

Mr Anthony Boateng's Vice-President's Address to the Methodist Conference, June 2022



Anthony Boateng is a local preacher in the Westminster Circuit, with a passion for social action, politics, church unity, spiritual revival and creative ways of worship. He is the Convenor of the London District Social Responsibility Commission and has been a member of the Conference since 2014. Until last year, Anthony was a member of the Church Action for Tax Justice Management Committee and Methodist Central Hall Westminster Leadership Team. In his day job, Anthony works part-time for a government work and health programme that seeks to help unemployed central London residents and people with health conditions into sustainable work.

My journey so far

This will be the eighth consecutive year I have been attending the Methodist Conference, dating back to 2014. I remember receiving a call from my then Superintendent Minister, the Revd Cathy Bird, to attend the Conference. I remember how I felt – excited but nervous. It's a little like today. I remember what Cathy said to me as a word of advice: "Anthony, do not waffle!" No pressure, I thought. I hope I do not waffle today.

Friends, let me briefly share a little about my journey with you. Around 2014, I was encouraged to train as a local preacher. Through prayer, I sought direction from the Lord about whether this was what he wanted me to do. Just as I did before allowing my name to be put forward for this role. It was on a seemingly normal evening when (through a dream) the Lord offered me confirmation that I was to commit to training as a local preacher. In 2015, I started my training.

During the early part of my studies, I received some life-altering news. It was around this time that I obtained a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit and how he can manifest in our lives.

I had to learn experientially what it meant to trust totally in God's plan, in spite of my own turmoil and suffering.

After six years of rigorous study, I am pleased to say that I finally completed my training last year, not long after my election as Vice-President, under Methodist Central Hall Westminster, and had my accreditation service at the beginning of this year. It was a joyous occasion for me, and one that I hold dear to my heart, as again, the Lord's grace and mercy prevailed. It was only through God's divine guidance that I was able to accomplish this.

Introduction

Friends, in preparation for this role, similar to my first-ever sermon preached at Dalston Methodist Church in 2016 as part of my lay preacher training, it has been challenging at times, but God's grace has prevailed.

In all honesty, I have felt nervous during my preparation. The last thing I want to do is disappoint God or let the Church and the

Conference down. And so, my sincere prayer is that God will be at the centre of everything I do. Nothing else matters, because after all this is not about me, it is about the Church, the Body of Christ, of which we are all part.



Friends, I am acutely aware how challenging this role must have been for my predecessors. And therefore, I am immensely grateful to all the past Presidents and Vice-Presidents for their service to us over the years and for the ways in which they have helped to shape us as a Church and helped me to discern my theme for this year's Conference.

I will continue to put God first, you have my word. As encouraged in 2 Timothy 4:2, I am confident that through the power of the Holy Spirit I will continue to be bold in proclaiming the gospel as I journey on in my servanthood for Christ. I kindly ask that you all support me in my endeavour by raising me before the Lord in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to continue working through me for the betterment of God's kingdom.

Since being elected for this role, I have been asking myself: "What does God want me to focus on?" I have been going back and forth in my mind. I have come to the conclusion that

there is no perfect way to do it and the best I can do is to let the Holy Spirit speak through me to the Church.

But how does one do this? For me it is by using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – using Scripture as the first authority, with the aid of tradition, reason and Christian experience as part of my theological reflection. Also, I am keen to incorporate the voice of the Church within my presidential year, which is why I have utilised a questionnaire to get a snapshot of people's views towards revival, worship and discipleship, in order to get a sense of what is working and what requires improvements. I will come back to this later.

And so, on that note, as previously mentioned by Graham during his address, this year's overarching theme we have chosen together to explore is the greatest commandment ("you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart"), which encourages us to focus on God's self-giving love and the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 22:34-40 and Acts 2.

For my part, I will be majoring on the theme of revival, by engaging in the worship and evangelism part of our Methodist calling, using Acts 2:2-21. This is a reading many of us will be familiar with, especially when we think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which marked the spread of Christianity. With your support and the Holy Spirit, I hope to unpack this a little more during the Conference and over this coming year.

For today, I want to humbly add to what my predecessors have said and done by adding my voice to what I think God is saying to us as a Church at this time.

