

PASTORAL ADDRESS 2022

Wholehearted Ministry



THE METHODIST CHURCH
IN IRELAND

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ASSEMBLY BUILDINGS,
BELFAST

What do you think of when you hear this phrase? Does a particular role come into your mind? Maybe you think of an ordained person exercising the ministry for which the Methodist Church has “set them apart”? Or do you consider a vocational lay employee, appointed locally and paid to undertake a particular form of ministry within a circuit? Do you think of a voluntary leader within the church who serves as a local preacher, a steward, a children’s group leader or a congregational visitor?

While the primary ministry of the church is that of Jesus Christ himself, the New Testament provides us with various images and models of ministry which indicate that every believer is to share in ministry, undertaking different responsibilities and roles according to their gifts and abilities. As Methodists we affirm this emphasis on the ministry of the whole people of God in our recognition of “the priesthood of all believers”. We recognise that some are called to exercise ordained ministry - ordained by the Connexion and set aside as ministers of Word, sacrament and pastoral oversight. However, we also advocate that as individuals, we would each use the gifts and talents that God has entrusted to us to fulfil the tasks to which God has called us. This means that whilst some may be trained and appointed to specific roles in the life of the church, others fulfil *their* calling in less formal ways, within the church, within the wider community, and through who they are each day. In the preamble to the current expectations for those who are accepted for candidates for ordained ministry within MCI, the gifts of ‘leader’ and ‘enabler’ are identified. The inclusion of both these attributes emphasises that the particular ministry of the ordained should be one that allows, enables and releases the people of God into the various forms of ministry to which they are each called. It also follows that any concept of shared ministry is not about making the burden lighter for the ordained person. Rather, as Bigalke puts it, “It is obvious that priests or ministers *cannot* do everything alone in their congregations. But that they *should not* do and determine everything is a theological insight: the whole ministry belongs to the church or congregation as a whole.”ⁱ

The theme for Conference 2022 is “Wholeheartedly” – taken from the vision statement: “*Living wholeheartedly as followers of Jesus for the transformation of the world,*” adopted by MCI at Conference 2021. This Pastoral Address seeks to explore the idea of *Wholehearted Ministry*. Its purpose is not to provide a comprehensive theological exposition on the nature of ordained ministry or on the ministry of the whole people of God. The objective is to enable more intentional conversation within the Connexion on the nature of collective ministry, and to stimulate our thinking as to how we each exercise that ministry alongside the ministry of others. To help us in this task,

individuals across the Connexion were invited to describe their own *wholehearted ministry*. In what follows, they describe some of the joys and the challenges that their ministry brings, across a range of different contexts for that ministry. Each account is followed by some questions, to prompt thought and action. It is hoped that these reflections will help us, as a Connexion, to think more widely about forms of - and approaches to - *wholehearted ministry*.

From the very early days of Methodism, preachers were appointed in local settings to lead the people of God in worship and to preach. At that time, and since, the term "local preacher" has been used as a way of distinguishing between those who live and minister in a local circuit and those who are "itinerant", travelling around the country to exercise their ministry. Irish Methodism has a rich history in which men and women have heard and responded to a call to this form of ministry. The first reflection is shared by a current local preacher.

Wholehearted: adjective: showing or characterised by complete sincerity and commitment.

I would be the first to admit that my ministry isn't always "wholehearted". Could do better," would be definitely on my report. As a Methodist Local Preacher and Sunday School Team leader, I have two areas of ministry: the children in our Church family and the adults. It is not always an easy calling to fulfill, but recently, I was struck by the following quote: "The calling of the preacher is surely the highest possible calling this side of eternity". If I truly believe this, I must be wholehearted in my ministry, as I allow God to use me as an empty vessel, filled by the power of His Holy Spirit, to challenge adults and children, as I share His precious word. Each week, I have to have faith that, through God's grace, even one life could be transformed because of what I have shared. Over time, I have come to realise that my wholehearted ministry isn't confined to Sunday! It goes on all week, in casual conversations at the shops and in text messages shared with friends who need a word of encouragement or hope. It continues in chats with parents or grandparents who faithfully pray that their children will come to know God's love. It continues as I share food and fellowship around my table, with family, friends and the stranger. It continues as I seek to give to others, from all that God has given to me. In the words of a worship song which I love:

"Thank you for giving to the Lord... I am a life that was changed. Thank you for giving to the Lord.....I am so glad you gave."

As I seek to respond wholeheartedly to God's call to ministry, I pray that those words may be true, for even one of those whom I seek to serve.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Think about the quotation shared by this Local Preacher: *“The calling of the preacher is surely the highest possible calling this side of eternity”*. Do you agree with this statement?

