

SUMMARY

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND

GOD'S MISSION OUR MISSION: "WARM HEARTS, TOUGH HANDS, AND WET FEET – MARKS OF OUR WHOLE-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP"

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Statement on the mission of the Methodist Church in Ireland is to set out our understanding of God's mission for our Church in the period ahead.

It will serve as a bench-mark at local and Connexional levels to assist in seeking to discern our future direction and in putting into practice fresh forms of mission. It will also assist in the assessment of the effectiveness of our mission.

1. WHY DO WE NEED TO REFLECT ON GOD'S CALL TO MISSION?

There is widespread concern that the Methodist Church in Ireland is not effectively or fully aligned with God's mission in Ireland. Yet increasingly we are seeking to respond to God's gracious invitation to participate in His transformative mission to gather all humankind and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are 'a people invited to follow' our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ is to serve God's mission by helping human beings to know Jesus Christ and to become mission-effective and fruitful disciples: we grow in maturity as disciples by participating in bringing others to enter God's new society and enabling them to live life to the full through the grace of God.

The one true and living God *wills* to be known through us, his covenanted people, because the supreme good of humankind *requires* that His love be revealed to them. The flourishing of human beings and their societies depends upon the effectiveness of the Church of Jesus Christ in fulfilling the Great Commission. (Mt. 28:16-20).

The critical question, therefore is, are we being faithful to God's mission as set forth in Holy Scripture?

Our Wesleyan heritage – our inherited spiritual genes- combines a number of vital aspects of Christian faith and practice which are essential for the whole Church of Jesus Christ. These have been summarised as follows:

"Methodist DNA is to be PRAYERFULLY TOGETHER a people of:

PERSONAL HOLINESS – for each person to grow as a disciple of Jesus

COURAGEOUS EVANGELISM – for people to speak boldly the news that Jesus loves and died for all

COMPASSIONATE SOCIAL ACTION – for churches to serve vulnerable people in their communities"

Another valuable identification of our 'genes' is *SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS, SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE, ACCOUNTABLE FELLOWSHIP, TRANSFORMATIVE WORSHIP, PERSONAL SERVICE AND EVANGELISTIC WITNESS.*

The fruit of practicing our faith as determined by these ‘genes’ will be ‘WARM HEARTS’, ‘TOUGH HANDS’ AND ‘WET FEET’: in effect, living out what has been termed ‘whole-life discipleship’. The President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Rev. Dr. Heather Morris, has described Methodists as those who have “ a *warm heart*, for everything stems from a living relationship with Jesus; *tough hands*, because they serve; and *wet feet*, because when God leads we step out, take risks, be uncomfortable for the sake of God’s kingdom.”

The concept of ‘whole-life discipleship’ is one where each disciple engages in mission wherever each is placed everyday – at the ‘frontlines’ of everyday life. The role of the local worshipping and nurturing Church is to fully equip and support such *discipleship shaped for mission*.

Underpinning this ‘whole-life discipleship’ is John Wesley’s ‘The Scripture Way of Salvation’, where salvation is understood as ‘a present thing’ where each follower of Jesus is embarked upon a **journey of transformation into the image and likeness of Christ**. Wesley stressed that this is all of God’s grace – prevenient (whereby God is at work in the His world before we are), justifying (whereby we are saved from the penalty of sin) and perfecting (sanctifying) grace (whereby we are saved from the power of sin). Disciples on this journey must actively co-operate **together** in all the means of grace.

2. ‘WARM HEARTS’ : JOY IN THE GOSPEL OF LOVE

John Wesley’s ‘heart-warming’ experience on 24th May, 1738 reminds us that Methodists are a people of ‘warm hearts’: they are a people who have experienced the love of God flooding their hearts in an encounter with Jesus; in on-going friendship with their Lord and Saviour they are a people who joy in His Gospel of Love. Methodists a joyful people who cannot help singing their faith:

“ He left His Father’s throne above
So free, so infinite His grace-
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race:
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me!”

Fundamentally whatever challenges we face in our twenty-first century world we seek to live out our joy in the Good News and to bring God’s love to all people: such “faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6) underpins our committed action to developing right relationships between human beings and between them and God.

We have the greatest possible privilege of participating by taking up our cross and reflecting God’s perfect love in the world as we fulfil our calling through holy living : the ‘renewal of the whole image of God’ in ourselves and in God’s creation.

3. ‘TOUGH HANDS’: A DISCIPLESHIP MOVEMENT SHAPED FOR MISSION

The character of our discipleship requires life-long learning and practice: we grow and develop ‘tough hands’ in everyday mission. Together we work hard and we constantly reflect on our mission effectiveness and through this we are ‘transformed by the renewal of

our minds' as we cease to be 'conformed any longer to the pattern of this world'. (Romans 12:1-2).

