

# Methodist Church Committee for Gender Justice

## Theological Basis

The Christian understanding of what it is to be human begins with the conviction that male and female together are created in the image of God. In Christ, God's intentions for humanity are clearly declared and displayed as including justice, equality and inclusiveness. In Christ there is neither male nor female; all are one in Christ. Christians are called to live as disciples of Christ, following his example by offering dignity to all, empowering the weak, challenging injustice. All these things and more are ways in which the Good News of God's all-embracing love is proclaimed to a world which, though suffering and damaged is still fundamentally God's good creation.

The Church, as the body of Christ, can be true to its calling "to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission" only if it strives, in its own life, to show this concern for justice, equally and inclusively. The Committee for Gender Justice is one of the ways in which the Methodist Church seeks to be true to this calling.

In the words of the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *"Without progress in the situation of women, there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name if they exclude the female half of humanity. The struggle for women's equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human beings, and all societies."*

"In the present cultural climate, Christian commitment to justice will have to risk the charge of 'political correctness'" comments Clive Marsh, Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee, writing in a personal capacity. The term 'political correctness' has become a weapon used against those who work for change and justice. If we take seriously the gospel call, we need to move beyond a limited understanding of 'correctness' to a full understanding of justice. We offer some definitions below and invite members of the Conference to engage in this process by articulating their own descriptions of justice.

- Justice is... what God requires of us (Micah 6).
- Justice is... love manifested at the social level.
- Justice is... about all people being valued, their needs and abilities being recognised.
- Justice is... to be brought to the nations by God's servant (Isaiah 42:1-4).
- Justice is... intended by God to 'roll down like waters' (Amos 5:24).
- Justice is... necessary for real peace to flourish.
- Justice isÉ linked by Jesus with mercy, faith and love (Matt 23:23 and Luke 11:42).

## Crown of thorns

Alongside the important structural issues about gender which need to be addressed in the Church, there are the day to day 'thorns' endured by women and men. Some of these are illustrated below:

"People pity me looking after the children; they think I should get a 'proper' job" (male church member).

"You can imagine how it felt when they said, 'would wives of the new ministers now come forward to receive some flowers'" (minister's husband).

"Our minister must have had a nervous breakdown or why else is his wife the Superintendent."

"The song 'Father God, I wonder' has such a good tune - it's a shame about the line 'now I am your son'."

"I walked out of the service - I've never been anywhere before where the language was so male or exclusive" (occasional worshipper).

A Women's Network President was not included in the printed schedule of invited guests but male guests were.

"We've *had* a woman minister for five years, now we should have a man" (Circuit Steward).

### **Work Undertaken**

The Committee for Gender Justice is committed to promoting gender justice and equality within the Methodist Church and has therefore, in accordance with its terms of reference (see Appendix 1):

- Consulted with all main UK Christian denominations as to their policies and practices regarding gender issues;
- Scrutinised reports of the Methodist Church and its committees, and published guidance notes for the use of committee convenors and report writers;
- Established a database of theological work, to be available as a list on the Committee's website;
- Encouraged the development of an Equal Opportunities Policy for the Church;
- Run a workshop at the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women Conference;
- Consulted with the Revd David Gamble regarding appropriate responses to pastoral issues and sexual harassment. The support and follow up required by such incidents is not within the remit or means of the Committee. It was very helpful that David was able to meet with the group and discuss the current and future arrangements for dealing with these matters. We have been able to refer a number of individuals to appropriate sources of help;
- Designed web pages, to be part of the Methodist Church website;
- Provided training for Committee members;
- Consulted with institutions offering training to foundation students and student ministers;

- Undertaken a gender monitoring exercise and consultation (see below).

**The Gender Monitoring exercise 2000-2001 was undertaken in response to the following term of reference:**

*"É. ensuring the establishment of procedures to monitor the appointment of lay and ordained women with a view to enabling their full participation in formal structures."*

Research was undertaken, using the Minutes of Conference as the key source, in three areas.

### **1. Numbers of active male and female presbyters and deacons within each category of ministry**

#### **Percentage breakdown of Totals 2000-2001**

- 2449 Presbyters 23% Female 77% Male
- 108 Deacons 76% Female 24% Male
- 625 Circuit Superintendents 10% Female 90% Male
- 252 Single-Gender Circuits 6% Female 94% Male
- 72 Single-Station Circuits 14% Female 86% Male
- 112 Ministers in Local App't 60% Female 40% Male
- 46 Ministers Without App't 48% Female 52% Male

The overall number of presbyters is not the number available for stationing - it contains Recognised and Regarded Ministers, Ministers in Local Appointment and those in other categories of ministry. It presents a basic picture of the overall proportion of men and women exercising presbyteral ministry in the name of the Methodist Church. This provides a benchmark figure (23% female) against which to measure other ratios. If, however, you reduce the number by including only those available for stationing, the percentage of women increases - which is good news; the bad news is the effect that this has when applying it as a benchmark against which to measure other ratios.

