

The Vice-President's Address to Methodist Conference 2020 Mrs Carolyn Lawrence

There's an old Christmas song that I used to listen to on an Amy Grant album called 'Breath of Heaven' which reflects some of Mary's possible thoughts on carrying God's son.

One verse of this song has always meant a lot to me in the various roles I have been called to fulfil but never has it had more significance to me than now.

*'Do you wonder as you watch my face
If a wiser one should have had my place?
But I offer all I am
For the mercy of Your plan
Help me be strong, help me be, help me.'*

When I went to conference last year I arrived with no intention of offering to stand again for this role but had said to God that if someone asked me to stand I would take that as a sign and then test the call. As it turned out lots of people suggested I stand again and the rest is history! As soon as I realised that I had been elected I was overcome with terror and felt that I was completely inadequate for the task – I felt that there must be many more qualified and able than me but at the same time believed, and still do, that God must have a plan and a purpose in this calling and believed he had called me in the words from the book of Esther, 'for such a time as this.' Little did I know what 'such a time' it would turn out to be as so many things are different to how I expected them to be!!

I have received a lot of encouraging words and Scriptures sent to me in the last year and love this quote from Heidi Baker in her book 'The Hungry Are Always Fed'. She says:

'God is not about using the mighty, but the willing. He is not into using amazing people, just ones who are prepared to lay their lives down to him. God is not looking for extraordinary, exceptionally gifted people, just laid down lovers of Jesus who will carry his glory with transparency and not take it for themselves.'

The immense honour of being elected to this role is to me, an opportunity to bring glory to Jesus in any way I can. I would love it after this year if someone could say that they have come to know Jesus, or that they have been encouraged to use their gifts in ministry, or have grown in their faith.

That I am in this role at all is highly unlikely and testimony to God at work in my life.

I grew up in a non-Christian home but had started to attend my local Methodist Church through joining the Girl Guides and going to their parade services. As a teenager I was full of fear and terribly insecure and now realise I was one of those really annoying teenagers who must have driven the leaders in my youth group to distraction!

I had been going to church for a few years but had not at that point asked Jesus into my life. At the time I felt that I had to try to be a better person and that God wouldn't love me unless I could be really good. Then when I was 15 I went with my family to a Dick Saunders Crusade visiting our town and heard a message that God loved and accepted me as I was and that evening I invited Jesus into my heart and life and for the first time realised that my salvation didn't depend on my own works but in receiving the mercy and grace of God through what Jesus had done for me in his death and resurrection. It was so liberating to know it didn't depend on me to just try harder or be better!

I was hungry to change and to know God, to serve Jesus, to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit and to be obedient to his call on my life.

Though I was full of fear, was terribly insecure and lacking in confidence, I can testify to God's transforming work in my life little by little over the years. At my baptism shortly after becoming a Christian, someone gave me the verse from Philippians 4 vs 13 which says, 'I can do all things through Christ Jesus who gives me strength.'

That has become my life verse and I have clung to that promise when God has led me to do things and go places I would never have thought possible, giving me confidence and strength to go through the doors he has opened even when I have felt afraid and inadequate.

Hopefully at some point in the coming year I will be allowed to visit some of your Districts and Circuits and share fellowship face to face! You will get to know me better over the year but if I had to describe myself I would tell you that I am an introvert and though I like socialising, get exhausted from too much peopling. I am an activist and get bored easily. I can be flippant and say inappropriate things. I love Jesus but hate dead religion. I can't stand fakery and love truth and honesty. I enjoy a wide variety of worship but feel most at home when things are informal and involve movement and rhythm like the exuberant style I have experienced in Africa and Brazil.

Having been overlooked, rejected and bullied in the past, my heart, and the passion I believe God has given me is to be sensitive to those who are often overlooked in our world and in our churches.

