

## **The newly inducted Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, Rachel Lampard MBE, has called for the Church to stop ‘problematizing’ and trying to ‘fix’ the poor, but “address the problems and pain that not having enough money brings.”**

Speaking to the Conference gathered in London today, Rachel Lampard said: *“We live in a world where we need ‘oceans of justice’, where in the UK more than 1 in 4 children live in poverty, and 2 million people die each year because of a lack of safe water or sanitation.*

*“When we look at the poor and those in need of justice, do we see a problem – or do we recognise the face of Jesus Christ? Sadly we have ‘problematized’ the poor so much that we choose to look for their faults rather than address the problems and pain that not having enough money brings.”*

Ms Lampard celebrated the Methodist desire to get ‘stuck’ in to help people and encouraged them to tackle injustice, not by trying to ‘fix’ people, but by listening and learning from people who are seen as ‘fragile’.

*“We are all fragile. Deep down, or perhaps not so very deep, we have flaws, fears, hurts, struggles. God doesn’t come along and say ‘Right, I’ll sort you out and make you into a line of perfect Christians.’ Rather God chooses vulnerability, precariousness, fragility.*

*“By holding each other’s fragility and vulnerability we tread into precious, holy spaces. It is then that we see the thousand hidden injustices in our world.*

*“The Church is committed to justice. This isn’t some optional extra. This is part of the mission of the Church. To be involved not only in the alleviation of human suffering, but also in the eradication of the roots of that suffering.”*

Ending her address, Ms Lampard issued the challenge: “A commitment to justice and holiness changes us and will change the Church, if we have the courage.”

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## **Vice-Presidential Address**

Mr President, members of the Conference, I rang my husband Steve last year from Southport to tell him that I had been designated as Vice President. After the initial congratulations and shared excitement, there was a pause. "You know it feels a bit like it did when you told me you were pregnant." He said: "I’m very excited, and a bit scared. I know we’ve got about 9 months to get used to the idea. And, although it’s going to turn my life upside down, I’m conscious that you’re the one who’s going to go through most of the pain."

And just like pregnancy and bringing up children, I feel the vice presidency is going to be a family affair (though hopefully with fewer nappies). My children will be at home skyping me or hopefully occasionally travelling with me to see bits of Methodism beyond their home church; my husband, friends, parents and parents-in-law will be offering invaluable help with the childcare and school runs to enable me to travel; and then there is the wider family of Methodists and Christian sisters and brothers who I know will be praying for Roger and me as we embark on these new roles which have been entrusted to us. Thank you.

Before I go on I want to just tell you about what my children call “my shakies”. I have a condition called an essential tremor, which means that my hands shake, often quite a lot. You’ll find this week and this year that I’m not good at holding papers without a lectern, I can’t distribute the elements for communion, my colleagues will tell you I’m absolutely lethal if you give me a cup of tea and a saucer. And you really don’t want me offering to do brain surgery on you. Give me a lectern, give me a mug, and I’m absolutely fine.

At the beginning of this year’s Methodist Conference, I’m mindful of the words of the prophet Amos who offers a serious reflection for the faithful on how we should use the gift of our time together (and here I’m using words from *The Message*)

*“I can’t stand your religious meetings.  
I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions.  
I want nothing to do with your religious projects,  
your pretentious slogans and goals.  
I’m sick of your fundraising schemes,  
your public relations and your image making.  
I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?”*

*Do you know what I want?  
I want justice – oceans of it  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want."*

And we live in a world where we need "oceans of justice".

- In the UK more than 1 in 4 children live in poverty, and 300,000 of them faced destitution, the severest form of poverty that we thought had been banished
- 1 in every 113 people in the world is a refugee or is internally displaced and more than 3,700 refugees are thought to have died crossing the Mediterranean in 2015 alone
- Water scarcity affects 4 in 10 people, and climate change is making rainfall even more variable
- Every 90 seconds a child dies because of a water-related disease, and 2 million people die each year because of a lack of safe water, sanitation or hygiene
- We know that there are places around the world where people of all faiths face persecution, torture and death because of their beliefs
- And today, just outside where we are meeting, thousands of people are meeting in protest. However you voted we live in a society that appears divided, ill at ease with itself and uncertain of the future. And where people who look or sound different from the majority population are reporting that levels of abuse are rising.

And this of course has only highlighted and emphasised the racism which is already for many a daily occurrence.

So what should we as Christians, and what should the Methodist Church, be doing about the injustices in our world? And why is it important to hold together *holiness and justice*, the theme which Roger Walton and I have chosen for the year?