Why revival

Revival can mean different things to different people. For example, in my questionnaire people

describe revival in terms of bringing life and taking action through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For the purpose of this address, one definition has been proposed by Martyn Lloyd Jones, Welsh Protestant minister: "Revival, above everything else, is a glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is the restoration of him to the centre of the life of the Church."

In the heart of every committed Christian, there is the longing to know that quality and depth of spiritual reality, and the presence of God in one's personal life.

In every era, the Church needs revival – certainly now more than ever. This sentiment appears to have been reflected within the questionnaire data, as the feedback suggested that, without revival, the Church will not survive, due to division and spiritual dilution.

We are having to grapple with countless issues including church decline, the cost of living, war in Europe, the long-term impact of Covid, the new asylum bill and the virus known as institutional racism. On a positive note, I believe the offer of hospitality by the general public for those fleeing the war, and society voicing their concerns regarding the new asylum bill gives us hope. Conference, it is time for us to strive to revive the Wesleyan fire in our everyday life.

If we go far back to 1807 during the Primitive Methodist days, under Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, revival was apparent during the Mow Cop camp meetings. More recently, as early as the 1980s, there were indicators that suggested revival was happening until the 1990s through the charismatic and ecumenical movement. The gift and empowering of the Holy Spirit was a regular occurrence through churches and congregations. There was collaboration and unity in churches, including different



denominations. It seemed, in some ways, to be a repetition of the day of Pentecost, resulting in Church growth. Those who were open to the work of the Holy Spirit became a part of it and those who failed to recognise it did not.

Some may say that the Methodist Church was, as a whole, not open enough to the work of the Holy Spirit. This idea appears to have been reflected in the questionnaire data. This suggested that, for some, the prospect of revival might invoke fear, which could go some way to understanding some people's reluctance to seek revival.

Stand up for justice

Conference, we need to revive the Wesleyan fire now more than ever in all areas of our Church. This is the time for the Church to stand up and show the world why social justice is in the DNA of Methodism. This is the time to strive further with some of the good work we've already made through our EDI Toolkit. Now is the time to find the remedies and creative ways to solve our common problems.

Friends, through unity, guided by the Holy Spirit, let us embrace people who feel marginalised and voiceless within our Church, challenge the status quo, and act as an agent of change. Let us remind ourselves of the benchmark Christ has set for all society, because God is Lord of every society and nation. This means no one is inferior and there should be equality in opportunity and treatment for all. There must be no room for tokenism or fear of being silenced. The principles of our values and, most importantly, actions must be able to stand up to the judgement of God.

Statistics for Mission report

Conference, I am acutely aware that some of us feel disheartened by the current state of our Church, but let me assure you that through Christ, all things are possible. I am sad to report that according to our Statistics for Mission report, active membership has fallen by over 20,000 between 2013 and 2016. Unfortunately, this trend continued, as data from 2019 suggests that active membership fell by a further 18,000. Even when taking into account the deaths of members, there still remains a large deficit of members unaccounted for. I am concerned that at this rate of decline we're going to go out of existence.

It pains me that, last year, only 25 people candidated for ordained ministry, after which 15 were recommended. Out of that 15, only 4 were of an ethnic minority. It pains me, the rate at which our churches are needing to close due to numerical decline and loss of income. It pains me that there are long-standing Methodists leaving the Church, especially people feeling on the margins.

Friends, I submit to us that, if there was ever a time to depend on God for revival, now is the time. Now is the time to strive to rekindle and revive the Wesleyan fire in our everyday lives.



It's now or never. Survive or perish. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.

Glimmers of revival

On a positive note, it pleases me to report that there have been glimmers of revival. We're witnessing growth with our cultural fellowships.

In June, I had the privilege to witness the inauguration of the first Ghanaian Methodist church in the UK. This is a significant milestone that should be seen as a real opportunity.

As highlighted by the response to my questionnaire, we need strong leadership, connection, clear direction, alignment and seeking of God for the Holy Spirit to flow. Under my Vice-Presidency, I will do everything in my power to encourage initiatives such as this across the whole Church and I urge you all to do the same.

