the Church as the body of Christ with every organ or limb having its own distinctive function and being part of a living whole) and is the Methodist expression of that *koinonia*, or communion, that is at the heart of Christianity.⁵ So, the Statement continues, “the Methodist sense of ‘belonging’, at its best, derives from a consciousness that all Christians are related at all levels of the Church to each other.”⁶

The connexional principle has been intrinsic to Methodism since its origins, and it is expressed through our structures of fellowship and governance, through the way in which we consult and make decisions and how we exercise oversight. The recent review, however, noted that the way in which it is expressed and embodied has changed and developed over time; it has “shaped, and been lived out in, the faith, practice and assumptions of generations of Methodist people.”⁷

The Methodist connexion came into being because John Wesley saw a need for more systematic spiritual guidance and mutual fellowship among his converts. In the eighteenth century the word *connexion* was used in other areas of life (among politicians, for example, as well as in religious bodies) and referred both to those who were connected to some person or group and to the relationship itself. “Connexion” came to be applied to individuals, societies, and preachers who were “in connexion” with John Wesley (and through him with each other) and to the emerging Methodist movement, a movement that

nature of the Church see The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, especially §4.6 and §4.7.1.

4 The Methodist Conference, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, §4.6.1.

5 *Called to Love and Praise* discusses *koinonia* in §3.1, ¶7–9. Note especially ¶3.1.8: “*koinonia*, then, denotes both what Christians share and also that sharing is at the heart of Christian faith.” For a full review of the use of the term ecumenically, see Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: The Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994).

6 The Methodist Conference, *Called to Love and Praise*, §4.6.4.

7 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §1.

was motivated by the three convictions that Christ had died for all, that all were called to holy love, and that there was no such thing as solitary religion. There is no doubt that while he lived it was John Wesley who held together those who became known as Methodists, but he did make provision for a corporate body to succeed to his authority as he sought to establish the Legal Conference of one hundred preachers (the Legal Hundred), and supreme authority today continues to be vested in the Conference, although it is now a more representative body of lay and ordained and those who represent specific areas of the Church's life. Today the foundational rules of the Methodist Church in Britain, as expressed in the Deed of Union and the Standing Orders based on them, both inform and are informed by the connexional principle, and it continues to underpin our structures. Local Churches are grouped into Circuits (which now vary in size from one-church Circuits to large Circuits). The Circuit is understood as "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 in the Circuit "that presbyters, deacons and probationers are stationed and local preachers are trained and admitted and exercise their calling."⁸ They are then grouped into Districts, which make up the Connexion, and there is a Connexional Team who support Local Churches, Circuits, and Districts, and carry out work on behalf of the Conference.⁹ The Conference remains the supreme authority, and ministers and members agree to abide by its discipline. In practice, though, the question continues of how well-known decisions of the Conference are and how well they are acted upon.

Challenges to Connexionalism

As I mentioned in my introduction, five years ago the Methodist Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to reexamine

8 *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 2017, Standing Order 500.

9 *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Standing Order 302.

connexionalism in the face of a host of challenges and issues that could be understood to call it into question. The idea that connexionalism “no longer worked” was not uncommon (and when that phrase was used it seemed to mean different things to different people), and there was a sense that British Methodism was becoming, or had become, more congregational, with many people having little sense of the Circuit (let alone the wider Connexion). The issues raised included pressures on the discipline of stationing (whereby ministers are annually appointed—or sent—to a circuit by the Conference) and a questioning of the level of commitment to ministerial itinerancy (there continues to be the expectation that ministers are available to be deployed anywhere in the Connexion according to need, and therefore most appointments are normally for only an initial five years). The report noted “the difficulties of sustaining circuit structures with a shrinking volunteer base, the implications for denominational loyalties of stronger local ecumenical relationships, [and] the consequences of increasing organisational diversity and theological, ethical and liturgical pluralism in Methodism.”¹⁰ Furthermore, “The perception has grown that an independent, local and properly ecumenical Christian identity has come to matter far more to many Methodists than a connected and connexional denominational identity. It is feared, moreover, that grassroots Methodism sees ‘the Connexion’ as something other than itself: the Conference, the Connexional Team, ‘headquarters’—a separate entity disconnected from Local Church and Circuit.”¹¹

And yet, it was found that “for Methodists connexionalism is not an abstract principle or a piece of historical baggage, but a way of being Christian. The overall conclusions . . . were that connexionalism is still fundamental to how Methodists understand the Church.”¹² Most who responded to the consultation that had taken place expressed a personal sense of belonging to Methodism and found this important, although expressed and experienced in different ways. The report also pointed to a prophetic and apologetic aspect of connexionalism. Written when the

10 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, \$2.