If one understanding of holiness is those times, places or people where we recognise God breaking through, then I had a profoundly holy moment walking down Oxford Street as a teenager. It was in the late 1980s, at a time when the numbers of people who were visibly homeless was rising. Walking past all the glitzy consumerism, I was following a man. He was a rough sleeper, carrying two large bags, a shabby coat tied with string, shuffling along the street, oblivious to the bustle all around him. He stopped by a bin, and started to fish in it. He pulled out the packaging from a fast food restaurant, and opened up the carton. Inside were the remains of some chicken bones. He put a bone in his mouth and started to gnaw it.

I felt, as I feel now, as if I had been punched in the stomach. I felt the roar of the prophets – this is not right! This is not how God wants it! This person is created in God's image – and God wants justice, oceans of it. At the time I was worshipping at the Hinde St, the West London Mission, and later spent time during my year out before university volunteering at its Lambeth Walk In day centre, where I met and drank hundreds of cups of tea with many more people just like the man on Oxford St. Each one of them infinitely precious and created in God's image.

We sometimes worry about what makes up the Methodist DNA. We joke about our love of committees. But a large part of our DNA is just getting stuck in. We respond to the need we see around us and we do something. According to our statistics for mission, there are over 7,000 examples of Methodist churches around Britain involved in community projects, many of them supporting people who experience poverty or are marginalised or are lonely. Running foodbanks, nightshelters, and drop-ins for people in need. We support charities with Methodist roots, such as Action for Children and All We Can. And of course we don't just do things that have a Methodist label - each of us responds to the need we see around us with and through people and organisations of all faiths and none. But Methodists do things, we get stuck in. We see things are not right, and we act because we are responding to people who are created in God's image.

This is why for me "holiness and justice" is such an exciting theme to be able to explore. These things are not polar opposites – the holy huddle versus the activist justice-seeker – but they are inextricably intertwined. We are delighted to have worked with the artist Ric Stott on the booklet, *Holiness and Justice*, which explores the intertwining and challenge of our presidential theme.

It's not a matter of loving God first and then as an outcome loving our neighbour: it's less linear and much more circular. Responding to God's love for us, seeing the sacredness of creation because God loves it, we love God and we love our neighbour. In loving our neighbour, and seeking justice for them, our love for God finds concrete expression, it's enriched, and we find a closeness with God. Because God has commanded us to walk with God "*in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice*".

And it is that closeness, that drawing nearer to the being of God that is holiness. The inner and the outer manifestations of God's love cannot be separated or take place sequentially.

I have attended a Methodist church all my life, I've been a member for nearly 30 years, and have been privileged to work for the Methodist Church for over 15 years now. In my work I've been challenged to focus on what it means for God's people, gathered in the Methodist Church, to do justice, specifically in the context of politics. I know that our Church is committed to justice. But today I'd like to offer a challenge: how do we embody God's command to *do* justice?

When we look at the poor and those in need of justice, do we see a problem – or do we recognise the face of Jesus Christ?

Let me take the risk of starting with a bit of politics and talk about poverty. I think our society, our government and our media have increasingly problematised people living in poverty. It has become common to talk about the "pathways to poverty", of family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, dependency, addiction and serious personal debt.

Now it's true that you will often find these problems amongst families who experience poverty. But you will also find the same problems amongst families who are wealthy. There are undoubtedly problems in our society. Problems that can have drastic consequences – especially for poorer families. But these are not the *causes* of or pathways of poverty; in reality they are a mixture of causes, effects and the messiness of life that rich and poor must face alike.

And have you noticed that they are all presented as the fault of the individuals? *Your* relationship broke down; *you* failed your exams; *you* don't work; *you* are addicted; *you* are in debt. Being in poverty is no longer about being poor. It's about being at fault.

Let's listen instead to someone in poverty describe what poverty means to them: *"Poverty is not being able to do the things that are necessities. Things that are important like gas and electric, showers, bus fares, and having to worry that your daughter has a hole in her shoe. She needs new shoes and I don't have the money. What do I do? Do I get the gas or do I get the shoes?"*

We have problematised the poor so much that we choose to look for the mother's faults rather than address the problem and the pain that not having enough money brings to her.

And surely this is at the heart of our challenge in responding as Christians to God's passionate call for justice. In the Bible we read that we encounter Jesus in three ways: through the Holy Spirit, through bread and wine, and through the poor - *"Truly, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

We tend to be quite good at the first two of these. But when we see people in poverty do we see the face of Jesus Christ, and want to listen and learn – or do we see "them" as a problem? Do we want to fix "them" and sort "them" out? Fixes that cost "them" and not "us"; that change "them", but don't transform "us"?

Around the country we are seeing the emergence of Poverty Truth Commissions. The first one was in Glasgow, and it took its motto from post-apartheid South Africa – 'nothing about us, without us, is for us'. In Poverty Truth Commissions, two groups of people are brought together. There are some of an area's most influential citizens, and people who experience the daily grind of poverty. Titles are left at the door, and everyone's experience is welcome. The Commissions work on the basis that people who experience poverty are able to shape the solutions, and not just be recipients of the uninformed ideas of others, otherwise nothing will really alter. So they have looked at the reality of the poverty gap - why things actually cost more when you're poor, they've looked at welfare reform, and why so many people who are in work are nevertheless still in poverty. Everybody gets a space in the room and everyone is able to contribute to solutions.

