

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2010

Conference 2010 was hosted by the Belfast District and took place in Sydenham Methodist and the surrounding churches.

Thanks to the Belfast District and to all who helped to make Conference run smoothly and for their warm hospitality.

THE PRESIDENT 2010, The Rev. Paul Kingston (C)

The President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Rev. Paul Kingston was born in Dunmanway, Co. Cork.

The youngest of eight children Paul grew up on a farm two miles from the town of Dunmanway. He was educated the local primary and secondary schools.

Before entering Edgehill Theological College in 1970, Paul had worked in a pharmacy in Bandon, Co. Cork.

The Rev. Kingston studied theology at Edgehill and Assembly's Colleges 1970-1973 after which he served as a minister in both parts of Ireland.

He is currently minister of the Adare and Ballingrane Circuit in County Limerick.

In the course of his ministry the Rev. Kingston has served the Methodist Church as the District Superintendent of three Districts: Portadown, the North East and the Midlands & Southern. He has

also served as Secretary of the Mission Board, the Property Board as well as its Ministerial Treasurer. He currently serves as Chair of the [Church Development Board](#).

His theme for his year of Office will be "*Our calling to fulfil*"

During his year as President, the Rev. Kingston will visit the Methodist Church in Ghana during which he will visit local congregations, some projects and attend the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ghana.

The Rev. Kingston is married to Edna and they have three adult sons.

[Our Calling to Fulfil](#) (pdf) is the theme of the President's address which was preached by Rev Paul Kingston at his installation on Thursday 10th June in St Mark's Parish Church, Dundela.

[To Serve the Present Age](#) (pdf) - sermon preached by the Lay Leader on Sunday morning, 13th June in Sydenham Methodist Church.



Sermon preached by the newly installed President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Rev Paul Kingston

OUR CALLING TO FULFIL

I have chosen as my theme, "Our Calling to fulfil" because for me this phrase based on a line from one of Charles Wesley's hymns sums up much of what Christian life and Christian Ministry are about.

There are many aspects to this theme and I hope to explore some of them during this year. This evening I want to focus on the final command of our Lord to His disciples because I believe it expresses His purpose for His church in every generation.

Many people have been given exciting commissions in their lifetime. For example, Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned to design many great buildings, including St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Michelangelo was commissioned to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a task that took ten years. But you and I have been given even a greater commission. Jesus commands us "Make disciples of all nations...." Think about it! Christ himself commissions us to be fellow-workers with him in this great creative never ending task. It is new and vital in every generation, because without obedience to it the church is ever only one generation from extinction.

Picture the context in which this commission was given - Jesus had spent three years ministering in Galilee. He had gathered a group of disciples around him. He had taught them about the Kingdom. They had observed his ministry. He had sent them out on mission. One of His main goals throughout this time was to prepare them so that they could carry on the work after His Ascension. But when Jesus was arrested, they were scared and ran away. When Jesus was crucified, they were devastated, disappointed and confused. They met together behind closed doors, no doubt asking, "What do we do now? Is this the end of it all?"

But, then their hopes were rekindled. The Risen Christ appeared to them a number of times. The final appearance took place back in Galilee where for them it had all begun and where now this Commission is given. He is saying in effect. It is over to you now.

Luke tells us in the book of Acts of how their lives were transformed and empowered by the coming of the Spirit and then the impact of their work and witness. If Christ could do what He did through those eleven weak, uneducated men, what could He not achieve if each person here was committed to fulfilling their calling in Christ as it is stated in His final command? In our church Building in Ballingrane, one of the Societies in my present circuit, there is a Memorial Tablet to the Rev Thomas Walsh. He is described as a Preacher and Evangelist. Thomas Walsh was converted to Christ through open air preaching on the streets of Limerick. He went throughout the length and breadth of this country - offering Christ to the people - and died at the age of twenty seven, burnt out in the service of Christ. John Wesley said of him, "Give me half a dozen men like Tommy Walsh and I will turn the Kingdom upside down". God has given us in this gathering far more than half a dozen dedicated men and women. There is immense potential right here.

The Spire of this beautiful church in which we are met is visible from quite a distance out to sea and has been a landmark for ships coming into Belfast harbor. It has helped bring them safely to their destination. Here is a parable of our Calling in Christ. We are to be as light in this dark world, to stand out morally and spiritually to guide others to Christ.

