

## **Vice-President's Address to the 2019 Methodist Conference**

**An interview with Bala Gnanapragasam, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, 2018-2019, by Rachel Lampard, Past Vice-President of the Methodist Conference.**

*Interviewer: Madam President, members of Conference, friends, it is a great honour to introduce you to your new Vice-President. Bala – this is an unusual way to present your Vice Presidents address. Why have you chosen to be interviewed in this way?*

One of my great passions in life is conversation. That's the way I make friends. That's the way I share and that's the way I learn.

I'm not a Local Preacher, so an interview is a way a layman can give voice, bear testimony and share what God has done and is doing.

*Interviewer: Let's plunge straight in then! What do you want to bring to the church during the coming year?*

Above all, I want to meet people and to listen to them. I want to engage in the sort of listening and conversation that makes friendships, builds community, and encourages hope. I want to discover what God is calling us to be and to do. I want to meet those people that churches have links with, who build better communities. I want to spend time with and learn from those battling injustice and poverty, whether they are in the church or not, and whatever faith. I want to ask them 'How can we pray for you?'

*Interviewer: So, in that context of listening and conversation, what are the challenges you want to bring to the church?*

I want to share my passionate conviction that as a church we are called to confront injustice and poverty wherever we meet it and to reach out to the limits of our strength, with compassion and practical help, wherever there is suffering.

Here, is an example from the Methodist Church Sri Lanka.

When the terrible civil war in Sri Lanka ended, I met with some former Tamil Tiger fighters. The SL Methodist Church had begun helping them with counselling and livelihood projects.

*"My name is Kandalingam Kubendran. I live in Kokkaticholan. At present I repair electronic items.*

*"I am a former liberation fighter. I did not find the church, the Methodist Church found me, otherwise I might have committed suicide. When we came from prison that's how we felt. The past weighed heavily on us. No one would talk to us. They looked at us as enemies, traitors. The church gave me counselling and helped economically, so I am now sitting here talking to you."*

'I did not find the church, the Methodist Church found me' – those words really struck home. The church embraced this guy and other ex-combatants like him. The church was not judgemental. They helped them move beyond the past and gave him and his community hope and dignity.

That conversation helped me to understand how our efforts can and do make a difference

So I will be sharing more of these stories and will be bringing the message that we need to play our part and make a difference.

*Interviewer: But surely that's easier said than done.*

Well, let me give another example. In April this year, I went to Italy with Churches together in Britain and Ireland to see the work of 'Mediterranean Hope'. It's a small project, set up by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, of which, the Italian Methodists are a vital part. The federation, in conjunction with the Sant' Egidio Community and with the endorsement of the Italian Government, have established Humanitarian Corridors to bring refugees, mostly from Syria, to Italy safely and swiftly and to receive them into a hospitable and caring environment. Since my visit, Italy has a new Government.

Mirella Manocchio the President of the Italian Methodist Church, tells me that;

"The new government policies, could make it very difficult for the churches to respond to the refugee crisis. She confirmed, however, that "Italian churches remain determined to fulfil God's call to love the stranger. The Methodist Church in Italy, wants to continue to work with and for, migrants and refugees at the Ecumenical, National and Local level, through Methodist social projects and through the congregations.

She thanked the British Methodists for their prayers and their show of solidarity.

Here is a sculpture in Lampedusa is called the Gate of Europe. It is a large open gate with nothing to bar entry. This sculpture embodies the attitude of open welcome.

I ask myself, could the UK, could our churches, respond to the current refugee crisis with the same compassion and generosity?

*Interviewer: That's a huge challenge, but there are things we are doing in this country aren't there?*

Yes, there are. And we need to recognise, celebrate and draw inspiration from them, and that's another part of what I want to do this year.

For instance, I have heard of a family of Syrian refugees being looked after by the Methodist Church in Birmingham, they were the first successful Community Sponsorship that the Church has delivered.

And here in Nottingham, and in other parts of the Connexion, Methodists are involved in supporting foodbanks, language cafés for refugees, and joining with other organisations through groups like UK Citizens, to campaign for change and compassion.