11 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, \$2.

12 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, \$4.

United Kingdom had not long ago voted to leave the European Union and when there were increased incidents of hate crimes reported—when, as the report says, “Many are wrestling with social and political questions in relation to issues of human identity and belonging; seeking to work out how we live together as members of diverse communities with sometimes competing needs, values and priorities”—it was noted that the Methodist Church in Britain had an opportunity to reflect on what its own patterns of relating reveal “about the nature of relationships rooted, through Jesus, in the love of God.”¹³ It was stated that “connexionalism challenges us to a broader understanding of belonging, inviting us to see our experience of being church as reaching beyond those whom we meet week by week, to other Methodisms elsewhere, offering the opportunity of increased connection with other people and the world. Such connection deepens our experience of God and enriches our witness.”¹⁴ The 2017 Conference adopted *The Gift of Connexionalism* report overwhelmingly.

Inherent Dynamics in the British Methodist Understanding and Expression of Connexionalism

Reflecting on our understanding of connexionalism, on the challenges it continues to face, and on how it has developed over time, there were five tensions, or dynamics (because none are an “either-or” but a “both-and”), that I want to highlight, which help to illuminate how and why connexionalism has developed in this way and why such challenges continue, as well as indicate where further work (both practical and theological) could be needed.

1. Ecclesiological Principle or Means of Structuring

It is significant that the earlier 1937 British Methodist Conference Statement on the *Nature of the Church* did not refer to connexionalism, although it was considered fundamental to practice. While this

13 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §8.

14 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §8.

was rectified in the 1999 Statement, it is only relatively recently that the theological and ecclesiological convictions underpinning it were more clearly and corporately articulated, and it can be argued that even now our understanding of connexionalism could bear more theological depth. Many of our ecumenical partners, for example, see much value in the connexional principle, but it remains questionable as to how far we are yet able to adequately and robustly distinguish understandings of connexionalism from understandings of communion.

The development of the connexional structure of Methodism during John Wesley's lifetime was a response to need: there was no particular plan (and, unlike today, no concerns about a need to "grow" the church); the Connexion just grew. After Wesley's death, the emphasis was greater on the Connexion as a system of mutual support through which the societies and the preachers related to each other, and an emphasis (or expectation) of the Connexion being a means of receiving (and sometimes giving) support continues to be prevalent, although it is now often understood as pragmatic (through sharing or giving financial or other resources) more than anything else. For Wesley, connexionalism was a pastoral and practical way of ordering for mission, and he did not intend to establish a new church. Today, connexionalism is used to refer both to an ecclesiological principle and to the structures through which the Methodist Church in Britain expresses this understanding, but which one is being spoken of at any one time is not always clear. The most recent reflection revealed that while the ecclesiological principle continues to be affirmed, the structures and methods of expression are more frequently referred to as "broken."

2. Theological Ideal or Pragmatic Ordering

The distinction between ecclesiological principle and structures leads me to the dynamic between the theological ideal and the pragmatic ordering, the gap between the theory and the practice. The Conference did not hesitate to reaffirm the connexional principle; indeed, it adopted a report overwhelmingly that, as I mentioned, indicated that it had the potential to witness to the life-giving nature of relationships rooted, through Jesus, in the love of God. Yet the challenge of realizing

that potential should not be underestimated: such witness can only happen if we are able to embody something of our understanding. It is acknowledged that relationships can be very, very, very hard and profoundly challenging, “sustained . . . through time, attention and commitment.”¹⁵ We might well affirm the connexional principle and celebrate its contribution to our theology, but how well do we try to live it out? How much of our time, attention, and commitment do we give to embodying the principle in our practice, our decision-making, our prayers, our ways of relating, our priorities? If one wanted to, one could possibly trace the development of the connexional principle from a pragmatic ordering to encourage spiritual growth to a theological ideal that we are unable to live up to, but I hope that is not the case.

