

3.4. **President's Letters to Office Holders**



Letter to a Minister

Dear Me!

Of all the letters I've written during the year, this is the most risky! However, in the light of the renewal of worship and witness which it is hoped the Connexions process will bring, it seems appropriate to put down a few thoughts, some with which you may disagree!

I candidated for the ministry with idea that the aim of ministry was to 'keep the Church going'. In the 1960's everything seemed to revolve around that singularly clear task. It soon dawned on me that ministry involved more than preaching on Sunday, taking a Bible Study and visiting the congregation. There was service in the wider Connexion; representing the Church in community and social affairs; working for justice with others; ecumenical co-operation, as well as chaplaincy and educational work. It is small wonder ordained ministers feel pulled in different directions and find it hard to fulfil their obligations to hosts of people. No one mentioned, either, that as Christians, we can have an ungodly tendency to be difficult to work with!

MY HOBBYHORSE

Let me put this one on the table before saying anything about our place in the new structures at local level! As ministers, the Conference appoints us to circuit. For about one third of ministers that means working in one particular Church, although there may be other Churches and ministers on the circuit. However, you and I are never the ministers of any one Church. We are ministers of one Methodist Church in Ireland, sent to serve in a circuit of Societies for a period of time.

There are two issues here. One is that each minister has responsibility beyond the local Circuit to the Connexion where we offer support to every congregation through youth work, Social Responsibility, Home and Overseas Missions, finance and so on. This workload needs to be carefully and well spread. We are indebted to all who play such significant and helpful roles in this way.

The second issue relates to the length of our appointments. In recent years it has been said that seven or eight years in a Church is not long enough to fulfil a vision or enable Church growth. There is hardly one among us who has not had 'my vision' for 'my Church', and tried to introduce resources or programmes that have succeeded elsewhere.

MY VISION?

Offer your visions to the leadership of the Church and wait for it to be changed and owned. How often in the past has a minister been frustrated when Leaders and people do not seem to grasp what it is he or she wants to accomplish?

A strength of having a smaller Church Council is the opportunity to talk through more thoroughly the details and implications of what the Church is to be and where it should go. In the past, we may have been enthused with an idea, found that one or two others thought it good and got the Leaders (at least those who attended) to agree. Then we discovered when we tried to get it going, no one seemed interested! Let's admit it – chairing a meeting provides opportunity to sell your idea. When you seem keen, no one objects since they assume you will

be doing it! Don't mistake consent for support! We haven't shared a vision because the meeting agrees. Keener questioning and discussion in a smaller team means thorough work and better allocation of work load.

ANOTHER ADVANTAGE

Sometimes we fall for the 'my vision and my church' concept. Unquestionably God gives ministers dreams for Churches and it can be hard to believe that the clarity of one person's vision (ordained or lay) is not the whole picture! I have usually found, that what I can see so clearly is not only difficult for others to grasp but more importantly, it is not the final product. God has given it to me just to get it kicked off! It needs to be refined before it is a fully rounded vision. Only by respectfully offering it to the wider Church leadership and community, with the threat of rejection, can it broaden and expand as God intends it. Then the people who develop it begin to own it. It is their vision and, in its outworking, the Lord's hand is seen, and I will find that my dream has become a shadow in the light of the bigger thing God really wanted to do. Where a community is moving this way, the case for any longer tenure can be made, if necessary.

TASK GROUPS etc

Connexions is about handing the Church back to the Church! The Report's ideas have already helped many congregations to uncover fresh focus and direction and unlock gifts of service. One of the facets of this has been that the minister no longer chairs, (or even attends) every meeting. It might appear some kind of heresy for the minister not to chair the Worship Group, but by involving more people in worship development, they are better involved in the offering of worship. That's how it is meant to be. We do need wisdom to know when we are having people support our ministry, and when we are intentionally releasing them into their God-given ministries.

THE FUTURE

The increasing complexity of life and changing expectations of ministry have raised enormous issues for the Church. This Conference of 2006 received a report on Candidating as well as one on the Health of Ministers. Providentially, the recommendations for team ministry in the 2002 Connexions Report, provides a useful contribution to addressing these and some of the other concerns ministers have today, namely the management of stress, the use and development of God-given gifts, in-service training, and work practices.

The Connexions recommendations (agreed by Conference 2002) that we should no longer have Circuits that consist of just one congregation, and that the role of Districts be reviewed, actually provide important keys to unlocking the way forward. The former recommendation has been viewed as a threat that it was never meant to be. It is not about removing the minister but releasing him/her into a team of colleagues for the service to Christ to that area. However good a congregation thinks the minister is, it is simply impossible for one person to exercise the full ministry Christ has given the Church. It is foolish, not to say unscriptural, to try! But, if congregations received ministry from their key minister, with other ordained and lay people bringing their visions and complementing one another with varied skills, then not only would the Church survive, it would be better structured for growth and maturity.

