

Presidential Address by Richard Andrew

Our Story, Our Song: Learning to Live Again

(You can watch the address at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/structure-and-governance/the-methodist-conference/conference-2025/presidency/president-and-vice-president-2025-26/the-presidents-address-to-the-conference-2025/>)

Come, Holy Spirit! Maranatha! Come, Lord, come (John Bell)

'...truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains but a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (John 12:24)

Introduction

The people who surround us with their love are a sign of God's graciousness because they help to call out from us a beauty we could not have realised without them. As I begin today, I want to celebrate those who have shared my life story with me and enabled me to sing my song. I give thanks for the faith sharers, way makers, star gazers, vision crafters and most especially friends and family and those who have been gifted to me. I give thanks for my late parents, Ralph and Pat, and late mother-in-law, Wendy, for whom this occasion would have been a proud moment, I give thanks for the unique, wonderful woman that is my wife, Debbie - you are my soul buddy and life companion - for my children, Tom and Becky, who fill me with hope, pride and great joy, for Tom's partner, the lovely Jo, my sister, Belinda, and brother in law, Jim, here with me today, for my brother Chris and his family, my father in law, Jim and his wife Eileen, unable to be with us today, and for special friends, some of whom are here today, who have been so precious to me and signs of God's grace. Thank you for being with me on this journey. Love you to the stars and back.

A Methodist Future?

What is the future of Methodism in Great Britain? The obvious answer is, 'I don't know', because in reality no one really knows what the future will hold. If discerning the future was that simple, then the Secretary of Conference and the Connexional Secretary would immediately appoint a Director of Futurology and the whole of connexional life would be shaped around it. But it is not so. Indeed, there are probably as many ideas of what our future will look like as the number of people sitting here today. But none of us knows and there is a humility in recognising that. What I do sense though is that we are not the first people of faith who have had to learn to live through 'interesting times.' Many generations before us have had to rebuild in the midst of ruins or forsaken power and status only to recognise that the vulnerability they discovered along the way placed them in the company of Jesus.

If that is so, then we can be confident that rumours of our death have been greatly exaggerated. I say that not because of some naïve belief that somehow years of decline will be easily reversed nor, more optimistically, because the Methodist family worldwide is growing in many places, including in our own context. Nor is it because of the transformation of the Methodist Church in Britain in recent decades that has seen the global become the local and our Church become much broader and diverse as a result even whilst there remains much to do to make a fully inclusive Church a reality. Nor is it because of the evidence emerging in recent reports such as *The Quiet Revival* which sees not only an increase in church attendance and spiritual engagement amongst those in their 20s and 30s but also related benefits in improved well-being, connection to local community and engagement in social justice: participating in church community, it turns out, is good for you. Nor is it because of an increased interest in intellectual circles in the Judeo-Christian tradition and what it might have to offer as a basis for underpinning political and cultural values

for those who wish to express the right to love their neighbour as the basis of community in a world that seems ever more fragmented and destructive and where neighbours are cast as strangers rather than as friends. Nor do I say it because of the calls over many years from successive Presidents and Vice-Presidents reminding us that God has not finished with us yet, that we are a discipleship movement shaped for mission, that we are called to a way of life in which worship, learning and caring, service, justice and evangelism are all integrated, or that there is something planted deep within our DNA which means that we can never deny our calling if we are to be authentically ourselves. All of these things are true but they are only partly the reason for my conviction that the rumours of our death have been greatly exaggerated.

I believe that the rumours of our death have been greatly exaggerated because God is faithful, Christ is risen and the Spirit blows amongst us, wherever she wills, drawing and calling us into new life, new hope, new community, new creation. It has always been so and for those who wish to join in, it offers not only the most exciting of futures but also a glimpse into our true vocation in Christ. Our hope and convictions about the future are born not out of our present experience of history, important though that it is, but from an enduring sense of God's faithfulness and desire in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit to make the new heaven and the new earth.