How can you enable and support preachers (local and itinerant) to engage wholeheartedly in this form of ministry?

How might the Connexion continue to enable and support preaching ministry?

Over recent years, MCI has commissioned individuals to exercise the role of “Pioneer Mission Leader” in range of situations and contexts. This second reflection comes from one of those currently engaged in this form of ministry.

Our greatest fear is that we would find ourselves 'living half-heartedly as part-time followers of Jesus for the preservation of ourselves'; that our hearts would grow cold or timid, or our focus shift, in these testing and distracting times, back to ourselves or to the immediate demands of our small circle of influence, or even to the vanities and obsessions of social media and the news cycle. How can we 'guard our hearts' and 'fix our eyes on Jesus' in times like these? In the parable of the sower and the seed, how can we be those with good soil who have 'a good and obedient heart, and they persist until they bear fruit'?

Disciplines of prayer, community and hospitality help us here.

We practice a daily rhythm of prayer as a community, half an hour before the working day and half an hour afterwards. We ask the Lord to churn up the soil of our hearts: that 'Sower and the Seed' passage was the reading we shared this morning, with its exhortation towards goodness and perseverance. “Together” is key. I wouldn't have the self-discipline to do this alone. I don't always have faith to pray sincerely, but my friends will be waiting for me; our hearts are set on pilgrimage together, and their companionship is a comfort and inspiration along the way.

We 'practice hospitality' together also, hosting a weekly community meal, with 60+ folks from the local area eating together. Together, we celebrate a joyous event, reminiscent of the Kingdom Feast, with all sorts of folks from the 'Highways and Byways' of life coming to share. Together, we have established a community garden, a community choir and we are sponsoring a refugee family from Afghanistan. The lovely thing about all these projects is that other folks who aren't in our church community are also joining with us. They don't want to live half-hearted lives either in self-centred or timid ways either; they are pilgrims too, looking for someone worth following.....

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This pioneer mission leader shares a profound challenge: *Our greatest fear is that we would find ourselves 'living half-heartedly as part-time followers of Jesus for the preservation of ourselves'.* What aspects of the approach to ministry which they describe strike you as key to whole-hearted, rather than half-hearted ministry?

Wholehearted ministry engages with people, in many different contexts, so that they may catch a glimpse of God's kingdom. Which of the several ways described, of engaging with the community, do you think could be put into practice in your context?

Local Circuits around Ireland employ lay people to undertake a variety of roles. Sometimes such ministry doesn't look very different to that of an ordained minister; but in other situations, it has a clear and distinct focus. The next reflection has been shared by someone appointed to be a church development worker.

My ministry as a church development worker requires wholehearted immersion in the work of God, as a follower of Jesus. I feel energised by purpose, with an open-hearted drive to meet the needs of each local society and community, seeking to treat each one as a "favoured child" and respond to their individual needs. I have enjoyed process of getting to know those needs and, in response, creating plans and activities which are personal, non-judgemental and appropriate. We are opening churches for prayer and reflection outside the normal 'church times', encouraging the wider community to access the buildings and attend activities. A closed church is closed to the community and never considered open. By creating activities in and around the Church and losing the attitude that the building is "just for us and our Church", we encourage local people to access a sacred sanctuary. The emotional investment of the community and the spiritual investment of the wider church seeks to embrace collaboration that is helping to transform the world, locally and globally.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This Church Development Worker describes their varied ministry across several different communities as treating each one as a 'favoured child'. Reflect on what such an approach might mean, for anyone ministering across several different congregations and communities. How feasible is such an approach and what support does a 'minister' need, as they exercise this approach to ministry, at Circuit and District level?

The nature of youth work roles varies across the connexion: employed or voluntary, fulltime, or part-time. For many this form of ministry is not simply a "stepping-stone" to other leadership roles, but rather, it is a context in which they are called to exercise their ministry in a wholehearted and on-going way. We asked one youth worker who has exercised their ministry in a variety of roles to tell us about it.

I have been involved in youth ministry, in one form or another, for over 25 years. In recent years I have been proactive in joining and exposing young people to many different spaces where it is obvious that God is at work. All of these are outside of our usual church building “comfort zones”. Most of these experiences are amongst the more marginalised in our society. Together, we have realised that our fears or preconceptions of many people or environments were unfounded. It is in these spaces that we have experienced the power of God to transform and bring restoration to broken lives. I myself have realised that even subconsciously I have judged many from afar. Once you hear and process their personal stories it is no longer possible to judge them. Over time, I have realised that it is not for the church to dictate solutions to people, or to address their situations through eloquent speech. Our primary purpose is to be their servant. Only from this posture will our Heavenly Father be able to teach and refine us into the people and the church he created us to be. We have so much baggage to let go of. Some of the areas which the Lord needs to strip back are our attitudes of pride, rights, entitlement, and class, to name but a few. In God’s upside-down Kingdom, He chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This youth worker speaks passionately about ministry to and with people who are outside the church’s ‘comfort zones’, stating: “*Our primary purpose is to be their servant. Only from this posture will our Heavenly Father be able to teach and refine us into the people and the church he created us to be.*” Reflect on how, within your current ministry, you are able to assume the posture of a servant. What might God be teaching you about the relationship between *wholehearted ministry* and a servant mindset?

