

Dear Friends,

Many years ago, I took a course with the Open University in Social Sciences. It was enlightening in many ways. One of the key themes was 'Continuity and Change' and this has been a recurring topic for reflection for me throughout the years. When we look at baby photos of people we know, we may remark how their adult features are recognisable in them as babies, without for a moment denying the changes that maturity has brought. There are watershed moments and periods of development that do bring profound and lasting changes to each growing individual, nevertheless the DNA coding remains the same and some facial features still hint at the past. This is even sometimes true across the generations, when we look at old photos of our family.

It is very possible that we will look back on the Covid-19 lockdown as bringing about a step change in the life of our churches, and the wider society. Having said that, one lesson to draw is that forecasting trends is an unsure process, made complex by things we do not even know that we do not know. A glance at the changing forecasts for the decline or growth of air travel, GDP or even world population give us several examples of this. However, in the short to medium term it is more than likely that for all our respect for the past, things are unlikely to completely return to the old normal very soon. There will be continuity but there will also be change.

The decision on whether or not to reopen our churches, and when and how to manage it, lies with the local trustees acting in accordance with national guidance. These are big responsibilities which we will all take seriously to balance the care of souls with the physical safety of our people.

In the wake of Methodist Conference, I took out a subscription the Methodist Recorder, which I have not read for some time. There was indeed continuity, with the familiar names of some contributors. There were also changes – new contributors, less advertising, and a 'worship at home' page. For me, the key benefit of the edition was the connectedness with what is going on in other circuits. The front page on 17th July reviewed the response to possible reopening across the Connexion, with the headline, "*Majority of churches 'not yet' opening*". The editorial comments, "*Methodism has never been a one size fits all denomination and we must recognise that that will be even more the case in the coming months*".

The requirement to look after those amongst us who for whatever reason have greater vulnerability is a real one. Christian teaching about the Church being the Body of Christ (Roman 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4) makes it clear that a special duty of care is owed to the weaker parts of the body. Church Councils in discussing reopening their churches will, I am sure, wish also to discuss the requirement to fully include in the life of the church those members who still cannot attend church buildings. There are gifts and graces amongst those who need to take particular care that the church can benefit from as we continue to find our way forward.

In a sense there is continuity in this situation, but there is also change, because we have seen in the lockdown that there are ways to minister to people and receive ministry from people who are in their own homes. I would make a plea to our churches, in the joys and challenges of reopening, to take seriously the continuing part in the life of our churches, to be played by people who need to take special care. Let us be creative in finding safe ways in which to include them and harness their abilities.

In saying this, I do so with a confidence in the lay leadership of our circuit and local churches. We have seen many examples over the lockdown period of the church acting as the Body of Christ. I do thank God that our Methodists have a remarkable commitment to their church fellowship and to one another, with members caring for one another often in quiet, unseen ways.

As information filters out from Methodist Conference, we are reminded that we belong to something bigger than our local context, and it will be clear that the Connexional year ahead will present both challenges and opportunities. There are difficult topics which will require consultation. It has been said, *'the more things change, the more they stay the same'* (Jean Baptist Alphonse Karr). However, we can find continuity in our shared fellowship, our shared heritage of creeds, prayers and hymns and we can rejoice that we can trace the hand of God even with the changes. After we too are called to change: "Changed from glory into glory, Till in Heav'n we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise."

God bless you,

Keith.

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent minister.