***Address by President and Lay Leader of the Methodist Church in Ireland concerning the ‘Decade of Commemoration, 2012-2022’ in Ireland.***

**Our Call to be A Covenant People of Memory and Hope**

**Introduction.**

This Address is presented to all people concerned about the future of those who live on the island of Ireland, to all who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and, in particular, to those whose Christian lives are lived within the Methodist Church in Ireland. We issue this special Address on the occasion of the island-wide celebration of St.Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, in this year which commences a decade of commemoration of historical events which shaped the lives of people on the island for the last century. St.Patrick was devoted to bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people in Ireland and Christian history on our island commences with his mission. This coming decade will provide rich opportunities for reflection on the relationship between the Christian faith and history. The events which marked the decade, 1912-1922, frequently invoked God’s name in seeking political advantage and in the pursuit of causes either unionist or nationalist. It is, therefore, appropriate that, as the People of God today, we reflect together on how we should commemorate such historical landmarks as the Ulster Covenant of 1912, the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916, the Great War, 1914-1918, the 1918 General Election, the meeting of the first Dáil, 1919, the violent campaign for independence, the creation of Northern Ireland and Partition, the Treaty 1922, civil war and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

We are conscious, also, that by 2018 we will be marking 50 years on since 1968. This, in turn, will bring us into a new and more immediate round of anniversaries in which many people who experienced atrocities causing death and injury to people will be still alive - we are facing another 30 years after that where events and atrocities will be recalled. This adds greatly to the urgency of Christian reflection on how we may most appropriately commemorate the trauma and suffering our history now represents for so many people.

The coming decade, and subsequent years after 2022, will call to mind major events almost annually as each centenary occurs and we need to reflect profoundly both on why we commemorate the actions of now dead generations and how, as Christians, this is most appropriately done. Christians are uniquely a people of memory and hope and this decade of commemoration provides a prolonged period for reflecting deeply on the call to be faithful to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We issue this Address to assist those who wish to consider how our acknowledgement of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all our lives is best reflected as we respond to the ‘decade of commemoration’.

**Repentance and Remembering.**

In the past the Christian churches frequently acted as ‘chaplains’ to political movements and to ideologies contrary to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christian leaders and people supported the use of violence and military means in support of sectional and often sectarian objectives. It is not

our purpose here to point the finger at other churches; each must take corporate responsibility for how in the past they may have allowed Christ’s name and the Gospel of God to be misused. It is clear that in Irish history churches, politicians and others share responsibility for sectarianism out of which violence often erupted, not only in the last century but in the centuries prior to the twentieth century. As Methodists, we repent in great sorrow for whatever was done in the name of the Methodist Church in the past which dishonoured the Gospel. Repentance is an intentional act to live and behave differently than we used to do. *What does it mean to repent?* It means that we have ‘turned away’ from supporting violence or threats of violence either overtly or covertly and from claiming God’s mission is served by such means. It means that, by God’s grace, we are, in our generation, given fresh opportunities to witness more effectively to the way of the Lord Jesus Christ in seeking human flourishing for all people on this island. It means that we humbly seek to love of **all** our neighbours as ourselves and to be ever more faithful learners in the school of Christ. It means that we remember seminal historical events in the light of the call of Christ’s followers to be a new covenant people of memory and a people of hope centred on the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It means that we are now more aware of the grave dangers of allowing secular and political causes to supplant our first loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ever need to keep in mind that the call ‘to remember’ in the Holy Scriptures is a liberating experience as expressed particularly in Passover and Holy Eucharist. Biblical remembering always contains a key dimension of envisioning a purpose and a new future. Sadly, in Ireland, remembering has been in many ways over the centuries an oppressive, exclusive and imprisoning experience. We express gratitude to God that more recently historical events have been commemorated more inclusively, more humbly, and more generously in respect of all those on this island who suffered death or injury in the actual events being remembered. We believe the coming decade of commemoration should build upon this approach: as Queen Elizabeth 11 observed in Dublin Castle in May, 2011, we ought to be in the frame of mind “of being able to bow to the past, but not be bound by it.” Former President Mary McAleese responded “while we cannot change the past, we have chosen to change the future.” Christians today must accept their **current** responsibilities for shaping the future rather than allowing the thoughts and sentiments those we commemorate, whose lives were lived a century ago in an entirely different context, to limit or prescribe the possibilities now before us. It is precisely this freedom that we now enjoy that many of the finer spirits we remember wished that generations subsequent to their own would cherish and use for the flourishing of all people on the island.