As I have prepared for today, I have felt a burden to address not only this Conference and our wider Church, but also that section of the great cloud of witnesses who are our spiritual forbearers in the Lord: John and Charles Wesley, their mother Susanna, Hugh Bourne, William Clowes and many others, many of whom will be known only to the Lord.

Dear forebears, I am deeply grieved to report our decline. I confess, at times, we have been guilty of squandering our inheritance. I am sorry. Susanna, we desire a return to the intimate devotion to the Lord which you knew in your Epworth home. John and Charles, we need an abundant effusion of the Holy Spirit, just as you received in your own day. Hugh and William, we long to see again a move of the Holy Spirit as you saw on Mow Cop. We need all the inspiration you can offer to slow the curve of decline.

Conference, I submit to you that the only way we can slow down the curve of decline and experience revival is through a repetition of the day of Pentecost. We need an encounter of the Holy Spirit in our worship, a deep sense of the intimate love of God, which then flows into the lives of others through evangelism, Christlike living, social concern and renewal.

The backdrop

Friends, I want to draw our attention to the reading we have heard from the book of Acts. The overall message of this passage is about discipleship, our relationship with God and our worship of him.

To offer a bit of context, prior to this event, Jesus gave his disciples a commandment:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. ...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from

their sight. ... They went upstairs to the room where they were staying. ... They all joined together constantly in prayer.” Acts 1:4-5, 8-9, 13-14 (New International Version).

Fast forward. During the Jewish festival of Pentecost, all Jesus’ disciples were gathered together. The city of Jerusalem was alive with people from all walks of life, including Jews who had settled there from all over the empire. It was a special day, but Jesus’ followers were separate from the festivities. They knew about Jesus and the prophet Joel’s prophecy. They wanted to be found in the presence of God. They were determined not to leave ‘the same’, as in the song *Gold* by Jesus Culture: “Find me here in Your presence I’m not leaving the same”.

Jesus Culture

Find me here in Your presence
I’m not leaving the same
Let Your refining fire
Purify me again
Let the weight of Your glory
Bring me back to my knees
O God come with revival
You can start it in me
You can start it in me
You can start it in me.

Personal relationship with God

The disciples wanted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit came like a mighty wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. They discovered that God seeks an intimate relationship with us.

The question is, as a Church, do we nurture intimate relationships with God enough? Like on the day of Pentecost, we need the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit. I thank God there were some circuits during the pandemic who held weekly prayer meetings via Zoom and still continue to do so today.

Our worship of God

Conference, what is the focus of our worship? Do we really allow space for the Holy Spirit to operate? Do we allow space to hear God's voice?

The questionnaire responses suggest that, in some of our churches, our worship of God lacks depth and does not incorporate the Holy Spirit. It was also suggested that there is little room for spontaneity and dynamism, which might make it difficult for us to appeal to the younger generation.

Regular Bible studies and prayer meetings have become a thing of the past. We need regular fellowship and prayer groups during the week. We need to find ways to revive the things that were the bedrock of Methodism. We need a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The questionnaire feedback also revealed that people feel something has got to change within our style of worship. Generally, people would welcome greater flexibility in our worship, which could enable more space for the Holy Spirit.

Candidates' outcomes 2021/2022 report

According to the census research in 2019, over half of those aged from 20 to 29 reported no religion. It worries me that in our Methodist churches we could only attract 2 people below the age of 39 last year into full-time ministry. It begs the question, why are our young people not interested in our ministry? Is our current Candidating process fit for purpose? Perhaps we need a radical change.

It pains me when I think about the missing generation in our churches. Where are the young Wesleys of our generation? Where is the spirit of Mama Susanna and the Primitive Methodist movement of our generation? It worries me that we appear to be fixated on the old ways of doing things when clearly they are not working. We need to challenge the status quo of our Church.

Creative and collaboration

We need ideas and decisions that give hope to our future. Every church or circuit needs a decent-sized collaborative team of preachers and worship leaders every week or rotating



regularly to help provide consistency, and give the church the confidence to try new songs. I can almost hear Charles Wesley saying to us, what has happened to our worship? We need to revive and rekindle the Wesleyan fire. We need manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to invest more into our worship. We need a cluster of churches to come together to form a team ministry, in order to provide services in strategic locations to reach a missing generation. Sustainable, Spirit-filled, creative – this has got to be a key focus over the coming year. We need to inspire more young people to get into ministry and leadership and this may just be the way to do that. A church that does not put young people at the forefront of their worship is a dying church.