There are drop-in centres for Syrian migrants and asylum seekers operating in so many places.

And in a different situation we saw the open welcome that Notting Hill Church gave the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire. Mike Long, the minister persuaded the police to move the cordon so that the Grenfell Tower residence could take refuge in the church in the early hours of the morning of the fire.

We are making a difference. We will continue to make a difference. But. more can be done

*Interviewer: So, your Christian calling is driven by your passion for social justice. It's clear that the kind of individual meetings and conversations you describe have made a deep impression on you and opened up new dimensions of understanding. Can I turn to your work as a Trustee with Christian Aid which led you to another important meeting?*

Alongside 'All We Can', Christian Aid has been profoundly important to me. In my travels, I have had the privilege of meeting people battling poverty and injustice and been able to show solidarity with them.

Not long ago, I visited the Jansaha Programme that works with the Dalit people in Madhya Pradesh in central India. The Dalits are the lowest caste in India. They have been, for centuries, victims of the most horrible injustice, subjected to human rights abuses, rape and violence.

This is my friend Kranti.

Kranti, is from a family and community of manual scavengers. Manual scavenging is unprotected work of cleaning and disposing of human faeces. This is dangerous, unhealthy and dehumanising. It is now illegal. But it still goes on, because they are forced into it or because they have no other way of making a living. Kranti and the Jansaha programme have worked to eradicate this illegal practice.

The Jansaha programme has liberated these women and helped them to find better ways to support their families.

Kranti and the Jansaha team, have been working through the Indian legal system to bring to justice the perpetrators of the atrocities against Dalits. By collecting the evidence, keeping records and preparing victims and witnesses for court appearances. Kranti, a qualified, experienced lawyer, has achieved an impressive record of getting justice for the victims.

Kranti, could have been a well-paid high profile lawyer so, I asked her "why are you doing this"?. She said 'I do this because I am a woman, because I am educated, because I am a Dalit.'

Her response remains an inspiration to me, and deeply humbling. It reduced me to tears.

*Interviewer: Of course, poverty and injustice are present in this country as well.*

Absolutely! We face poverty and injustice at every point of our lives and in every place. So I ask myself. 'Can this be what God wants for his people?'

It is NOT in God's plan that in the past year, 1 in 4 parents in the UK has skipped a meal in order to afford to feed their children

It is NOT in God's plan that people are disempowered and unable to make fundamental choices about their health, education, work and wellbeing.

It is NOT in God's plan that last year in this country, child poverty rose to 4.2 million and it's predicted to get to 5 million by the end of the decade.

As Christians, and especially as Methodists, we cannot ignore it.

I believe, God's plan is that we should all have the ability to flourish and live out the potential God has placed in us. But for too many people, poverty makes this impossible.

And sadly, many churchgoers and the general public have come to believe that the key factors driving poverty in the UK are the personal failings of the poor, especially 'idleness' and living off the state. This is, so wrong. We need to open people's eyes to it!

This thinking is not new. John Wesley challenged it in 1753, so doing something about it is deep in our Methodist DNA. He said:

"...So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are only poor because they are idle.'

'so devilishly wicked'! Powerful words,

A church that abandons the poor is no longer the church of Jesus Christ and we do abandon the poor if we don't challenge these ideas. In Luke 6 verse 20, Jesus says: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God' – we need to recognise, that deep truth – only as we stand in solidarity with the poor can we share the Kingdom of God.

*Interviewer: So, it's there in the Bible and in Methodist tradition – just how might that work out in the everyday life of our churches?*

Let me take the example of the impact of universal credit on the poor. There was a story in a recent edition of the Methodist News that illustrates this, it is from my own Superintendent David Hardman.

"A new father called at my door. He was struggling; waiting for a delayed Universal Credit payment and doing his best to keep his family going."

"The foodbank had helped but it became clear that his baby needed nappies and other supplies, he just didn't have the money to pay for them. The church helped by buying what he needed for his baby, I also made sure he had money on his travel card so he could keep looking for work and avoid being sanctioned. It is a privilege to be able to help families like these – but we shouldn't need to and certainly not so often."