I am married to Mark who is a presbyter and together we have had the privilege of serving God in several circuits around the country, as well as overseas. We have always valued and appreciated the everyday miracles that we see as we minister to ordinary people doing extraordinary things for and with God. We have observed and been in awe of

many faithful servants of God whose names will never be known by anyone but God, who quietly serve and demonstrate God's love day by day. I pray that in this role, I will be an encouragement to ordinary people and help to build people's confidence and self-esteem. I am forever thankful for the work that God has done in my own life and believe that if he can use me he can use anyone to fulfil his call. I love to pray with people and will pray with and for anyone who will allow me to!

I am an evangelist and long to draw people to know my Jesus and to grow in their relationship with him and as a teacher build people up in their faith. I'm excited to be inducted as Vice President at the same time as we launch the God for All evangelism strategy and as we engage with the Methodist Way of Life commitments as a tool for discipleship and growth.

I often feel most comfortable being around people who are not Christians because that is where I have found the most honesty and integrity about matters of faith. I hope I demonstrate to people outside the church that you don't have to be weird to be a Christian! You can be normal! I love the stories of Jesus which show us that he must have been a fun person to be with otherwise he wouldn't have been invited to so many parties or accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and children would not have gone anywhere near him – as a teacher, parent and grandparent I know that kids are most attracted to people who are genuine and fun!

As we read about Jesus we see that he repelled religious people and attracted sinners. It saddens me that as the church we often attract religious people and repel sinners.

God gave me the theme of this speech before Covid-19 hit our world. I felt that he wanted me in this speech to talk about the church. In the light of the corona virus and the immense changes in our world I prayed and reflected on whether God still wanted me to retain this theme and feel that it is just as relevant as ever, if not more so. The church still has a vital role to play, and we are seeing the church adapting to reach people in new and exciting ways that a few months ago we would never have dreamed possible. As we emerge from this pandemic in the coming months, we will be forced to look at new ways of being church and that is in many ways a good thing.

There is an old Spaghetti Western from 1966 called 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.'

I felt that God dropped this film title into my head as a reflection on the church! Only I am renaming it, 'The Good, the *Mad* and the Ugly.' Because I want to end on a positive, I am going to start with the mad and the ugly!

You know they say that you can moan about your own family but no-one else is allowed to so forgive me if this part rings home to some or causes offence! I promise this is coming from a place of deep love for my church family.

The media often portray the church in negative terms, making us sound at best dull and lacking in fun and at worst, judgemental, narrow, controlling or even abusive. Sadly some of the criticisms levelled at the church are true but the secular media don't tell the whole story.

So first of all, the mad!

There are crazy things that happen in churches that someone from outside would have a hard time getting their head around.

During my forty plus years of being a Christian and twenty five years of being a Local Preacher, I have observed many weird things in churches – none of whom shall be named!

I've been told off a lot! Including but not exclusively, for sitting in the wrong seat, parking in the wrong place, using the wrong tea towel, teapot, cups, putting said tea towel, teapot, cups back in the wrong place, putting things on the piano, putting things in the wrong place on a noticeboard or on the wrong board all together, removing something from a noticeboard without permission (usually out of date posters or photos!), doing a children's action song, not doing a children's action song, wearing the wrong clothes and moving a box of tissues - some people really need to get a life!

Church chairs warrant a telling off rule book all by itself! I have stacked them too high, not high enough, put them in the wrong places or in front of something, laid them out in the wrong order, not enough or too many to a row, too far apart or too close together, or at the wrong angle. Handling chairs in a Methodist Church is a minefield!

I've been asked to do some things that have made me uncomfortable. If I'm honest sharing the peace usually makes me feel awkward as does looking around the room sharing the grace but that could just be me. I've also been asked (or sometimes told) to hold hands in a circle to pray or sing, hold hands with the person next to me, wave my hymn book in the air, repeat a response in a prayer time that is so long I can't remember what it is, shout responses to the preacher, turn to the person next to me to look at them with love, to tell them they are beautiful that I love them, or to tell a complete stranger a deeply personal thing about myself!