This means our first task today is to build strong communities of trusting and interdependent relationships. Within these, we can be more accountable to one another and learn to work in the harmony which is the sign of God's love for his world.

FINALLY

If you are being re-stationed this year, you will be facing a period of uncertainty about the new place. Remember that when the Lord called us, he knew the Church into which he was calling us. The truth that one sows and another reaps in ministry, is nowhere more starkly seen than in stationing. It emphasises that we serve in Christ's Church where he is not a titular figurehead but an active director working, not to keep congregations and ministers happy, but to make us all holy!

God anoint you and bless the work to which he has called you.



Letter to a Circuit Steward

Dear Hilary,

First of all let me thank you, as I am sure your minister has already done, for remaining in post as Circuit Steward during the Connexions transition on your Circuit from Leaders' and Quarterly Meetings, to Church Councils and a Circuit Executive. I realise that you had already 'done a year' under the old system and will now do at least two or possibly the maximum three years in the new structure.

A NEW JOB

Your job has changed substantially from the days when Circuit Stewards were responsible for collating the monies from the different Societies; preparing books for audit and looking after the manses, not to mention helping the minister in whatever ways possible. Circuit Treasurers now have oversight for the financial affairs of the Societies and the Manse Steward has his or her responsibility clearly laid out.

It is the undefined side of your old job that now becomes the job description for your new one! That is to provide support to the Superintendent minister and when necessary or fitting to act as the official lay representative of the Circuit at civic and other functions. Your role in relation to the Superintendent is primarily that of being an advisor and taking pastoral interest in his or her work, life and where appropriate, family.

APPRAISALS FOR MINISTERS

Every minister in the Irish Methodist Church should now be involved in an Accompanied Self-Appraisal. An accompanist will already have been assigned to help your minister reflect on his or her life and work. Appraisals take place about every two years, and may result in suggested changes of work practice, or seeking out further training. You need to be aware that this is happening, enquire how it is going, and encourage positive developments.

THE CIRCUIT EXECUTIVE

Your interest and advice will be especially important when the meetings of the Circuit Executive are taking place. As you know, the Executive is comprised of all the ministers, officials like yourself, the Manse Steward and Circuit Treasurer, together with the Society Steward and a representative of each Church on the Circuit. This relatively small number of people is charged with deliberating and deciding on Circuit matters. These include co-ordinating the life of the Churches in the area, their finance, matters to do with appointment of

ministers and lay workers, manses, Local Preachers, recommending Candidates for ordained ministry and electing representatives to Synod and Conference. How all this is actually done, is up to the Executive itself, but your advice to the Superintendent will be invaluable. Don't be afraid to say how some things are done in your own secular work – we need to be business-like for God!

GETTING AROUND AND HAVING HELP

You will find that your job will be easier if you can make a point of moving around the Circuit to events and services, during your three years in office. It might be an idea to chat beforehand with the local Church Steward as your presence can be an encouragement to him or her also. Catching a sense of the atmosphere and getting to know the people and their worship will equip you in unexpected ways in case of a crisis or a major development being proposed.

On a large circuit, it is perfectly in order for an Assistant Circuit Steward to be appointed to work with you. This may be a person designated to succeed you in a year's time or another person who shares the job in a manner defined by the Executive. That person would also only serve for a maximum three years.

STATIONING

Now the dreaded task – Stationing! As Circuit Steward you will be one of maybe two or three representatives appointed by the Executive, to discuss a change of minister with the District Stationer. Stationing is a progression of consultations that take place during the months of October to February each year. As you know, the change of a minister can be quite an unexpected event, both for the circuit and the minister and family concerned! Sensitivity, discretion and prayerfulness are all essential attributes for your task of ongoing consultation. Stationing is an involved and delicate process, which takes place for the benefit of the whole of the Methodist Church in Ireland. Of course, that can be very difficult to appreciate at local level when a change is suggested. It is also easily misunderstood that the early proposals are precisely those, and are open to alteration as the procedure unfolds. The draft of recommendations to Conference is not finalised until the end of February each year and until then, changes in proposals may take place.

When a change is suggested the District Stationer will be in contact with you as the spokesperson for the Circuit. You, and the group the Executive may have appointed, will have to rely heavily on your own knowledge of the circuit for these conversations. Your only source of information about the new minister must be gleaned from the District Stationer as it is not permissible to contact the circuit from which the person is coming, or indeed to contact him or her directly, until the final decision is made in February. Then you can begin to plan a briefing for the new arrival!