The need is enormous. We need to get at the roots of such injustice.

*Interviewer: Can you give me other examples?*

Yes, these are also about people who are overlooked or forgotten.

I am a trustee of Methodist Homes, born out of Christian concern 75 years ago. We often remember the residents in our care homes but what of the staff? Methodist Homes is a progressive employer. In spite of the significant funding gap, it pays its staff, as a minimum, the Real Living Wage. This is nearly 12% higher, and in London 30% higher, than the Government's National Living Wage. Practical, just and compassionate action, one of the few employers in the sector to have done this.

In addition, Methodist Homes has a hardship fund to provide relief for its workers when they hit hard times and administering this fund has reminded me, again, of the terrible financial pressures on so many working people.

The Methodist Homes response to the reality of the 'working poor' is one we can be proud of.

Another area of concern, very close to my heart is the way we care for people with HIV. I am a trustee of the London HIV Chaplaincy, which has benefitted enormously from Methodist support since its beginnings. We are in the process of publishing a book which tells its story and reflects on the frankly tragic consequences of misguided, often unthinkingly arrogant pastoral care offered to those living with HIV. It is a terrifying but ultimately a hopeful book. Look out for it!

*Interviewer: Bala, I wonder if at this point we could become personal. Introduce us to our new Vice President!*

A 'citizen of the world' – I left Sri Lanka when I left school, to study Electronic Engineering in Southampton. My working life was spent in telecommunications, working with colleagues from all over the world and of different cultures and faiths.

I am a British citizen. Much to my Sri Lankan friends' annoyance, I pass the Tebbit test, an England Cricket supporter!

I am a 'Methodist' from an Anglican family – my mother registered me on the Cradle Roll and like many young men I was drawn into Methodist Church through the youth fellowship – all the pretty girls – I worked my way through to Sunday school teacher. My socialist awareness was born out of the work the youth fellowship did in the slums of Colombo.

I would not be here if not for my mother who was a devout Christian, totally immersed in Jesus. She instilled in me the kingdom values that have stayed with me throughout my life.

*Interviewer: She must have been quite a woman*

She was ... and these family reflections remind me that there are a number of people I wish to thank.

My sister who travelled from Sri Lanka. Thank you Acca for your love and prayers.

My friend President Bishop Rev Asiri Perera representing Methodist Church of Sri Lanka and the Rev Ebenezer Joseph friend and mentor, the General Secretary of the National Christian Council Sri Lanka.

My friends at Southwark and Deptford circuit and of course my friends in the London District who have supported me through the years.

To Michaela, or should I say, Madam President, the creative member of our partnership – we have been friends for many years, she is now a very special companion, who holds me in prayer and keeps me calm.

I join the President in adding my thanks for those who have worked so hard to organise the Conference ... and of course a special thanks to you Rachel for asking the questions!

Finally, thanks go to my family. My children and delightful 5 grandchildren. My dear wife and soulmate, Sylvia, whose abiding love of God and deep commitment to Jesus has sustained her and me.

*Interviewer: So, thank you for introducing us to your family. But I know that another important part of you has been your involvement in politics*

My faith, from its beginnings gave me a passion for social justice, and I have always been deeply involved in politics.

I was catapulted into politics in my late twenties, when the TUC nominated me to serve on the Regional Health Authority where I encountered and challenged health inequalities.

I have stood for election – known failure as well as success; canvassed the neighbourhood, and I still do.

I served two terms as a Labour Councillor in Lewisham, with one of those terms on the Inner London Education Authority.

I saw the difference my obvious non-British name makes to the number of votes received.

I learnt the hard way that social justice gets done by hard slog, team work, building community support, steadily year by year. But that's the way to make a difference.

For instance, a significant achievement that, I played a part in, was writing and implementing the Anti-Racist Statement for Schools, Colleges and Polytechnics in Inner London in the 1980s.

These experiences have led on to a number of other roles such as Chair of University Hospital Lewisham, Vice-Chair of court of Central London Polytechnic, Chair of Change Alliance, an Indian subsidiary of Christian Aid.