A college student became a Christian. Shortly afterwards he had to leave home for a few months for work experience. His friends feared he might be teased and ridiculed because of his faith or be tempted to abandon it altogether. When he returned home, they asked if others had given him a hard time because of his faith. He answered: "I handled it well. They never found out that I'm a Christian!"

The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. It was a name given by others who observed their way of life. Can others see that you are a follower of His? Or, do you just blend in?

This island North and South needs men and women who truly live out their Christian faith and bring Kingdom standards and values into every area of life. We face political uncertainty, difficult economic circumstances and spiritual impoverishment. Many feel let down and betrayed by politicians, financial institutions and indeed the church with all the scandals that have unfolded. Enquiries and tribunals have been costing millions, which ought to have been available for health care and education.

There are times when we hear or read the news and we almost despair.

We ask what hope is there for our children and grandchildren?

Our hope is in God and in the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. God has not given up on Ireland.

God has commissioned us to be His representatives, those through whom He seeks to fulfil His purpose.

In the Great Commission there are four "alls". The first is "ALL authority"

Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The authority Jesus Christ commands is complete. He is Lord in heaven and on earth. He is Head of His body the Church. His is the authority to which His followers must submit and allow Him to be truly Lord in their lives.

So with all the authority Jesus commands, He says "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you, and Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." The great commission was not given to an individual. It was given to His followers then and equally to the church, his followers now. His marching orders still stand.

I love the story of a raw army recruit standing at attention in the exercise yard. The drill instructor yells, "Forward, march!" And the entire ranks begin to move, all except this one recruit. He's still standing there at attention. So the instructor strolls over to him and yells in

his right ear, "Is this thing working?"

"Yes sir. The recruit replies. Then the drill instructor walks around to the other ear and yells, "Is this thing working?" "Yes sir." The soldier says.

"Then why didn't you march when I gave the order?"

"Sir, I didn't hear you call my name."

Sometimes we are like that recruit standing around waiting for God to call our names. But the great commission is Christ's command to His whole Church. It has everyone's name on it. The commanding Officer, Jesus sends us out with His authority into the world. Last year was the Tercentenary of the arrival of the Palatines in Co Limerick and since a large proportion of my present congregations are their descendents, I was invited to a celebration meal at which I met the German Ambassador to Ireland with whom I had a long conversation. We discovered we had much in common since we were both accustomed to going where we are sent. But it was most challenging to discover just how excited and pleased he was to represent his country. It is what an ambassador is sent to do. We are ambassadors for Christ. We go out with His authority, in His name, with His stamp of approval. We need to make very sure that all we do is worthy of Him and His Kingdom. We must be obedient to His will and His purpose, wherever He has placed us. We must remind ourselves again and again that whereas it is wonderful to come and to invite others to come and join with us, we must go out into the world, with the authority of the Master to be his faithful ambassadors.

The second all is "Go to all Nations."

When we talk about going to all nations it means "everyone, everywhere". It includes every individual. It means all people in your community. In our Methodist theology we emphasize the fact that all men need to and can be saved. Jesus loves each one. He longs to see each one brought into a vital living relationship with Himself. That is true in respect of each and every person in your community. Hold on to that great truth. We must share the love of God, the Good News of the Gospel with all people.

It is the task of each person. God reaches people through people, through their friendship, through their prayers, through the witness of their lives. Surveys show that up to seventy-five per cent of those who come to faith in Christ do so through personal contact.

There are people all around you who have not yet found real fulfillment in life. They may tell you that they are getting along all right, but deep down many of them know that something vital is missing. Surely in such circles we must take our Lord's Commission seriously and seek by life and word to proclaim the Good News.

Thirdly, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

Notice he didn't call us to make converts or church members, but obedient disciples!

You cannot follow Jesus Christ and live your life as it has been. Faith brings a challenge to our relationships and our lifestyle.

So as we share our faith we must be honest about the cost: The cost of putting God first; The cost of following Jesus; The cost of allowing the Holy spirit to guide and direct our path; The cost of loving others when loving is hard. "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." A disciple is not only a committed person, surrendered to Christ, but also an obedient person, instructed and taught by Christ. Believing must lead to doing. "Teaching them to observe" not some things, says the Master, but "all things that I have commanded." The Lord Jesus Christ has called us to demonstrate the power of His transforming grace and love in the world.