This youth worker also writes of the need to let go of ‘baggage’, as we engage in ministry. What ‘baggage’ do you think you, and those who share ministry with you, might need to let go of?

Another reflection comes from someone exercising ministry within and beyond the recently created role of District Lay Leader:

My ministry as District Lay Leader builds on my ministry at Circuit level, as Circuit Steward and a Local Preacher. District Share and Pray meetings on Zoom have been a source of comfort and learning. Through these meetings, I’ve had an opportunity to meet and pray with all the ordained ministers on the District and out of this have come invitations to preach in churches across the District. I have found this immensely valuable, as I grow in my understanding of the role and as I participate in a range of District meetings and working groups. Preaching in churches across the District enables me to talk with people and listen to what is on their heart. My ministry is also ecumenical, as I share in the leadership of the

World Day of Prayer, Ireland and the National Bible Society of Ireland. Membership of the Management Board of a Residential Home offers further opportunities for ministry and practical service. In conclusion, I feel that my everyday ministry, in its many different contexts, begins and evolves from the daily time I spend with God. I need to have my quiet time: to read my Bible, to reflect on God's word and to be strengthened for whatever the day may bring. That is why I love the vision statement of the MCI: 'To live wholeheartedly as followers of Jesus for the transformation of the world.' No other goal can ever match this!

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

This reflection includes reference to the value of a District on-line 'Share and Pray' gathering. What opportunities are available where you are, to provide a means for mutual encouragement, support and accountability for those involved in 'ministry'? How might such opportunities be developed further at Circuit and District level?

The role of District Lay Leader is a relatively recent development. Reflect on how this role and this ministry might be further shaped and developed, in support of *wholehearted ministry* across your District.

Within MCI, we have ordained individuals to presbyteral ministry. However, while we have not had our own Diaconal order, over the years we have been blessed by the ministry exercised by British Methodist deaconesses, and latterly, by members of the Methodist Diaconal order. Currently one British Methodist deacon is stationed in the Irish Connexion. When she was asked to reflect on what *Wholehearted Ministry* means, her thoughts were drawn to the promises made by deacons at ordination:

In God's name we are to assist God's people in worship and prayer; to hold before them the needs and concerns of the world; to minister Christ's love and compassion; to visit and support the sick and the suffering; to seek out the lost and lonely; and to help those we serve to offer their lives to God... fulfilling our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. We are to share fully in the life of our Order and to keep its discipline, remembering our call to: support the weak; bind up the broken; gather in the outcast; welcome the stranger and seek the lost.

The Methodist Covenant Service and Convocation's service of rededication give me two opportunities to renew promises that challenge me to live wholeheartedly into these commitments, which come into sharp focus while reflecting on where I have been sent to serve. Wesley's mandate to go not just to those in need but those in greatest need, adds another lens. Diaconal - shaped ministry: having 'one foot in the church and the other outside of the it', brings blessing and challenge, in being prepared and resourced to go beyond the margins of church life, for what God is doing beyond our usual focus. Our Rule of Life is a practical tool, helping to enable and sustain me in body, mind and spirit, as I seek to live it out, through whole-hearted ministry.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Take some time to read again the first paragraph of this reflection: a summary of the promises made by a deacon at their ordination. Think about how your own ministry reflects the type of ministry encapsulated in these promises: which aspects of ministry do you give time and energy to and which might you want to develop further, either yourself or in collaboration with others?

Having one foot in the church and one beyond is a description that could also be applied to the many people who engage in ministry and service whilst they work in “secular” employment. Many speak of a sense of “calling” to the work which they undertake and see it as a place in which they too may exercise *wholehearted ministry*. The following reflection comes from one such person, who works as an Occupational Therapist within a Cancer Care team.

Whole-hearted ministry? Whole-hearted service? Those concepts challenge me to ask:

How do I fill my time? What do I give my attention to, my energy, my enthusiasm? What do I give my heart to?

