

Two yearly Conference

A discussion paper for Parishes, Boards, Synods and Hui Poari

Following a most helpful debate at Conference 2008 it was clear that there are a number of important issues to be clarified. This paper will seek to address those issues, to allow further conversation to occur throughout the church prior to Conference 2009.

The first Methodist Conference met in 1744 under John Wesley, who gathered together his assistants (both ordained ministers and itinerant lay preachers) to confer together about 'what to teach, how to teach, and what to do, i.e. how to regulate doctrine, discipline and practice.'

The governing body of the Methodist Church of New Zealand is the Annual Conference. Its decisions are final and binding upon both the ordained and lay members of the Church.

In addition to acting as the ultimate decision making body for the Methodist Church a number of acts of worship: Ordinations, Inductions of President and Vice President and celebrations of service are added. For some it is these times of celebration which are the most significant, while for the Board and Committees and Conference itself it is the business sessions which are the prime focus.

When Conference is not in session, it is the President who has the capacity to act as Conference following appropriate consultation with the President's Committee of Advice.

What lies behind the suggestion of a two yearly Conference?

The main reasons are:

- Human cost
- Financial cost
- Difficulty in arranging
- Unavailability of 'traditional' venues
- Creating the space for new initiatives.

Human Cost

In a church which has both fewer presbyters and greater workday demands being placed on lay people there is a significant 'human cost' to preparing reports and business for Conference. Furthermore there is only a brief window to carry out these tasks as reports are required for August Synods in early July. It is not only difficult to prepare reports and consult widely in the time frame but also the time required detracts from other responsibilities. So a cycle of annual Conferences does not give the church space to carefully consider matters of importance or develop new ways of attending to its life and relating to the wider community.

Almost every year there are reports which come to Conference which have not been fully discussed at Synods and in parishes. Often these are sent back for further work. This is frustrating for everyone and not a good use of resources.

Creating the space for new initiatives.

This is the most significant reason. If for one year all the energy and time which goes into planning for Conference could be used to dream and imagine and engage in mission in our communities, then what might happen?

Why do human beings so readily keep on doing the same thing over and over again, yet expecting a different result?

Financial Cost

Conference is becoming increasingly expensive to run. Gone are the days when most representatives were billeted and self catering is no longer possible. The budget for 2008 Conference in Manukau was \$105,000. This doesn't include the cost of travel and accommodation. It is estimated that the total cost is equivalent to one quarter of the Connexional budget. [Approx \$200,000] Is this the best use of the resources of Parishes and Boards?

Difficulty in arranging.

The decision was made 10 -15 years ago to have Conference primarily in Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch. Not only is the cost of getting to other centres much higher, but also the facilities for Conference and expertise to arrange Conference are not available.

This means that Christchurch and Wellington have to arrange a Conference every three years which is a significant burden upon those Synods. It was also suggested last time we were in Auckland city, that the city was too hard to get around to make it a good venue.

A two yearly conference would give some relief to local arrangement committees and may also make it possible on occasion to use professional facilities as parishes and boards could budget over two years. This was essentially what happened when we went to Rotorua. A good venue, but too expensive for every year.

Unavailability of 'traditional' venues

Access to Pitt St and Durham St during the week make them unsuitable venues. Few of our churches have sufficiently large enough facilities to provide both Conference and meal space. It is becoming increasingly more difficult and more expensive to find good venues.

Summary

In summary then the vision behind a two yearly Conference is to use the resources of the church better and to give space for creative thinking and action.

Implications of a two yearly Conference

Those who spoke at Conference highlighted a number of potential impacts of a two yearly Conference.

- Ordination?
- Isn't Conference the 'glue' that holds us together?
- Stationing?

What about Ordinations?

There are two possible options.

- (a) Ordinations are at Conference every second year. This would mean that some would spend an additional year on probation, but all would be ordained as part of Conference our most significant national gathering.
- (b) Ordinations at significant regional events in the year that conference doesn't meet. The President who officiates at the service, representing the whole church, could carry out that role at significant services in Synods around the country. This would enable a stronger involvement of local parishes and is similar to the practice in the UK where Ordinations occur in a number of venues.

Isn't Conference the 'glue' that holds us together?

There is no question that for those who attend regularly there is a real sense of family. We enjoy being together. We enjoy catching up with friends old and new. This is important for the 300 who gather, but of little relevance to the majority in our parishes. Few people jump at the chance to be the Conference Rep and when did a parish have to choose between potential reps. A two yearly conference would allow for significant local events in the alternate years providing new focal points and opportunity for many more people to be involved.

What about Stationing?

The approval of the stationing sheet is an important part of Conference. However in the more complex world we inhabit there are many appointments now being finalized at other times of the year. The important thing is that the process is clear, transparent and fair. Also moving the stationing process away from Conference could allow Conference to be held in the September School holidays for example. This could mean that we could use the facilities of a boarding school or university.

Summary

Yes it would be different only having Conference every two years, but rather than diminishing our life it could provide opportunity to express being in Connexion in new ways which would mitigate for any real or perceived loss.

Suggested Recommendations

1. That Conference be held every second year from 2011.
2. That Ordinations continue to be held at Conference.
3. That Stationing, on the recommendation of the Stationing Committee, be approved by the President, in years when the Conference doesn't meet

Responses to this paper to be sent by August 21st 2009 to:

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