A Personal Testimony

My own faith journey gives testimony to this. I was brought up in a market town in North Yorkshire in an unchurched family, or perhaps more accurately a folk Christian family which saw the Church as the place where we celebrated rites of passage at significant points in life, but little else. At 15, a friend invited me to a Methodist youth club and over the next couple of years I found myself seeking and asking questions and observing the work of the Spirit in the lives of others, although I wouldn't have called it that at the time, until at the age of 17, I had an experience which for me was life transforming and for which I had no reference points. At an old priory in Swaledale which had been turned into an outdoor adventure retreat centre, my heart was strangely warmed and I received a call as simple as it was profound – it was two words, 'Follow me'. I have been working out the meaning of that calling ever since.

In some ways my understanding of that moment has changed. I now see it as something which was already at work within me even before I knew it. Christ was simply there waiting to be recognised drawing me towards him with the voice of his calling. His depth spoke to my depth and the depth I discovered lived inside me and beyond me. As the years went by, this sense of a living God and a living call continued to grow in me both in good and bad times.

That sense of a living God and a living call was there as I moved from a rural market town to Brixton in the midst of the 1985 riots and began to sense a Church that was deeper and more diverse than anything I'd experienced before. A living God and a living call was there during ministerial training when my wife, Debbie, and I spent a summer working in the townships of South Africa during apartheid, a year after Mandela had been released from prison and two years before the first free elections. I met that living God in an elderly woman who told us she had been praying for 30 years, assured like Anna in Luke's Gospel, that the walls of apartheid would fall and a great liberation would begin. It was in those townships that I discovered the power of song to keep hope alive.

That sense of a living God and a living call was there in York where I found myself overwhelmed by anxiety, poor health and occasional darkness, known only to my wife, and where I found love and light in a deep dialogue with God in stillness, rhythm and the Psalms which has profoundly affected me ever since.

These moments amongst so many others, have been the soundtrack of my life, deeply embedded in memory and story. It was in Methodism that I discovered the story of God's free grace: grace which sought me before I even recognised it; grace which set me free even despite me; grace which called me to grow, to seek partnership with others and which sought to redeem all things.

I sometimes sit back and wonder whether we recognise just how wonderful the gift we have been given really is and how much that plotline influences our sense of identity – what others might call our golden thread or our 'why'. Of course, my story, just like the Methodist story, is just one small story in the context of God's unfolding story but it is enough to know that I am invited to play my part and sing my song while knowing that it does not all depend on me.

To be Church and to share in God's mission is to be part of an expansive story that reaches out to all people and all things because that is the nature of God's love and grace and the pattern for life set out for us in Jesus Christ. The Church will endure in the future not because of our efforts, our strategies or our programs, however important they may be, but because God's enduring love has kept us. What we experience now is simply a sign of God's future not the future itself. So we should never be afraid of signs of death, or to shed the skin of our present, because it is only in learning to die to ourselves that we shall truly begin to live in the power of the Spirit and begin to live. Faith precedes sweat; hope leads us into a future that is not our own; love binds us to God, our neighbour and to our eternal goal. This is our story. This is our song.

It's a story we celebrate every year when we gather together as Conference and sing, 'And are we yet alive?' A hymn written at a time when Methodism was scorned by the established Church and chased out of communities by stone throwing and pitch forked rioters. In this context, Charles Wesley writes a hymn which reminds us that God's protecting, preserving and providential grace has been with us as we have journeyed through whatever the year has brought until we meet together again. 'And are we yet alive...?' is a hymn of trust and confidence in God's enduring faithfulness especially through the darkest of times. As the poet Pádraig Ó Tuama puts it, 'Hope is a song sung when everything else says you shouldn't be singing.'^[1]

Every year when we sing that hymn together at Conference, we boldly proclaim our faith in what God is doing amongst us. Even though we may live through death, struggle and uncertainty, even though we may look on the world with perplexity, we and the world we live in is being drawn and reshaped into the life of God by God's Word and Spirit. What a message! What a cause for song!

A Grain of Wheat

Professor David Ford, in his magisterial commentary on John's Gospel, notes that in John 12, the parable about a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying is followed immediately by an indication of how Jesus' disciples are to live, '...not fearing death; free to risk their lives for the sake of love; trusting in Jesus; living in service to him; and being where Jesus is.'^[2] He goes on to explain that to be where Jesus is, is to share in the union of love between Jesus and his Father and with all those who trust and love him. It is a love which has as its horizon the whole of the world because love embraces all things and so to be committed to Jesus is to live a life of utter commitment to God and to God's life of love for the world, even sometimes at great cost. This way of living produces 'much fruit' because it is a participation in the life that salvation enables.