**Christians and Historical Understanding**

Our Christian faith is rooted in historical facts concerning the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. We believe that through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ a radical transformation has occurred in human history: we with St.Paul we believe “ in him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28). We are created with free will and are given responsibility as human beings but are accountable to God for our actions. As Christians how we exercise our free will is governed by the Gospel summed up in the Great Commandment of love and the Great Commission “to go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19). Our Christian understanding of history is infused with

meaning based upon what we learn in the Bible of the God of history and His purpose for His creation. This entails a radically new view of human life and a decisively different way of living. As St. Ireneus of Lyon wrote so long ago: “The glory of God is man fully alive; but the life of man is the vision of God.” We read history with this perspective in view celebrating when we discern personalities who sought to develop human beings and to build a society in which all would enjoy human flourishing. We read history with values based upon Christian ethics and with a concern for our shared humanity. We endorse the concept of ethical and shared remembering in respect of commemorations of historical events.

We welcome in this context asking the past new questions concerning what made for human flourishing. For example, in the decade 1912-1922, those who advocated equality for women, those who struggled for better conditions for workers, those writers who spearheaded the cultural revival and who sought to foster the Irish language, those who sought to be paece-makers and those who led improving developments such as the co-operative movement ought to be celebrated by us today. In our thinking through what and why we commemorate we need to retrieve such aspects of our past: the past has encouraging signposts as well as more depressing culs-de-sac. We can choose what we cherish in the past. The test of the coming decade of commemoration will be whether a true and lasting foundation for justice, peace and equal citizenship has been laid by what we do so that every human being may lead a fully flourishing life.

**Methodists are a Covenant People**

Methodist Churches, in particular, through the annual Covenant Service, have a very special way of renewing our covenant relationship with God. As **the Methodist Worship Book** states:

“The emphasis of the whole service is on God’s readiness to enfold us in generous love, not dependent on our deserving. Our response, also in love, springs with penitent joy from thankful recognition of God’s grace. The covenant is not just a one-to-one transaction between individuals and God, but the act of the whole faith community. The prayers of intercession which follow emphasise our unity with all humanity.”

In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ. For our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God. It is in this context that we respond to the commemoration of major historical figures and events in our past. In this context we need to examine our own roles in the mission of Jesus Christ and His inauguration of the kingdom or reign of God. Our call is to proclaim this Good News and to be a prophetic voice in our time. Our Biblical Covenantal responsibilities are to promote social justice, right relationships, social solidarity, inclusivity, ‘shalom’(peace), non-violence and *agapé* (love).There is a day-to-day reality for each Christian in dying to self and in following with every ounce of one’s being the call to bring the Gospel that ‘Jesus is Lord’ into every part of life including the ‘public square’. We cannot separate our Christian lives into a private spiritual affair (where we offer worship on a Sunday) and a separate public life in which we either ‘go with the flow’ or give our active consent to causes or political movements which are contrary to the Gospel. Jesus is Lord of all or He is not our Lord at all. We believe that Jesus is at work taking forward His Kingdom; our prayer ought to be in this regard , in the words of Percy Dearmer (1867-1936):

*O Lord,*

*You have set before us the great hope that your kingdom shall come on earth,*

*And have taught us to pray for its coming;*

*Give us grace to discern the signs of it dawning,*

*And to work for the perfect day*

*When your will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven;*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

In the coming decade we must rethink and renew the contribution of Christians to public life. We seek to be faithful to the freedom, justice, peace and well-being that are at the heart of the Kingdom of God. We seek to bring these gifts into public life as a service to all, and to work with all who share these ideals and care for the common good. As Christians we never seek for the Gospel we proclaim to be equated with any party, ideology, economic system, class, tribe or national identity. The past errors of either privatising faith or politicising faith must be avoided: we have a vision of public life in which citizens of all faiths are free to enter and engage on the basis of their faith within a framework of what is agreed to be just and free for such expression respecting the human rights of all. As People of the Good News we seek to embody and be good news to our society and to the world.