### **2. Numbers of women and men involved with key connexional committees**

#### **Conference-Appointed Committees 2000-2001**

- Conference/Policy 51 Female 98 Male
- Order and Pastoral 118 Female 167 Male
- Trusteeships 29 Female 87 Male
- Education 18 Female 49 Male
- Other Bodies 20 Female 41 Male

- Finance 8 Female 73 Male

Many people serve on small committees, perhaps with up to ten members. If we begin to talk about representation of gender or any other group, it can seem awkward or irrelevant to adjust committee membership. It doesn't perhaps feel important that there are six men and four women; after all that is almost half. Yet if we group these committees by category, we see a clear picture emerge. We can see that there are areas of decision making in the Methodist Church where women are significantly under-represented.

Of the 24 committees listed in the Minutes of Conference only two have more women than men. Eight of the committees are without an ordained woman and three without an ordained man. Four of the committees are without a lay woman and one without a lay man.

It is not clear from the lists in the Minutes who it is that takes a leadership role within committees. Where a chair/convenor is identified, 2.5 out of 21 are female (.5 being where two people share one post). Where a secretary is identified one in ten is female.

Again, the issue of being 'small' or isolated can apply; after all if you work with a standard committee model you can have only one chairperson who will have to be either male or female. When looking at the bigger picture, however, a trend is revealed.

### **3. The gender split within the Connexional Team 2000-2001**

- Of those listed in our Church's national directory, 68% are male.
- Of the 80 full-time staff not one is a female presbyter. (4% female ordained is made up of deacons.)
- Of the 26 part-time staff one is a female presbyter.

These figures are more striking since the findings of the National Church Life Profile, particularly as Methodism has a higher female to male ratio than the national average gender split in churches which is 65% female and 35% male.

### **The Monitoring Report Conclusion**

The Report concludes that the Methodist Church in Great Britain is suffering from institutional sexism.

#### ***Institutional sexism:***

*the collective failure of an organisation to provide appropriate services and opportunities to people because of their gender.*

An organisation that suffers from 'institutional sexism' is not full of sexist individuals who set out to prevent women or men from fully participating. Neither is it an organisation that deliberately or maliciously sets out to be sexist. More often than not historical factors create the situation; it is the willingness to look at the organisation as a whole and to ask painful questions that will allow change.

The Report's conclusion should make us all uncomfortable but will it cause sufficient discomfort to lead to action? By establishing the Committee for Gender Justice, the Methodist Church has made a commitment to enabling those currently excluded from the Church's decision making to play a full part in Methodism's future.

Monitoring gender ratios is not an end in itself but a tool to help the Church have a clear picture of the way things are for women and men in the Church. To be effective, monitoring needs to take place at a number of levels and over an extended period of time. The Committee is encouraged by the warm and positive response of the Methodist Council to suggestions for future monitoring, including:

- North Lancashire and Nottingham and Derby Districts to undertake studies of gender ratios in various contexts of District and circuit life;
- Following up possibilities of District's self-monitoring, perhaps by a standing agenda item at District Policy Committees;
- The monitoring of numbers of women willing to be circuit Superintendents and those subsequently matched in one specific stationing year;
- A further broad-based monitoring exercise in 2003-2004, allowing comparison with figures in *The Cry of the Beloved* and the 2000-2001 Report;
- The dissemination of ideas and examples of good practice revealed by the consultation about the 2000-2001 Report.

## **Conclusion**

The Committee's work is presently carried out on a minimal budget. In order to sustain and develop this work we would ask the Methodist Council to look at how this work will be resourced and appropriately located in the future.

## **Resolutions**

1. The Conference receives the Report.
2. The Conference directs the Methodist Council to:
  - a. establish how the work of the Committee for Gender Justice shall be resourced in the future
  - b. consider where this work shall take place within the structures of the Connexional Team.

## **Appendix 1: Committee for Gender Justice Terms of Reference**

This Committee aims to facilitate the Church in its task of addressing institutional sexism and raising gender awareness across the whole of the Methodist Church in Britain. The Committee will work to promote gender justice and equality by the following means:

1. Ensuring contact points are available for people wishing to raise issues of sexism as experienced within Methodism.
2. Responding to and collating the issues of institutional sexism which have been raised and their implications.
3. Ensuring the establishment of procedures to monitor the appointment of lay and ordained women with a view to enabling their full participation in formal structures.
4. Ensuring strategies are developed through the Church to address those issues which are identified.
5. Promoting affirmative action including the training, developing and consciousness-raising of women in order to develop their full potential in the Methodist Church.
6. Scrutinising statements, reports, policy and papers for adoption by the Methodist Conference with a view to assisting the Church to avoid the perpetuation of institutional sexism.
7. Supporting the implementation of any Equal Opportunities Policy of the Methodist Church.
8. Facilitating the development of a theological base for the critique of power relationships within the Church with particular reference to gender.
9. Receiving reports from Methodist Women's Forum, Women's Network of the Methodist Church and others involved in various issues.
10. Relating to and consulting with other relevant bodies.
11. Presenting reports to the Methodist Council as appropriate.
12. Commissioning specific relevant pieces of work.

The Committee will meet at least three times a year, members will participate in appropriate training, much work will be delegated to volunteer task groups, and the Committee will nominate a representative to the PCCE Committee. With appropriate reference to the policy on inclusiveness in connexional committees, the core membership of the Committee is twelve people, including men, committed to the terms of reference and to gender justice. Four of these members are nominated by Women's Network, and four by the Methodist Women's Forum.

The Committee was appointed in February 2000. The Council will in future, as appropriate, offer to the Conference proposals arising from its work.