*Interviewer: With all this going on, have you had time to be involved in your local church and circuit?*

I have always had a strong sense that wherever I have been involved, I have been sharing in what God is doing.

True in my secular career.

True in the Labour Party and Trade Union.

People knew that, if I was not at church then I would be at a branch meeting. On an occasion, when I apologised to my minister, Stephen Penrose for missing a service, Stephen said something very important. He said, "That is where God wants you to be, and how can we, as your church, support you in what you are doing?" That sense of solidarity is vital. The church needs to be alongside its people, wherever they are, battling with them against injustice.

*Interviewer: I wonder if I could therefore narrow the focus for a moment and ask you on the basis of that experience what you find are some of the most important issues facing our church?*

Proper attention to procedures, and safeguards, and Safeguarding. Because we are doing good does not mean we can cut corners, and not be professional. This is especially true of property and finance, as I have found in my time as Manse Steward for the Circuit!

*Interviewer: Let me stop you there for a moment. That's clearly an important point, but given the increasing complexity of these jobs aren't they very hard for volunteers in the local church?*

You're so right. Not just that, but many of us are not as able-bodied or energetic as we were once to take on practical property tasks. We need to rediscover the resources of Connexionalism and share our skills and our resources.

So if there are no people to do the job locally or if we need help to catch the bigger vision, turn to experiences of the Circuit, the District, then wider Methodism . Gareth is nodding so it's definitely right! At every point, there are people delighted to help as we build each other up!

If that doesn't work, then we must pay for the help we need.

*Interviewer: What other issues do you think we're facing at the moment?*

There are so many, but just to mention three:

We need to honour the gift of administration. We honour those connected with worship, rightly so, but although we consistently undervalue administration, it is the calling in the church that enables all the others.

The importance of buildings to mission – comfort, welcome, hospitality

Teamwork – team of lay and ordained. To trust each other. To take risks and when we make mistakes, not to lapse into a culture of blame, but to see the opportunity to learn from failure. Teamwork does not come naturally. We have to learn the skills and practise them to get them right.

*Interviewer: If I can pick up on that last point, in so much of what you have said, the notion of team work, of solidarity has come through as vitally important for you.*

Solidarity, human and divine community, are at the heart of my faith and at the heart of what it means to be a Methodist.

I find it especially in two areas:

I have to confess to a reputation for enjoying good food – that's true, good food helps enjoy company and make friends, and get to know people as they really are! A good meal together builds solidarity, hospitality, friendship these are the values I delight in. They challenge loneliness and create belonging, build friendships across cultures, faith and class

Alongside good food and drink – I also thrive on good worship! And in worship, intercessions are very special to me – a privileged way of expressing solidarity ... that's why wherever I go, whoever I meet this year I will be asking them, 'What can we pray for you?'

*Interviewer: I love the phrase "thriving on good worship"! What does good worship mean to you?*

For me, worship is the point at which we meet our Lord, draw on his strength, and where we are inspired, renewed and transformed for service.

If that's to happen we need thoughtful and challenging preaching and teaching which engages with the Bible, but is aware of contemporary issues and how we can respond to them,

We need the best music we can deliver;

And my special concern, we need intercessions which enable us to ponder in the light of God's word, what we can do, through the Spirit's inspiration and guidance, to contribute to God's mission for the needy and to challenge the collective policies and corporate structures that hurt, that frustrate or damage life and relationships

It is hard work for those called to lead, but that's what it will take to make a difference.

It's down to this: worship and preaching that doesn't call for and lead to transformation is 'only a noisy gong and a clanging symbol'.

*Interviewer: You have chosen for your theme the phrase "Transforming Hope". Can you say a bit about why, and what that means to you and the church?*

Hope is vital, and it is right at the heart of our faith. Paul spoke about the idea that we are set free and at the same time, bound, compelled, by hope. So, I believe I am a 'prisoner of hope' convicted and held so tightly and irrevocably by a sense of Christian hope that it cannot be resisted. It might be more comfortable to be despairing, cynical, fatalistic, but while hope is exhausting it is liberating, always anticipating God's Kingdom breaking in at any time, any place.