By the way if your circuit, even if a City Mission, wishes a minister to remain beyond the eighth year, you need to be alert to making the request for an extension during your minister's sixth year. The procedure for doing this is outlined in the Manual of Laws – chapter 4 para. 32

THANK YOU AGAIN

Hilary, you will find that this is not an exhaustive job spec! Every Circuit Steward will bring his or her own personality and gifts to the role. You have a wonderful ability to work in a team and the knack of getting people to enjoy working together. As a Circuit representative to the District Synods you will not only learn more about the wider Church, but conversations with others will enable you to learn as well as offer your own experience to them. Above all, keep prayer for the ministers on the Circuit at the top of your agenda.



Letter to a Manse Steward and a Note for a Property Steward

Dear Joan and Michael,

Whilst I writing one letter to both of you, because your jobs overlap a bit, I would point out that each of you will find better guidance for yourselves and your Task Groups, if I refer you to the 'book of rules' – the Manual of Laws! The Manual is available on disc (from No9 Resource Centre or online at www.irishmethodist.org) and contains the regulations about properties – standards, maintenance, use, insurance, letting etc. When amendments are made they are printed in the Minutes of Conference. As Manse Steward Joan, you will find that the manse regulations were completely revised. Don't panic - the section can be found in the 2005 Minutes, from page 119!

MANSE STEWARD

Having mentioned manses, I will keep going! You have been appointed by, and report to, the Circuit Executive. Each of the three Churches (Societies) on your Circuit has two representatives on the Executive. Local Church Councils may very well have things to say about manses, but remember it is the Executive that makes the decisions.

Your task is to lead a small team to look after the two manses and I suggest one or two of the Property Stewards might serve on that group.

MANSE REGULATIONS

The Manual's rules exist to ensure that good standards and practices are maintained throughout the Connexion. It could be said that whilst the Circuit provides the house, the minister and his/her family have the right to make it their home. Both occupants and Churches need to respect this principle. For instance, it should never be assumed that the manse is an extra meeting place for Committees. Any that take place must be at the invitation and discretion of the minister. The practice of one minister should not be a precedent for the next.

CHECK IT OUT

To ensure that the house is kept structurally sound and well decorated, your Manse Group must inspect it annually, discuss needs with the family and prioritise necessary work. The Executive should budget for refurbishments and for major redecoration at a change of minister. Of course you will need to be given authority to spend money without first going to the Executive - burst pipes do have to be fixed!

NEW ARRIVALS

The Home Mission Department issues a Conference-approved list of manse furniture and accommodation requirements. At a forthcoming change of minister, you and he/she will receive a check-list of preparations to be made for the arriving family. The practice is that families leave a manse as they would like to find it. Of course there is always potential for problems, but there are rules that apply when the condition of the manse is found to be unsatisfactory. The guidelines outline the expected standard.

FINANCIAL HELP

Provided the regulations are being observed, the Home Mission Department is willing to provide some financial assistance to needy circuits in their efforts to repair, refurbish or purchase manses. The District Home Mission Secretary can guide you with this. By the way,

if there is vacant manse on your circuit it is also the responsibility of your group. The appropriate rules for letting are on page 200 of the 2005 Minutes of Conference. It is crucial that any letting agreement is short-term and receives the approval of the Property Board of the Methodist Church in Ireland. It is equally important that rental income is kept in a separate account to be used only for manse purposes.

Joan, I believe you are ideally suited to leading your Manse Group. You have loads of common sense, an eye for detail and the necessary diplomacy! Don't forget, you are not alone and the guidelines are there to back you up when it comes to getting things done.

A Note to the Local Property Steward

Michael, it can be a thankless job to look after the security, safety and maintenance of church buildings. When everything is fine, nobody notices, but a Celsius degree below on a Sunday morning and you will hear more about the freezing temperature than the worship! You will need to work with the Society Steward and those who welcome worshippers or prepare for events. The location of keys, clearance of fire-exits, kitchen use and storage are all cogs to be discreetly oiled.

The Church Council has appointed you and your Task Group to ensure that the buildings are suitable vehicles for the mission of the Church. It is worth spending time to ask, 'How can the Mission of this Church be reflected in our buildings?' Sadly, we underestimate the influence our physical environment has on the manner and atmosphere of our worship and witness. A little used, poorly kept or dim building makes for depressing worship and besieged Christians.

THE RULES

Your church buildings are all vested in the Trustees of the Methodist Church in Ireland, therefore no structural alteration, letting or sale, can take place without approval from the Property Board. This is obtained in consultation with the District Property Committee. The Board itself is always willing to discuss a Church's various needs and aspirations. Every five years a Commission will visit the Circuit to discuss both mission and property. It's an external audit to encourage rather than fault-find, and you will need to arrange for professional electrical and timber reports.

Michael, I am sure your interest and expertise in building matters will be great asset to the local Society as you and your team act as 'doorkeepers in the house of the Lord'. So, from the fixing of the heating, to monitoring the opening and closing of the doors and overseeing the building of the extension – or whatever you're asked to do, may you know God's blessing, the goodwill of His people and gladness in your own heart in your service to Christ and his Church,