**Our Christian Hope transforms memory and leads to reconciliation and forgiveness**

Our vision of future possibilities influences the way we remember past events and what we do with our memories in the present. As Christians we rejoice in our ‘God of hope’, to use St.Paul’s phrase: we have utmost confidence that God is intent upon renewing the whole cosmos through Christ and has inaugurated His reign in the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The Psalmist has expressed the vision of what the Kingdom of God consists as he listens to what the Lord promises if we do “not return to folly”:

*“Love and faithfulness meet together;*

*Righteousness and peace kiss each other.*

*Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,*

*And righteousness looks down from heaven”* (Psalm 85:8, 10-11).

We commend this Psalm for reflection in the context of this Address.

We seek to walk in this ‘newness of life’ (Romans 6:4) in our discipleship led by the Holy Spirit as the new covenant people of God. What transforms often bitter and divisive memories concerning past events into a positive catalyst for Christians is this horizon of future expectations that is borne in our

minds and hearts out of a boundless love that hopes and renews all things in Christ; His Cross – His giving His life for us ‘while we were still sinners’- transforms our view of others particularly those who may have grievously hurt us or those we love either in the past or currently: we, and those who have caused us pain and suffering, have no future without forgiveness as Archbishop Tutu has expressed it in the context of South Africa.

We do not underestimate the path of forgiveness and the long process it involves: we recognise that forgiveness is only possible in remembering- those who have suffered at the hands of others are not served by bland ignoring of the evil that has been done to them. Forgiveness may not be the same as a pardon nor is it a substitute for justice. Yet, in Christ, we find our own sins remitted freely and we are enabled to live in a new day not being defined by our evil deeds. For the power of forgiveness is in this liberation from the burden of the past this is vital and valuable for those who have suffered as well as those who have perpetrated evil deeds. The Biblical record of lamentation is important in this context of loss and suffering: there will be no social and political reconciliation unless we overcome denial and honour the voices of the traumatised and the victims. Liturgies and other experiences which express trauma and which emphasise truth-telling matter greatly. In the Bible lamentation contain the seeds of new beginnings even in human catastrophe with combined with the challenge to seek justice and pursue it.

There can be no cheap and easy path to reconciliation and forgiveness. We believe that historical research into our past must proceed and the truth about the past must be told as professional historians evaluate the evidence according to the best canons of the historian’s profession. Further we believe that all citizens ought to have access to a knowledge and appreciation of the history of all communities on the island of Ireland. We do no service to anyone by glossing over the past either through a well-intentioned hope of ‘moving on’ or simply through ignorance about our past. If we are to have a shared future we must be aware of how history has shaped our communities and develop an empathy that appreciates that many of our forefathers and foremothers suffered in their generation. Yet many of those whom we will commemorate in coming years, however flawed as human beings and limited by their circumstances as we also are, gave inspiring example of reaching out in generosity and did seek, as best they knew how, the flourishing of their societies and of all people.

It is important to recollect that since 1912- 1922 there has been on the international stage, largely as a result of world wars a revolution in the articulation of human rights and the making of solemn international declarations and covenants in this regard. Institutions, such as the United Nations and the European Court of Human Rights have been established. In this context there has also been a seeking for developments in democracy including the extension of the franchise and seeking for more public participation and public deliberation concerning issues affecting our common life together. Citizenship needs to be conceived as a richer concept in the twenty-first century than it may have been for most in the early twentieth century.

Good active citizenship today, and in the coming years involves an educated and mature respect for the past. This needs to be combined with a determination to take responsibility now and in the future for pursuing the restoration of relationships between previously divided communities within

the democratic freedom we all now enjoy. Such active citizenship and the duty of each citizen in this regard is a responsibility of all people in society. For Christians there is added the Biblical imperative and call to pursue social justice for all, especially those who are excluded or who suffer discrimination, to pursue, sacrificially if necessary, restoration of relationships where they are broken, and contribute, often at great cost, from the richness of our life in Christ to processes of truth-telling, reconciliation and forgiveness.