Jesus was asked on one occasion - What is the greatest commandment and He responded - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. That is the first and greatest commandment. That speaks of a loving relationship with God. And Jesus said, "Go out and teach them that. That is crucial for every person - A love relationship with God. Because God so loves each one to send His only Son to die for them, says. Teach them to love God.

The second is like it, He said, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Our neighbour is everybody who is hurting. Our neighbour is everyone who is in need. Our neighbour is everyone who is living without Christ. And we are to love them as we love ourselves.

Jesus also said to His disciples; "You are to love one another as I have loved you". Why was that so important? Because if the fellowship of God's people is torn asunder by bitterness, jealousy and resentment and all the other things that can so easily creep into a Church then there is going to be no blessing and there is going to be no growth.

Bishop George Appleton was the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. He became good friends with a Jewish professor at the University. This Jewish scholar told Appleton that he prayed for Christians every day. He said,

"I pray that you Christians may be more like your Jesus,
that your love for one another
will be made more plain."

Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. Love God. Love your neighbour. Love one another. In doing that we are fulfilling our Christian calling and showing that faith applies to every area of life. Jesus said, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

People don't just want to be told they want to see the difference Christianity makes in daily living.

Fourth ALL - I am with you always. I am with you for all time, said Jesus.

The Late Rev George Good was President when I entered the ministry. I have very fond memories of his teaching ministry. I recall hearing him preach on the promise, "I am with

you always" and referring to a hymn from the children's section of the Old Methodist Hymn Book.

"I think, when I read the sweet story of old,
When Jesus was here among men
How He called little children as lambs to His fold
I should like to have been with them then"

He said "No, I wouldn't like to have been with them then, because I could only have been with Jesus in one place at one time. Because when He was restricted to human flesh and He could only be in one place at one time. But now that He is glorified and His Spirit is given to the world, He is here in this place, He is with others on other continents and islands all over the world at the same time and that is so much more wonderful.

We have His abiding presence: "Lo, I am with you always." That's a wonderful promise. By His Spirit the Lord Jesus Christ abides in your heart and mine. His presence is with us in every situation

He calls us. He commissions us as He did the eleven. He assures us that we are never alone. He is constantly there enabling us and showing us the way forward.

The emblems on my preaching scarf encapsulate our task; The Sower scattering the seed, which represents our proclamation and sharing of the Good News of the Gospel; The Shepherd's Crook; which is a symbol of our care for people; The Basin and Towel, which symbolizes our humble service and the Descending Dove, the reminder that we can only fulfill our calling in the Power of the Holy Spirit.

The words of Thomas A. Jackson are a fitting conclusion;

We are called to be God's people,
Working in His world today;
Taking His own task upon us,
All His sacred words obey.
Let us rise, then, to His summons,
Dedicate to Him our all,
That we may be faithful servants,
Quick to answer now His call.

May each of us as we leave this place know the presence of the risen Lord with us as we seek to fulfill our calling. **Amen**

Sermon preached by Ms Gillian Kingston, newly installed Lay Leader of the Methodist Church in Ireland

Conference Sunday morning service 13th June 2010 (with Conference related illustrations/ references in blue), Sydenham Methodist Church, Belfast

To serve the present age

The President's theme is '*Our calling to fulfill*'

Fulfilling any call - as a community or as individuals - happens, as Charles Wesley has rightly observed, in *the present age*.

The challenge is to discern, as best we may, what it means *to serve the present age* as the people called Methodist in 21st century Ireland.

The role of *Lay Leader of the Conference* has emerged from a sense of needing to serve the present age in a new way.

At the heart of what John Wesley saw as a holiness movement within the Anglican Church to which he belonged was, and remains, the role of lay persons as leaders in worship, witness and service.

The *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document of the World Council of Churches sets its discussion of ordained ministry precisely in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God, noting that

...in a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become God's people (M1)

...all members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent. (M5).

The Methodist Church in Ireland has the distinction of being the first church on this island to 'formalise' this in its leadership structures.

It is my privilege and responsibility, under God, to serve you in this capacity - thank you!

To serve the present age - our calling to fulfil....