And the Poverty Truth Commission in Scotland has been helping to change the way that that nation approaches poverty. The Scottish Parliament published a report on poverty in Scotland, for example, in conjunction with the Poverty Truth Commission – can you imagine a government co-publishing a report with people who were poor?! And senior officials in the Scottish Government's Social Justice Team each have a mentor who has direct experience of poverty - which perhaps helps them to have a clearer understanding of the realities of lives lived juggling sparse financial resources.

Martin Johnstone, one of my colleagues at the Church of Scotland, says we often talk about people and communities which we think need sorting out as being “fragile”. And he tells the story of his great grandmother’s wedding tea set, which was always kept safely in the cabinet at home. One day his mother was dusting and she handed young Martin a tea cup to hold. “Take care with that. It’s fragile,” she said. Something being fragile didn’t mean that it was worthless, or needed fixing, or turning into something else. Being fragile meant that it was wonderfully precious in and of itself, to be treasured and held with wonder.

Isn’t that marvellously incarnational? We are all fragile. Deep down, or not so very deep, we have flaws, fears, hurts, struggles. God doesn’t come along and say “Right, I’ll sort you out and make you into a line of perfect Christians.” Rather God chooses vulnerability, precariousness and fragility. He cradles us, like a precious, treasured piece of china. And sent his son, both divine and fully, fragilely, human, to show us how to treasure and love one another. In the amazing poetry of Charles Wesley, “*Our God, contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man*”.

John Wesley had a fierce heart for people in poverty and he said some things which are deeply challenging to us, to our politics and our Church today. He said that “*one great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them.*” And by the way, a person was ‘rich’ by Wesley’s standards if they had “*food and raiment sufficient for himself and his family, and something over*”. Nothing more than that made you rich. God’s love was for absolutely everyone, and early Methodism appealed strongly to those who were poorer. Pope Francis has issued a challenge to today’s church, not just to be a church *for* the poor, but a church *of* the poor.

I wonder if we as a Church sometimes struggle with the urge to fix people, to sort them out, rather than be a church *of* the poor? And how much does this relate to our desire to be the host of every party? Hospitality is a good thing. We can give freely, we can share what God has given us, often sacrificially, to others who have need. But being the host also puts us in a place of control. Our house, our rules. My bat, my ball. Do we really know and understand what it costs people sometimes to step over the threshold, accept our hospitality, our agenda? What would it mean for us to become guests instead? To receive rather than to be in a position of power, where we assume we only need to give? What does doing justice look like when we put ourselves into the hands of others?

Well perhaps it means that we can have a deeper understanding of what people really want and need. We’ve got better at doing this in our justice work in countries other than our own I think. Christian Aid, for example, are good at making sure that we hear more clearly the voices of people from the southern hemisphere, and recently brought people from countries directly affected by climate change to the recent climate conference in Paris. The Methodist charity All We Can identifies partners with whom it wants to work, and then instead of telling them its own priorities, says “What do *you* need to do?” Then it works alongside them to help them achieve their own goals.

Earlier this year I was very privileged to visit the Church of Pakistan. I arrived obviously knowing the stories from the western media about the country, but I left with a profound awareness of bigger story, a truer story. The story of a Christian people who are often poor, misused and facing the threat of violence – indeed the appalling Lahore park bombings took place only two weeks after my visit. Yet it’s also the story of a people who have a life or death commitment to building peace between faiths. We met with senior Muslim and Christian leaders who are committed to faith, friendship and honest inter-faith dialogue in a country where this can bring death. One young man said that without inter-faith relations, his country simply has no hope.

So I learnt a lot. But how did that encounter challenge me? In many ways, but I am still wrestling with two challenges I received during my visit. We heard that Muslims were welcomed to say their prayers in one of the Cathedrals during an interfaith visit because that was thought to be a sign of absolute hospitality, even though Christians are in a vulnerable minority. We still struggle with that as a Church, which is part of the majority faith in our country. And secondly I was challenged about whether we fail to speak up for Christians in Pakistan because we are worried about fragile inter faith relations in this country. How do we hold those two together? The stereotypes I had previously held were challenged by meeting Christians and Muslims in Pakistan. I became more aware of our interconnectedness. I became more aware of the injustices that people are facing. And I realised that I needed to be challenged by the very people that previously I might have dared to speak about.

It is through getting to know people, listening to them, offering practical help and support, that the justice questions can helpfully emerge. When we move past the “what fault can I fix in you” question to the deeper “why” questions:

Why are people sleeping on our church steps at night?