My dear friend Ebenezer Joseph the former President of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka, who is here, pointed out to me that we live between the cross and the resurrection – here is what he said;

"Hope in God always comes when our expectations are shattered. So setbacks, destruction, obstacles always strengthen our hope in God, it enables us to turn back to God. But on the other hand, Christian life is also rooted in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Where there is destruction where there is I would say public murder innocent blood being spilt then you have on the third day one is risen from the dead offering us new life , new hope, and fullness of life . So the cross may be a setback, but there is always hope in resurrection. I always look at my ministry as in between the cross and resurrection. So setbacks frustrations we believe one day will bring new hope and fullness of life."

Christian hope is rooted in God's saving activity. It opens up new horizons, new possibilities that are envisioned not by sinful human desires and aspirations but by Christ and in Christ.

*Interviewer: That's something much more dynamic than and very different from the sort of passive optimism that can often pass for hope in daily conversation or even in church isn't it?*

The journalist and TV presenter David Frost once interviewed Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with the words: 'I always think of you as an optimist.' To which Desmond Tutu replied, 'I am not an optimist, I'm a prisoner of hope'

'Optimism is a flimsy feeling upon which to build a transformed life, but Christian hope is rooted in the infinite possibilities for transforming hurt into healing and fear into trust that spring forth from the resurrection.'

*Interviewer: We are a church in decline numerically. We see buildings crumbling, ministers over-stretched, local leaders feeling guilty that they are not able to carry on. Now this obviously isn't true everywhere, but in such a context, what does Hope mean for Methodists today?*

I very much identify with what you describe. I'm not sure of the answer. But in the middle of this apparent hopelessness, I know that God must be doing something – changing things, calling us to new journeys so we have to be ready! We also have to recognize that some of churches are growing, the youth are returning, new Sunday schools are springing.

Even very small church communities, like the Italian Methodists, can do important things for God and God's world if our hope is alive.

So I agree with Lorraine our Ex-President: 'God has not done with us yet!'

*Interviewer: And what about the word 'prisoner'? How does it fit in and how is it relevant to Methodists?*

Very relevant, and Biblical. Christ has made us his prisoner so profoundly, and set hope so deep within us, that for me the word 'prisoner' really does reflect our call and the service to which we are committed. We cannot escape it. Even if sometimes we want to walk away, God keeps drawing us back. Let me give you an example, forgive me it's very personal.

There have been times when I have really struggled to carry out some of the lay roles I have undertaken. You know how it is. Your arm is gently twisted, you are persuaded and feel honoured to be asked, you say 'Yes' ... and then you wonder what on earth you have let yourself in for!

One evening, things were going in the same way like they had been for months. I felt we were not making progress. I felt I needed to step down and offered to resign.

My colleagues persuaded me to carry on, which I reluctantly did despite months of growing frustration.

That evening, as I was travelling home I was disappointed with myself for having agreed to remain and to carry on with what felt like a waste of my time.

On the train I was reading the Guardian. In those days just below the editorial there was a regular 'In Praise of ...' feature. That day, it was 'In Praise of the Methodist Covenant Prayer'.

'Put me to what you will,  
rank me with whom you will;~  
...let me be employed for you,  
or laid aside for you,'

I felt intensely that God was speaking to me.

You see, I had prayed that prayer so many years but I had not heard it till that moment.

I realised then that when we Methodists pray, we really do become 'Prisoners of Hope', part of a church in the business of fulfilling Jesus' 'manifesto' spelt out in Luke 4:

'God has appointed us to preach, good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives.'

I think of the Tamil Tiger Kandalingam and of Kranti the Dalit Lawyer

'The recovery of sight to the blind'

And I think of the way John Wesley, David Hardman and the HIV Chaplaincy challenge our blinkered views of the world

And I think of all those, I have worked with to strive ,....'to set at liberty those who are oppressed'  
....in politics, in health, in education, and in the church.

I thank God we are all ranked together as 'Prisoners of Hope'

*Interviewer: Bala, thank you very much.*