If we are serious about it then this is the kind of commitment that lies at the heart of what it means to live out *Our Calling*, responding to God's love for us in Jesus Christ in worship and mission. It is the narrative which helps us make sense of what it means to aspire to be a growing, inclusive, evangelistic and justice seeking Church. In our presidential year, Matt and I seek to encourage the Methodist people to undertake a 'soul expedition' deep into the heart of our calling, encouraging us to ask questions about our fundamental orientation. What story do we wish to tell,

what song do we want to sing about ourselves? Is it rooted, grounded, lived, and authenticated in Christ or in something else? Is it a Spirit shaped story open to the future or a world weary one? Is it a song of wonder and praise that marvels at the presence of God in all people? Does it help us to imagine the Church like a great community choir in which the great songs of liberation and salvation which permeate the scriptures can be re-learned, rehearsed and re-performed? Are we a Church waiting to die hanging on for the graveyard or a Church willing to die in order to live? If these sound like old questions that is because they are but maybe they are also questions we all need to ask today because they are fundamental to our calling and identity. Put in other terms, the Presidential Theme, *Our Story, Our Song* is an invitation to the Methodist Church to ask itself, 'Who do you think you are?' 'And what song are you singing in God's world?'

Perhaps, by now, you find yourself saying, 'this is not how things look where I am'. Pádraig Ó Tuama, wisely notes that, 'We do not tell stories as they are; we tell stories as we are,'[3] and in so doing, reminds us that we can hide behind the stories we tell or get lost in our own narratives. For many people their experience of church is one of decline over many decades, an ageing demographic, with not enough volunteers to fill roles and in some places people who feel tired, disillusioned and anxious about the future. As Mark Slaney once said to me, 'The things which used to carry us we now seem to be carrying'. To borrow an image from Elaine Heath, for many churches it can sometimes feel as if we have taken all the familiar religious furniture from an old house, packed it into a removal van, only to discover when we move into a new home, that it no longer fits:

'After a while we sit down, exhausted from all our efforts, and think about calling it quits. We keep asking ourselves why nothing works anymore. We lose the desire to try.'[4]

We must recognise both the pain and the truth in that story. We do no-one any favours by denying its reality. At the same time, however, we would do well to recognise what we are saying about God's purposes in simply accepting that story as it is, since to do so is to conceive mission as survival, as endurance, as hanging on in quiet desperation trying to keep the show on the road. It views our history either nostalgically – 'things were better then' - or as a burden. It settles for what we know in the present over the newness God offers for the future. Its fruits are exhaustion, cynicism and anxiety. No one can live healthily like that for long. It creates a subconscious plot line, a funnel of panic and anxiety about an 'inevitable' future which we try to subvert through our strategies, our work, our pathways, the next initiative landing on the desk. It is an approach which creates an over-stimulated, exhausted and overloaded Church. And it's an approach which leaves us continually disappointed with the fruit of our efforts, guilt ridden, confused and anxious at our failure. Worse still, it's an approach that forgets that the Church is Christ's body and that its future is secure in God's hands, not in ours. Hear me carefully. I am not suggesting that our participation and work does not have a place in God's purposes. It is rather about the fundamental point of orientation from which we choose to begin.

As Richard Rohr puts it,

'Whether human beings admit it or not, we are all in love with – even addicted to – the status quo and the past, even when it is killing us. Resurrection offers us a future – dare I say a permanent future – but one that is unknown and thus scary. Humans find it easier to gather their energy around death, pain, and problems than around joy.'[5]

If we read the Easter stories, we notice a combination of experiences which mirror our own: fear, anxiety, misunderstanding and doubt but also as the perceptions of the disciples begin to change after their bleakest and darkest moments, running, joy, abundance, feasting and a freedom for the future which bursts across the known world.

A future that we cannot plan. Out of the bruised, the disappointed, the disillusioned, God brings new life, new community, new creation if we are open to find it.