**The Current Crisis and the Decade of Commemoration: A Re-Moralisation of Society**

There exists a general crisis in the world characterised by the economic crash since 2008 which has brought great suffering and loss of income, jobs or hope for many people. The crisis has many aspects- economic, political, cultural, ethical and religious. It is evident to all that greed and unscrupulous ethical practices throughout the international and national financial institutions contributed to their collapse. Political systems have also been tainted by corruption. Churches have lost moral authority and this is associated with gross abuse of children. There have been media scandals due to the absence of an ethical and moral framework strong enough to combat abuses. It is clear that it will take many years to work out a better way forward for ‘this crisis of capitalism’, as it has been called and citizens will have to grapple with deep-seated problems and possible solutions in the decade ahead. It is in this often very depressing context, which calls for a re-moralisation of all our public institutions, that commemorations will occur for events between 1912 and 1922. It is easier, therefore, perhaps to see that the decade 1912-1922 was also marked by a more general European, and indeed world crisis, and that people then were caught up in this wider crisis while responding to events in Ireland. We too are caught up in the crisis of our times and future historians may not judge that we always have responded in the best way. For example: is our priority now to gain as much for ourselves as we can *or* is it to care for those most vulnerable to the prolonged economic crisis? Perhaps we ought to be more humble in judging actions in the past; there is a danger that we may arrogant in thinking that we always do the right thing. The call to Christians is humbly to seek to ensure that our approach to contemporary affairs is in accord with the message and methods of Jesus Christ in proclaiming and building for the Kingdom of God. We offer as a Biblical reflection for all our people in this context the study of the Beatitudes as set out by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount. If we are faithful to this teaching in our thoughts and actions then we may be confident that what we do in building for the Kingdom will not be wasted. (1 Cor.15:58). We must in our reflection on the past and in our commemoration of particular events humbly to seek to learn about how we may more effectively respond to the challenges we now face in our day. Christlike behaviours ought to be our hall-mark as we seek to be salt and light in a very confused and suffering world. We are called to serve our age with a fresh expression of a moral and ethical framework which promotes human flourishing and we need the moral courage to speak truth to power when breaches occur. Faith communities are communities of moral and ethical formation. The Methodist Church in Ireland is called to play its part.

**Conclusion: Our Calling to live faithfully by the values of God’s New Covenant.**

We are issuing this short Address to assist in the more general consideration underway in many organisations and, in society generally, concerning how best to commemorate historic events and indeed more recent events which we call ‘the troubles’ since 1968. In particular, we wish to focus on the need for serious and collective reflections in this regard. As Christians, and as members of the Methodist Church in Ireland, we have a vital role in supporting a more ethical and inclusive form of commemoration which will lead to liberation from the burden of the past and, through the grace of God, healing in respect of bitter historical memories. We also have a continuing pastoral care responsibility for those who continue to suffer as we seek to bring the love of Jesus Christ and His healing to all. We call for a renewal of our Covenant relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ and we urge that this be central to our responses. It seems to us that the essentials elements for reconciliation, for the healing of wounds, for the restoration of broken relationships, and the re-learning of how to live in peace and mutual trust are love, truth, justice, forgiveness and repentance. There will be no real and lasting reconciliation either of memories or of different traditions without the re-establishment of these fundamental values by all people of goodwill. We recognise that this implies continual conversion and transformation as we journey together into the future. We, for our part, rely on the Lord of History and His Promise expressed to humankind in Jesus Christ.

We seek for all Methodist people to work with others in an inclusive conversation to develop shared approaches to divisive episodes in the past so that our commemorations will serve our times and bring, we pray, a new time of blessing for all. We urge that in particular we live this out in coming years in deep reflection on, and in response to, the Beatitudes which we suggest becomes the subject of Biblical reflection in every society in the coming year.

Methodists are often said to be the ‘friends of all and the enemy of none’. We, in our generation, will attest to the truth of this compliment if we act as Christ would have us act.