The prophet Jeremiah heard the call of God to serve. What is interesting about the account of this call to which we have just listened, apart from the fact that Jeremiah felt inadequate (and I know where he is coming from!) is that it is historically specific.

Nothing vague and general here (vv.1-3): we know precisely who was called and when he was called. And it is related to a place with which he was so identified that later he buys a field there in defiance of all received wisdom.

Likewise, Peter and his companions are busy about their daily fishing enterprise; they hear the call of a carpenter from a neighbouring town, drop the nets, leave the family firm and follow...

The call of God comes in place and time - and the response is made in place and time. It is a call 'to serve the present age'.

Conference has just spent some three days in debate and deliberation. A range of issues have emerged, not least those related to how we expend limited resources, financial and otherwise.

[reference to debate on assessment, Council on Social Responsibility and education and to reports on Haiti]

But the issue at *this* stage in the Conference is that of whether or not we are now more fit to serve the present age, more fit for purpose.

What *does* it mean for the people called Methodist on this island to serve the present age?

John and Charles Wesley had a very clear idea indeed of what it meant for them in their time and place.

They believed that the movement, which had started so modestly among undergraduates in Oxford, had been raised up *to spread Scriptural holiness over the land* - this was their mission, and each, in his own distinctive way, got on with it. The rest, we might say, is history.

Fundamentally for the Wesleys, Scriptural Holiness was not simply about an inner experience of the grace of God, but of a conscious and deliberate shaping of every aspect of life to please God. The holy life is a whole life, expressing the love of God in love of neighbour..

Pertinently, the Theological Commission of the European Methodist Council has been pursuing a study of Scriptural Holiness - this is timely!

Have you ever looked at the Constitution of the Methodist Church in Ireland? No excuses - go online - it's all there!

I had reason to read [Section 1](#) recently - and it was thought-provoking!

I read that *under the guidance of God's Spirit the Methodist Societies gradually developed into a distinct and strongly featured Church...*

characterised by an earnest striving after holiness, a desire for Christian fellowship, and a passion for evangelisation.

This raised questions for me - I hope that it may for you too.

Are we a 'distinct and strongly featured church'?

Or are we perhaps in danger of becoming a bit woolly round the edges?

Might we be so intent on being all things to all people that we run the danger of not being anything much to anyone?

Are we becoming somewhat *à la carte*, picking and choosing the features we like and discarding the disciplines which challenge us, and especially if these differ from the practice of those who show an interest in joining us?

We once entertained a UMC minister and his wife, visiting Ireland with a choir of young people. A man built on the grand scale and deliberate in word and action, this delightful brother warned that 'If you fall for everything, you stand for nothing!'

[on Mission night, young adults - Leah, Hannah, Michael and Ruth -affirmed their commitment to MCI]

We're an army of ordinary people - militaristic language aside, the image is challenging: - an army is trained; disciplined; clear about its purpose; knows, under its Commanding Officer, where it is going.

A 'distinct and strongly featured' church has much to offer to both those who want to be part of it and to sister churches.

[The Covenant (with the C. of I.) relationship bears witness to this]

Indeed, the current language of ecumenical dialogue is precisely that of 'exchange of gifts', what each has to offer to and to receive from the other.

To serve the present age, we need to know who we are and for what we stand.

[the proposed [Faith and Order Confirmation certificate](#) notes importance of worship, witness and service]

This should be reflected in our worship, our witness and our service, as that hymn from Iona so powerfully reminds us...

- *Jesus calls us here to meet him...*
- *Jesus calls us to confess him...*
- *Jesus calls us to each other...*

There is a Latin phrase which neatly addresses and relates these matters:

Lex orandi, lex credendi, roughly translated, means 'the way we worship is the way we believe'.

This is an important concept: if our worship is slipshod, self-centred rather than God-centred, focusing on how we feel rather than on the God who has created, redeemed and continually sustains us, that will have an inevitable effect on what we believe about God and how we bear witness to God in God's world.

Is our God a cuddly teddy-bear God - or a loving, but challenging, God who equips us to fulfil his mission in his world?

Does the Gospel we proclaim encourage shopping round for what suits us best - or does it ask for commitment, 'stick-ability' and faith?

We have a Gospel to proclaim - necessarily, how we proclaim that Gospel is determined by our image of God and of God's mission in God's world.