3. Individual Growth and Corporate Witness (Being in Relationship)

The dynamic between the individual and the corporate, the community, is key, and the extent to which the boundaries of one need to be expanded or contained in order to allow the flourishing of the other is a constant question and movement and dynamic. Within it are, inevitably, questions about personal and corporate identity; about self-esteem and self-awareness (both individually and corporately); about generosity, appropriate self-denial, and an ability to truly live together with contradictory convictions (a subject that the Methodist Church in Britain continues to wrestle with). The 1999 Statement acknowledges that connexionalism relates closely to the overall balance between discipline and joy that is at the heart of Christian discipleship, individual and corporate. The system imposes restraints on the individual, the Local Church, and indeed other parts of the Church, such as the Circuit or District, in the interests of the common good and the overall mission. At the same time, it is productive of great joy and enrichment. Ideally, as the Church grows in maturity and love, the structures should be seen as embodiments of mutual love and support. Whether this is in fact the case is obviously a matter of sometimes heated debate!

15 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §11.

It is also worth noting that Methodist church life began from a movement structured to encourage growth in holiness in all its members, but many of the ways in which this was encouraged have faded (e.g., the class meeting). Today it has been emphasized that we are structured for mission, which is commonly understood as enabling a sharing of resources of money, property, and people in the places where they are most needed. In our 1999 Statement about the Church we say that as “the natural corollary of connexionalism, Local Churches, Circuits and Districts exercise the greatest possible degree of autonomy. This is necessary if they are to express their own cultural identity and to respond to local calls of mission and service in an appropriate way.”¹⁶ We have recognized that “their dependence on the larger whole is also necessary for their own continuing vitality and well-being. Such local autonomy may also need to be limited from time to time in the light of the needs of the whole Church,”¹⁷ but some of the recent work has highlighted continuing questions about whether our structures enable us to make decisions together about where resources are most needed, about what the specific missional priorities are, and about whether individuals are truly encouraged and enabled to participate in decision-making as part of a wider community. Questions also arise about whether individuals have the time, commitment, and inclination to undertake the hard work of doing so.

Connexionalism is experienced in a way of life that assumes that all contribute to and receive from the life and mission of the whole Church. British Methodists are known for their meetings. People may joke about Methodist meetings, find them tedious, time-consuming, and frustrating, but consulting, conferring together, coming to shared decisions, and seeking other views *can* be tedious, time-consuming, and sometimes frustrating—and it profoundly reflects our connexional understanding! The purpose of gathering together in meetings is perhaps not always understood or appreciated, particularly if they are viewed as a means of making effective decisions rather than as part of a process of conferring about our response to God’s call in order

16 The Methodist Conference, *Called to Love and Praise*, §4.6.2.

17 The Methodist Conference, *Called to Love and Praise*, §4.6.2.

to discern how together we best share in God's mission. At its best, the dynamic in connexionalism between individual and corporate growth and witness works to enable the flourishing of both, but it can quickly become a costly tension between individual, or local, and the wider community of Methodists, be it Circuit, District, or the whole Connexion.

4. "All Are Welcome" and Methodist Identity (*Belonging . . .*)

John Wesley once wrote, "I have only one thing in view, to keep all the Methodists in Great Britain one connected people."¹⁸ Former secretary of the Conference and past president Brian Beck, reflecting on connexionalism, describes how, in the twentieth century, "traditional tight spiritual discipline has given way to broader and more varied understandings of spirituality, and a greater openness to all comers."¹⁹ Whereas once societies, and their members, were expected to adhere to a clear discipline at the risk of ceasing to be "in connexion" with Mr. Wesley, it is not uncommon today for churches to be reluctant to remove those they have not seen for several years from membership. There is perhaps a greater expectation that the Local Church is a place of hospitality and welcome for all (reflecting something of the love and grace of God), and therefore common discipline, theological diversity, and other boundaries have expanded in various ways. There is more variety in how those who wish to call themselves Methodist express their belonging, and membership is no longer the defining factor. Patterns of relating and belonging are challenged by various communities such as Fresh Expressions of church, local ecumenical partnerships, and the cultural- or language-specific fellowship groups. The Methodist Church in Britain is undoubtedly richer for such diversity and difference, and it faces the challenges of where the boundaries of its identity lie. Our connexionalism enables us to hold in relationship

18 Wesley to friends in Trowbridge (March 3, 1790) in *The Letters of John Wesley*, vol. 8, *July 24, 1787, to February 24, 1791*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press 1931), 205.