Why are people attending our lunch club so deeply in debt?

Why can't mums afford to school uniforms, even when they are working?

Why are so many people lonely?

Why don't young people have anywhere to go of an evening?

And why do some people feel they have no stake in the economy or political system?

And these are just questions prompted in this country.

We are helped to find answers to these questions over a thousand cups of tea, through knowing people well enough so that we can ask and they can answer with the knowledge that they will be heard, by holding each others' fragility and vulnerability as we tread into very precious, holy spaces. It is then that we start to see the thousand hidden injustices. Injustices that are deeply rooted in the way we organise our society and our world, from the way we talk about people without material resources, to the desperate future faced by the world's poorest crushed by the impact of climate change.

Perhaps we can be cautious of interpreting too literally the proverb “*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.*” Should we be speaking up *for* those who cannot speak for themselves – or rather enabling those who, for whatever reason, cannot speak, to find their voices, to speak for themselves? I hope then we can have the audacity to speak out *together* for justice in our shared world.

Because the Church absolutely does have a role in speaking out. I have been very honoured to work within the Joint Public Issues Team which this year will mark its tenth birthday. Baptists, Methodists, the United Reformed Church and now the Church of Scotland working together on issues of justice and peace – a really effective example of how we can make a difference together ecumenically.

Last year our Churches worked, as you may well know, on the “Rethink Benefit Sanctions” campaign. Why did our denominations start talking about an obscure bit of benefit policy? It was precisely because we heard from local churches running foodbanks about the massive increase in the number of people who were hungry because they'd had their benefits stopped or sanctioned. So conversations with foodbanks, and most powerfully with people who affected, led to new research and policy work. The foreword to the report was written not by the Churches, but by people who had themselves been sanctioned. And as the Churches publicly aligned themselves with those who had been sanctioned, with those who were being blamed for their own poverty, more people spoke out. Friends, colleagues, members of our churches, had the courage to say that they too had been sanctioned. We obviously wanted to talk as well with the people who could change the system, with MPs, but at first we found we couldn't get in. That was until people from local churches, you, started to write to their MPs as part of the campaign. Then we started to be invited into meetings, we began to get a seat at the table. Over the last year there have been marginal improvements to the sanctions regime, but this is a long game and we're keeping up the pressure and it's great to see what happens with the Red Friday's initiative as well. But it's the encounters with people who were the most affected by this situation that gave rise to the justice work of our Church.

This is just one example from my own experience. You will have others. Those times when your encounters, your deep conversations have caused you to ask the question “why?”. When the justice questions break in, through – and because of - the practical actions of our churches.

Because this isn't some optional extra. This is part of the mission of the Church, the kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven. The mission of the Church, God's mission, is to be involved not only in the alleviation of suffering but also in the eradication of the roots of that suffering. Pity and compassion are vital responses, Christian responses, but this experience should also provoke within us the justice response, the why question.

But isn't this just one more thing for churches to do when we're already struggling to hold it together? But many churches are already involved in this “justice” mission in a variety of ways, perhaps unconsciously so. From the full scale foodbank to the drop in coffee morning which offers a haven for exhausted mums or people seeking asylum. To the church members who have a chat with the young people who hang around

on the church wall instead of seeing them as a threat or nuisance. To the prayer group which holds different parts of the community before God in prayer in week.

And then perhaps, like the mustard seed, someone in the congregation asks that why question about someone they meet – 'why are they hungry'; 'why are they homeless'; 'why are they lonely'? – and it becomes like a grit in the oyster, something that can't be ignored, and which can be transformative.

As Dr Helen Cameron of the Salvation Army describes in her book, *Just Mission*, four ways in which we encounter justice through our church life:

- in worship we meet a God whose nature is just; in our scripture and discipleship we encounter God's anger at injustice and the response God requires;
- through our hospitality we build deeper relationships and in our pastoral care we sit alongside those who have been wounded by life, and perhaps start to ask why;
- in our acts of compassion we reflect on the needs we see around us and the injustices that underlie those needs;
- and through our life as God's people we testify that grace and hope fly in the face of the anger, denial and despair that injustice can bring.

And if we are a Church where justice flows, then we will be a place where more people will want to be, where more people will be able to respond to God's call in their lives.

As we seek to draw nearer to God, to see God in the faces of those around us, and particularly in the faces of those who are the poorest and most in need of justice, then our longings for holiness and justice will go hand in hand.

A commitment to justice and holiness will change us and will change the Church, if we have the courage. The courage to be a guest at the party, instead of the host. The courage first to listen instead of speak, to first ask why instead of rushing to offer solutions. But then together to speak and act boldly. The courage together to join in the mission of God that God invites us to share. And we do it all in the knowledge that, by God's grace, **anything** is possible.

*Do you know what I want?  
I want justice – oceans of it  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want.*

**Rachel Lampard  
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