When we are intentional about making God first in our lives, that relationship shapes everything about us. As we go through life, we all fulfil many different roles. At present, some of my roles are as a mother, daughter, sister, wife, NHS employee and a friend. I am challenged daily to reflect on how I conduct the normal activities of my life, in the character and with the power of Christ. Day by day, I trust that God has put me in my current circumstances for a reason, even on the days when I feel out of my depth. In my work, I am privileged to listen to patients, hearing how their condition affects their everyday living and then seeking to find ways to help them maintain independence in their everyday tasks. I spend a lot of time listening to frustrations about how they manage pain and deal with unwanted limitations on everyday activities; hearing how they may struggle with mental health and well-being. In a work context where there are limits on what I can share about faith, I pray that my actions and my attitudes will speak louder and that the personal ‘arrow prayers’ I offer quietly throughout the day can make a difference. I seek to pray in all circumstances, trusting God to guide my thoughts and decisions, attitudes and reactions and to make up for my inadequacies when I get it wrong. The words of 2 Corinthians 12:9 are a constant companion: “my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness”. This wholehearted ministry is for the whole of life.

Wouldn't It be wonderful if people saw God's presence and beauty in how we live, in the everyday experiences and challenges, wherever we may be?

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

"Wouldn't It be wonderful if people saw God's presence and beauty in how we live, in the everyday experiences and challenges, wherever we may be?" This person has a clear sense of being involved in Christ's ministry, through their work and within their everyday life, across many different roles. How do you encourage, challenge and support people, where you are, to have that same sense of being involved in ministry?

How can the church demonstrate the value and worth we place on such ministry, within our worship and liturgical practice?

Our last reflection is from someone who felt very clearly that they were called to a particular work setting and who views that work as an opportunity for service and for ministry:

The way that we experience God's call on our lives is as unique and individual as each person. Some are called to ordained, authorised ministry, but most are not. All of us are called to follow Jesus, wherever we are, whatever our place of work, or whatever community we find ourselves in. He calls us to be Salt, Light or Yeast in many different settings. In my case, I felt a call to become a police officer. Joining the police in Northern Ireland in the late 90s was not a decision to take lightly, but a number of times before joining, I sensed God telling me "I will be with you". Years on from that first day, I have seen and learned many things, including things that many of my friends and family might find difficult to believe. Police officers have a sense of duty to bring order to chaos, and to help people. Law and procedure are only part of the job. Much of the time, it can be down to the Boy Scout principle of doing a 'good turn' to help somebody and applied common sense. I have worked with people from many backgrounds and beliefs. Facing adversities and struggles together can forge a bond of camaraderie with colleagues and I have generally found that colleagues are respectful of others' faith, even if they themselves are not believers. I have often found conversations opening up. Rarely was I the one to initiate it. More often I would have a colleague ask me questions, which I would endeavour to answer, without preaching, because many are turned off by 'Bible thumpers'. When they have asked more difficult questions, I have given an honest answer from my own experience of my relationship with God; and honesty also means telling them that you don't know, when you don't know. Often, I have found myself in a position of trust, almost like in a confessional, as colleagues have unburdened themselves, opening up about their joys, sorrows and difficulties. It has been a powerful witness to say that I would pray for them, and their situation - as powerful as the trust they placed in me. We are all different. God made us that way. He has placed us in various walks of life, and various ministries, for his purposes. I pray that he uses us well wherever he places us.

Ad magnum Gloriam Dei; Deus nobiscum.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As with the previous reflection, this person has a clear sense of being involved in Christ's ministry, within their 'secular' work context. Think for a moment or two about people in your church or churches. What do you know about their work contexts and the ways they seek to be salt, light and yeast within them? How might you provide ways for them to share their wholehearted ministry stories, as a way to encourage and support them and others?

The reflections offered here have provided a snapshot of some of the forms of ministry exercised by individuals within MCI:

- A Local Preacher,
- A Pioneer Mission Leader
- A Vocational Lay Employee
- A paid or volunteer youth worker
- A lay person exercising a leadership role in a local circuit or district
- A stipendiary ministry role – as deacon or presbyter
- A ministry in non-church work settings

As you begin to reflect on the nature of the *wholehearted ministry* described by these individuals, you might want to add your own form of ministry to this list, or you might wish to consider more deeply your own discipleship and calling. As noted earlier, the role of the ordained person is to enable and encourage this breadth of discipleship, by releasing faithful individuals to fulfil the ways in which *they* are called to service. What is significant for us for us as a Connexion is that this is not an optional extra to do so, rather it is a theological imperative. *Wholehearted ministry* embraces the discipleship and ministry of the whole church. What does it look like for you?

ⁱ G. Bigalke, 'Formation of the Laos', in N. Apostola (ed.), *A Letter from Christ to the World: An exploration of the Role of the Laity in the Church today*, (Switzerland, W.C.C., 1998), p. 63.