19 Brian Beck, "Reflections on Connexionalism," in *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, Routledge Methodist Studies (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 48.

a rich diversity of people and of expressions of Local Church (and it allows for more diversity than is often understood), yet there is also a perceived weakening of those things that are held in common and questions about what it means to be Methodist today; the dynamic between living with diversity and expressing a common identity is profoundly challenging.

5. Shared Oversight and the Visionary Leader (Issues of Power)

I could not reflect on tensions or dynamics without mentioning power, perhaps most clearly seen in the dynamic between our understanding that oversight is shared (and this is an understanding deeply embedded in British Methodist DNA) and the ambivalent relationship we have with personal power and authority: at times seeking and bemoaning the lack of visionary leaders and at other times refusing to give too much power to any one individual (e.g., each time the question of extending the presidency or vice-presidency beyond one year has come up, the Conference has not agreed to that). The tension between individual authority and power and corporate authority can be seen in the development of Methodism. John Wesley saw the Connexion as linked personally to and through himself (especially the preachers), and in the *Minutes of 1766* he explains the power he has: “It is a power of admitting into and excluding from the Societies under my care; of choosing and removing Stewards; of receiving or not receiving Helpers; of appointing them when, where and how to help me; and of desiring any of them to meet me, when I see good.”²⁰ Indeed, in 1771, speaking of the Conference then, one of the preachers said, “Mr Wesley seemed to do all the business himself.” But John Wesley ensured that it was a body of people, and not an individual, that inherited his power and authority, and today the Conference is the Methodist Church in Britain’s central authority. Questions of power and the flow of power in a connexional church might be a fruitful topic of

20 John Wesley, “Minutes (Leeds, August 12 etc., 1766),” Q. 29, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 10:329.

more rigorous reflection. It was clear from the consultations that fed into the 2017 report on connexionalism that power was commonly perceived to be something others had—usually the disembodied “connexion”—and individual members, Local Churches, ministers, office holders, representatives, Circuits, even the Conference may feel themselves powerless to bring about the change they would like to see.

Conclusion

In the Methodist Church in Britain, connexionalism therefore is, and always has been, in flux. At different times this has prompted us to reexamine both our understanding and practice. Although realistic about its imperfect expression and the plethora of challenges, the Methodist Church continues to affirm its importance, and I finish with the conclusion to the 2017 report:

The Conference has been greatly encouraged by the affirmation of connexionalism and by the evidence of the effective application of the connexional principle demonstrated in the responses to this consultation. In embracing the persistent and dynamic tension between the local and the wider community, the connexional principle prompts us to face the challenges and hard work of living in relationship with others. Where isolation, individualism and suspicion impair relationships, such a witness to other ways of being can offer life-giving possibilities. In emphasizing relationships of mutuality and interdependence, the connexional principle helps us to reveal something of the love and nature of God. Although working out the practical implications of being a connexional Church in the twenty-first century is challenging (as it was in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the Conference is confident that the Methodist people have the resources and the determination to undertake this task. Above all, we affirm our confidence in God, who calls us into connexion, and sustains us in relationship.²¹

21 The Methodist Conference, *The Gift of Connexionalism*, §16.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beck, Brian E. "Reflections on Connexionalism." In *Methodist Heritage and Identity*, 45–66. Routledge Methodist Studies, edited by William Gibson. Oxford: Routledge, 2018.
- Best, Thomas F., and Günther Gassmann, eds. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: The Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994.
- Wesley, John. *The Letters of John Wesley*. Vol. 8. Edited by John Telford. London: Epworth Press 1931.
- . *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*. Edited by Henry D. Rack. Vol. 10 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011.

DOCUMENTS

- The Methodist Conference. *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999.
- . *The Gift of Connexionalism*. 2017.
- . *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. 2017, Standing Order 500.
- . *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. 2017, Standing Order 302.

In the Nigerian Context

The Very Rev. Dr. Chinonyerem Ekebuisi

Introduction

Connexionalism is identified and defined in terms of belonging, mutuality, and interdependence. All Christians are essentially linked to one another; within the Methodist Church Nigerian experience, no local church is or can be an autonomous unit complete in itself, and this is expressed in apt structures of oversight, balancing authority and subsidiarity. Through lived experiences and circumstances, the Methodist