Our circuits have the missionary task, in conjunction with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, in sharing in the holistic ministry of Christ: circuits serve their neighbourhoods through mission involving social action, courageous evangelism, teaching, worship, and pastoral care for all. To this they must be hubs with many spokes forming wheels in constant motion. Methodists are a **movement** rather than an institution: our spiritual heritage encourages experimentation, diversity and flexibility supported by a **methodical** approach in analysing the missional context so that we go where we are needed most. We have an 'action-reflection' methodology.

Each local society must be effective in making disciples who are growing in God's love, who use the spiritual disciplines as the means of grace, who share fellowship with other disciples to whom they give an account of God's leading in their lives, and with whom they engage in mission every day. Our challenge now is to recover Methodism as a lay-centred contagious movement.

Each local society needs to focus on developing what was absolutely central to growth in the past: class meetings and fellowship bands adapted for our twenty-first context. The evidence is clear: small group discipleship-making is an imperative for our future mission-effectiveness. Classes and bands should not be confused with traditional Bible-study groups which impart information and doctrine and these have a valuable place. Classes and bands, however, are focussed on the development, growth and accountability of each disciple as they live out their 'whole-life' discipleship. Classes and bands enable growth, the use of the spiritual disciplines and give mutual support and a prayer ministry for everyday mission efforts as we serve God's mission to transform the world.

4. 'WET-FEET' – THE CONTEXT FOR MISSION IN IRELAND

The role of the Church in shaping the moral context for flourishing human living is underdeveloped in Ireland. Prophetic contributions, both in speech in the public square, and in deeds at local levels are now urgently required. We need to bring a well-thought through Biblical perspective to bear on addressing the key features which are now governing the shape of human living in Ireland. Many of these are profoundly detrimental to human flourishing and to people having the abundant life which is the promise of the Good News.

Such features include, in no particular order: materialism, individualism, inequality, social injustice, spiritual impoverishment, mental disease, stress, privatised and isolated living, fragmented communities, loss of trust, violence and crime, changes in family structures, violence against women and children, secularism and the 'economism' which prevails as a public philosophy and which judges everything on the basis on a 'market-mindset'.

So the water is 'cold' when we start getting our 'feet wet' in mission. Disciples need to be equipped to bring a sharp Biblical perspective and a searing light on the idolatry which now pervades western society. We need to be enabled to bring our faith in the Lordship of Jesus into dialogue with the wider culture in which people now live. It is clear that the evidence of

our lives as disciples – our sacrificial lives of loving service to others- is crucial to such a dialogue and to earning a hearing for the Gospel. The best apologetics is our personal and social holiness. Disciples – given that idolatry is a prime missional issue- need to be equipped to recognise and to unmask the idols which now distort, demean, and diminish human beings.

For Wesley religion is not humanity's escape to a more tolerable heavenly realm but active participation now in God's redemptive enterprise, God's new creation inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Such participation will inevitably emphasise the cost of discipleship as we confront the powers at work in the world and as we speak truth to power. *Are we prepared to pay the cost of following Jesus?*

5. WARMING HEARTS, TOUGHENING HANDS AND WETTING FEET

Methodists are a people of the New Covenant. Each year our Annual Covenant Service provides a solemn opportunity to reflect on how well we are aligned to God's mission and to renew our Covenant. **God's Mission Our Mission** is recommended for study and reflection as part of our preparation for the Annual Covenant Service.

Some questions may be helpful:

- A) As a worshipping community what do we have to celebrate and lament?
- B) As a pilgrim community, what boundaries are we called to cross?
- C) As a hospitable community, who are we called to welcome?
- D) As a prophetic community, what are we challenged to affirm or challenge?
- E) As a witnessing community, what stories do we have to tell?
- F) As a serving community, how do we express Christ's love for the poor?
- G) As a holy community, how do we reflect the goodness, truth and beauty of God?
- H) As a learning community, to whom do we need to listen?

OUR PRAYER

**God, loving guide, graciously, and at such cost,
You offer an invitation to all who follow you.
Stir, we pray, in every heart a longing for you:
Grant us discernment that we may recognise your direction;
Grant us courage that we may step out and follow;
Grant us deep trust in you, loving God,
The One who holds and promises never to abandon us.
As we follow You, Lord God, we pray
That in the power of Your Spirit,
You will illumine your people with Your light,
That You will form the lives of those who commit to You,
That every aspect of our lives together will point to Jesus
And that Your people will be a blessing to many. Amen**

