

## **Why do Methodists call themselves a connexion?**

Yes, it's a strange term isn't it – to say nothing of a strange spelling into the bargain! When a Methodist minister is ordained we say that they are “received into full connexion”. This month ministers and representatives from across Ireland are meeting in Enniskillen for “*the two hundred and thirty-first annual Conference of the people called Methodists in the Connexion established by the Late Rev John Wesley*”. So what do we mean when we, like our brothers and sisters in British Methodism, call ourselves a connexion?

Back in the eighteenth century when Methodism began it was not unusual even within the Church of England for local chapels and prayer groups to be in a network of committed relationships and loyalties with other like-minded groups. One famous example was the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. This aristocratic lady used her social status and financial resources to establish a theological college, build some sixty four chapels and employ numerous chaplains to preach in them. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the work of Wesley and Whitefield and did much to encourage the spread of Methodism in the early days. The Connexion she founded continues to this day.

Methodism likewise grew up as a connexion – a network of fellowship groups which expanded as more and more people came into a vital dynamic relationship with Christ. Wesley formed these believers into societies which existed informally within the structures of the Church of England. Where possible these people would attend worship in their parish church but meet at a different time for the teaching, prayer and fellowship which sustained them in their new discipleship. If you go to Wesley's house in London you can still see the writing bureau where he kept precise records of all the societies under his care. Their connection with him gave them their corporate identity and once a year they met for a conference over which he presided.

Two hundred and fifty years on that sense of being a connexion is still at the heart of how we operate as a church. Each Methodist congregation (or society – we still use that term) knows that it is not on its own. It has the sense of belonging to a much bigger church family. First of all it is part of a local circuit, and then a district and ultimately the Methodist Church in Ireland. Authority rests with the annual Methodist Conference which has representation from both clergy and laity.

Most of us love this sense of family. It is reinforced every time we get a new minister. He or she is sent to us by Conference and will move on in due course when Conference decides. Each new minister brings with them the richness of experience gained in other Methodist congregations. In this way ideas are shared and vision is extended. Meet a Methodist anywhere and it isn't long before you find that you know the same ministers and can chat away about how your churches are doing. That really is not the same in other denominations that keep their clergy for many years or in churches which are self governing and independent.

There's something special about those occasions when we can all meet up. We love events like Conference, Castlewellan Holiday Week, Global Vision, Lay Witness gatherings and MWI conferences. Our young people experience the same sense of

family at events like Autumn Soul and Soul Mates. It is here that friendships are formed and we learn what it really means to belong together.

It's a bit like what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 when he compares the Church to a human body. Just as a body has many different limbs and organs that depend on each other, so we like to think of our congregations as being bound up together with others, sharing in one another's pain, struggles, joy and blessing. Using tools like *Prayer Focus* we find that we really do care about and pray for the work of churches in parts of Ireland we have never even visited.

Naturally our connectedness is seen in our financial giving. We all, for example are happy to support our city missions. Through the Home Mission Department resources are channelled to congregations which otherwise might find it difficult to survive and grants are given to support exciting pioneering ventures and programmes in new locations. We see ourselves as being in the work of mission together .

Belonging together however brings its challenges. It means that as individual members and as congregations we are accountable to one another for our beliefs and actions. We like to think that we are seen as "the friends of all and the enemies of none"; we have always encouraged our people to work for peace and reconciliation and we have always sought to match gospel preaching with hands-on practical care for others. We have a lot to live up to.

Sometimes we run into difficulties. We see some fellow Methodists taking a stand or expressing an opinion with which we personally do not agree. We think they are letting the side down by being publicly seen to hold a certain moral stance or belong to that political organisation or that quasi religious group. We disagree strongly and we feel that Methodism should come off the fence, lay down the law and speak out clearly otherwise perhaps we should take ourselves off and leave. That sounds fine and would no doubt keep things simple but what about that picture of us being a connected body? With apologies to Paul, a body can't disown a painful infected finger. It is stuck with it and can only work to heal it and bring it back into health.

I think that is how I see things in Methodism. There is no perfect church and there is no denomination that is a perfect match for any of us. Sometimes we have to take a stand if we believe that gospel truth or the authority of scripture is being compromised but such occasions are thankfully very rare. For the most part we respect the right of other members to exercise their conscience and we love them as people even when we see things differently. I have seen that in operation time and time again in Irish Methodism. It reminds me of the words of Wesley in his treatise *The Character of a Methodist* "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." All part of being a family, I suppose.