It is further determined by our ability to proclaim. Listen to Peter...

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

And, I want to suggest, never has this been more vital than it is now.

There are increasing numbers of people in society at large who have never been to church, except, perhaps for what might be described as occasions of 'Hatch, Match and Dispatch'; there are those who, for whatever reason, have become disaffected from the church; those who know nothing of the things of the faith, often not even things which should come into the category of 'General Knowledge. If you don't believe me, just listen to any quiz programme!

Added to this is the indisputable fact that, on this island, south and north, we are encountering, as never before in our history, peoples of other world faiths who seem - and often are - much more committed to and articulate about their faith than we are.

We live, move and have our being among many who wonder, who are sceptical, antagonistic, just plain curious - they may well ask us to give a reason for the hope that is in us.

And it could happen tomorrow..[Blood Transfusion Service incident]

[reference to the doctor saying 'So you're a Methodist, what do Methodists believe?']

As a church too, we may be quite good at giving the Message or, indeed, messages, to 'the faithful', but, as a newspaper reporter asked recently, what about the Methodist Church's message to the non-faithful?

What have we to say outside the churches' page, he wondered.

Have *we* a message of hope for a society

- where many are crushed - or feel themselves to be - by the economic situation?
- where the suicide rate among young people is high and rising?
- where there is all-too-little community cohesion?
- where gangland violence is a daily occurrence?
- where all traditional 'authorities' have been found to be morally wanting?

Getting heard in the public arena is a live issue for any church or faith group, and not least for one as relatively small as the Methodist Church in Ireland.

It is however, one we must meet head on - the mission of the apostles didn't get off the ground, as it were, until they emerged from the Upper Room!

Serving the present age is about addressing the challenges of the present age and it is of the essence that we keep on finding ways and means to do this effectively. And it is about doing this in deed as well as in word.

St Francis of Assisi is alleged to have urged his followers to 'Preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words!'

To *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is sometimes added the phrase *lex vivendi*.

In essence, this translates as '***the way we worship influences the way we believe, which, in turn, influences the way we act***'.

Service is being, acting, Christian wherever we find ourselves - workplace or dole queue, sports arena or community hall, home or pavement.

One of the reasons posited for the exponential growth of the Christian Church in China is that of the compelling witness of 'ordinary' Christians, along with the Church's clear identification with service to the poor.

There are now real issues for leadership and training as that Church struggles to keep up with the extraordinarily rapid pace of growth.

Today, one of my fellow chaplains in UCD is celebrating the 25th anniversary of his ordination. It is a time for celebration - and for reflection.

Things are different from when Leon 'signed up' in 1985...and how!

The church - his church and the church as the whole Body of Christ - is in a very different place indeed 25 years on.

- Scandals of one kind or another in both church and society;
- Child abuse revelations;
- A rising tide of secularism;
- The influx of people of other world faiths;
- A massive economic downturn....

How Leon, as a priest, is perceived in church and in society has changed radically, even within the past year. This change affects how he exercises his ministry, how he interprets and acts on his call to serve the present age.

Tonight, four people - June, Colin, Julian and Ross - will be ordained to the full-time ministry; a ministry in which they will boldly proclaim God's truth, faithfully celebrate God's Sacraments and unflinchingly love those among whom God will appoint them as pastors and teachers. Our thoughts and prayers are with you.

You will need to be both faithful and flexible - today's church is in a very different place to where it was 25, even 10, years ago, and who knows where it may be in 10 or 25 years time.

In the June issue of the *Methodist Newsletter*, Karen Spence asks a pertinent question: 'Is it worth spending time and effort on a mission statement?'

She concludes that it is: it has focussed the congregation on its mission in the widest sense. Take note! There are some very 'dated' mission statements out there. It is high time to revisit mission statements round the Connexion and consider what is needed to serve the present age in the places where we are.

Jesus calls us here to meet him *an earnest striving after holiness,*

Jesus calls us to each other *a desire for Christian fellowship,*

Jesus calls us to confess him *a passion for evangelisation*

Partakers of the Saviour's grace, we are charged to serve the ***present*** age, maintaining our distinctiveness as a people called to spread Scriptural holiness over the land and being clear, disciplined and focused in worship, witness and service. Are we ready to go?