The Sycamore Tree

A few months ago, a small group in the Darlington District began meeting to explore discipleship in the district. In one of our first meetings, Stef, our Children's, Family and Young People Enabler, had a picture of the Sycamore Gap tree. Perhaps the tree held a clue to our calling.

The Sycamore Gap tree was one of the most photographed trees in the country. It lay in the wild borders of Northumberland, in a dip in Hadrian's Wall, in lands which historically have moved backwards and forwards between England and Scotland – the North-East is sometimes known as the land which Scotland wants but cannot have and which England does not really want but will not let Scotland have. The tree was the scene of marriage proposals, weddings and a place where people would spread the ashes of loved ones but more than anything else the tree was beloved in the North-East as a symbol of resilience, of endurance in an untamed landscape. In 2023 it was tragically felled and there was an outpouring of grief and sadness, even anger at what some saw to be symbolic of humanity's wider assault and degrading of nature.

The story of the felling of the tree seems to parallel some of our own experience of the Church. A wonderful institution that had meant so much to so many people now seemingly lost leaving us behind to grieve. But, of course, that is not the end of the story. The National Trust, who owned the land, discovered in August 2024 that the stump, although severely damaged, had begun to sprout new shoots at its base. Although it will take 150 to 200 years to grow back to something like what was lost, the tree will grow back. At the same time, seeds have been collected from the tree and used to propagate new saplings, the first one of which was planted by the King in Windsor Great Park.

Again there were parallels with what we were experiencing in the life of the Church in the district which echoes what is happening elsewhere with the growth of so many shoots of new life in New Places for New People and Church at the Margins, but also outside of that in quite unexpected ways, the work of the Spirit breathing new life into that which seemed to be dead, giving it new sinews, new flesh, new structure. It feels precarious but perhaps it's also a sign of what is to come: a Lazarus moment in which the Church is being unbound and released in order to live out its true vocation. The Church will be different but also somehow the same – this is our story, this is our song.

The image of the Sycamore Gap tree has become an important one for prayer in the district and fits alongside the Romero Prayer which is at the heart of the District Mission Plan:

'This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.'

It is a story we are only just beginning to live into, a song we are only just learning to sing. But it is a vocational song, one that is permissive and liberating and because of that, life-giving.

A Story

Helen Kirk told a powerful story at a Chairs' Meeting a few months ago about her parents who had met over 70 years ago at a dance class. It was particularly poignant to me because my own parents were of the same generation and had travelled the North Yorkshire dance halls together dancing to the Syd Lawrence and Joe Loss orchestras. Helen described how her parents loved to dance and at every opportunity they would take to the floor. Just before Covid it became evident that her father's memory issues were caused by dementia and so, in order to cope in lockdown, her mother created a daily timetable of activities to help them get through; one of these was dancing. She would put on the music, push back the furniture and ask him to dance. He would take her in hold, beautifully straight. His balance seemed to recover, and he no longer shuffled as they danced around the room. One day on the phone, Helen's mum told her that they had remembered that they loved each other and that they were loved.

Conclusion

I was so moved by Helen's story that I wanted you to hear it. Perhaps the deepest truth we can speak to anyone is to say to them, 'Remember you are loved'. We are loved because of the love of many but most fundamentally because of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. I wonder if that is the first thing that every church community needs to hear – 'Remember that you are loved'. Perhaps the second is an encouragement to recover our vocational muscle memory. Maybe we need to learn to dance again, to tell our story in a different way, to sing our song as a great testimony of God's love for us and of our calling to respond to that in love of neighbour and in seeking a new heaven and a new earth. Someone once said that hope is hearing the melody of the future and faith is dancing to that melody now. In a similar way, as Bruce Springsteen once said: '...the future is not yet written. So lace up your dancing shoes and get to work.' Amen.

Richard Andrew

[1] Pádraig Ó Tuama, *In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), p.178

[2] David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), p.243.

[3] Ó Tuama, *op.cit.*, p.232.

[4] Elaine Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017, 2nd ed.), p.25.

[5] Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for our True Self*, (London: SPCK, 2013), p.xi.