Church unity

Notice that on the day of Pentecost, the people in the upper room were of one accord – there was unity. Boundaries and walls were broken.

Jesus Culture

New hope, new life, new wine
We come together with
One breath, one voice, one cry
Jesus our Saviour
Jesus our Saviour
Jesus our Saviour.

Friends I submit to us that we need to come together with one voice.

The Revd Loraine Mellor said during her presidential address in 2017 that: “Our role is to be connexional as that is our gift, and to use the resources of each other, each church, each circuit, each district, and to stop reinventing the wheel.”

Conference, we need a collective mindset. We need teamwork. It is imperative we share

our resources. I believe this is one way to achieve church growth and take some of the load off our local preachers and ministers. We need to release our ministers to be ministers and not become bogged down by property maintenance. We need to shift the focus of our Church from committees to worship. We need to change the culture of how we do things. Why are we not getting a group of young people who are on fire for God to fill the gap in our preaching plan or evangelism? Why not trust them to bring something new? Why not invest more in them? This is just my view and you may disagree. We need to be more creative. We need to trust our lay workers and people more.

Notice the process that led to the day of Pentecost – from salvation to transformation and then to empowerment. In the 2019 census, an estimated 51% of the population reported their religion as Christian; this represents a decline of 8.3% since the 2011 census. Also, in 2019, 38.4% of people reported having no religion – meaning an increase of over 13% since the 2011 census.

Evangelism

We need to develop a more authentic message about the gospel. We need to revive the band and class meetings (or at least modernise them), apply a Methodist Way of Life in a non-prescriptive way through house groups and not just in the pulpit, to help disciples and transform individuals to transform their community. We need to create more leadership programmes to equip new leaders to run house groups. What is the point of planting churches if we don't have the core foundations in place?

After the day of Pentecost, the disciples went on to evangelise and as many as 3,000 became followers of Jesus on a single occasion. So what is evangelism? Evangelism

comes from a biblical Greek word that literally means good news. All Christians – not just some – are called to listen for, speak of and live out the good news.

You see, when God wants to bring salvation to a community, the first thing he does is bring it to individuals. He then uses those individuals to become a symbol of salvation through transformation in the community. Lastly, he empowers them through a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Manifestation of the Holy Spirit is evangelistic. Conference, I propose that we need this in our evangelism.

As a Church and society, we have become over dependent on the strength of the flesh, over dependent on our human wisdom, over dependent on books instead of the Bible. You see any Church that ignores the power of the Holy Spirit will plummet into dissolution.

Conference, how is our worship helping us to develop as disciples? Is there evangelism when we meet together? Is our evangelism inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit? Is it deeply rooted in the word of God? As a Church, we feel inadequate in the area of evangelism and the impact on our Christian witness is very apparent. We need to connect to Christ in such a transformative way that his light burning through us will draw others from all around. Conference, we must be people of worship. We must be a Church of sound teaching.

We have much to offer the world, but we need the power of the Holy Spirit in everything. You see, mighty works have a voice and it is very loud, especially when it comes to evangelism.

“Set yourself on fire with passion and the whole world will come and see you burn.” This is one of the most famous things that John Wesley appears never to have said, but still holds true today.

Conclusion

I look forward to the day when fasting with prayer at the Conference will be the norm. I look forward to the day when churches and circuits will hold regular prayer meetings. I look forward to the day when we will have a bold message about the gospel. I look forward to the day when we will revive the band and class meetings and meaningfully commit to our Methodist Way of Life. I look forward to the day when our worship will help us to develop as disciples. I look forward to the day when our evangelism will be inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit and deeply rooted in the word of God. I look forward to the day when there will be unity in churches, denominations and endless cooperation.

I look forward to the day when God’s prophecy will be fulfilled again. When God will pour out his Spirit on our Church; when our sons and daughters will prophecy; and all will see visions and dream dreams. **Amen and God bless you!**