Sometimes churches can be a bit like walking into a time machine. I read of one church that was holding a 1950s style worship service – or as many churches just call it, a worship 5. service! I notice when watching *Call the Midwife*, set in the 50s and 60s that they use the little cups and saucers that appear in most churches I have been a part of – most of you probably know the ones I mean that come in pink, yellow, green or blue! There always seem to

be hundreds of them and none of them ever get broken or thrown away even when a church has bought a set of new mugs!

We live in a strange world in the church at times. We can overcomplicate things, get embroiled or side-tracked by policies, plans and strategies, get hooked into minutiae that doesn't matter in the overall scheme of things and worry and argue over things that just aren't important and have no relevance to the Kingdom of God or reaching a lost world with the love of Jesus. We have often lost simplicity and forgotten to keep the main thing the main thing.

When Mark and I visited Uganda couple of years ago, we went with a pastor to a church he and his wife had planted in a remote village. All they had was a sheet of tarpaulin for the children to sit on, a few plastic chairs and a drum and with those few bits of equipment started a thriving church. Now they have a little building but the church began in a really simple way and it really spoke to me of how we sometimes lose that sense of simplicity in the church. Strangely, this latest crisis and the cancellation of all our usual events and meetings has forced us to go back to a simpler approach in many places.

So there are some things in the church that just seem a little mad but there are also some aspects of the church that are just plain ugly.

I know I am not alone in having experienced some of the ugliness of the church. I have listened to many stories from people over the years who have been hurt in some way by the church.

At one end of the ugliness spectrum are things like not being made welcome in churches. Mark and I always try to worship at a Methodist Church whenever we are away from home on a Sunday and have had mixed experiences. At one fairly small church, where it was obvious we were visitors, we were not welcomed or spoken to as we came in and found our way to a seat, nor were we spoken to at the end of the service. It broke my heart to think that we could have been people seeking God, or struggling with problems and seeking some love and support. Or people who had summoned up the courage to visit a church – who would probably never dare darken the doors of a church again.

At another church after navigating our way through the bewildering array of instructions in the car park, we fought our way through the heavy, closed, wooden doors to find we had walked in at the front of the sanctuary – everyone was chatting and stopped still to look at us walking in – then resumed their conversations!

We have witnessed visitors to our own churches being ignored or pushed aside by congregation members as they dash to sort out their rotas or chat to their friends.

I have heard congregation members telling visitors off for sitting in *their* seat. I have witnessed critical congregation members tutting and rolling their eyes when a reader makes a mistake or someone's child makes a noise, or when young people come in dressed in a casual way.

Then moving along the spectrum I have experienced and witnessed unkindness, criticism, discouragement, bullying, controlling behaviour, inappropriate touching and comments. The most vicious verbal attacks I have ever received have been from people in the church.

And at the other extreme of the ugliness spectrum, we know the church has engaged in more serious concerns such as racism, sexism, homophobia and abuse. The recent protests following the murder of George Floyd in the USA have brought to centre stage the racism that is evident not just in our society at large but also in the church, historically and right up to the present day. I heard only a couple of weeks ago from a minister in our connexion from an overseas connexion who told me that ministers from overseas connexions regularly receive racist comments from congregation members. It sickens my heart and I imagine how Jesus must weep when that happens and in any situation when people in the church behave in such sinful ways that are nothing to do with living in the Spirit of Jesus.

When we lived in Lincoln, Mark and I used to go with a team to the local New Age fair and take a Christian stand offering prayer for healing and wholeness along with Christian literature. Many of the people we spoke to and prayed with said they didn't have a problem with Jesus, but had been hurt or abused by the church. I think there are probably a lot of people out there in our communities who have been hurt, overlooked, bullied or abused by the church and we have to face up to that reality – the church can be ugly at times.

BUT despite all that is mad and ugly about the church I still believe with all my heart that the church of Jesus Christ is awesome! At its best there is nothing like the church on this earth – she is an amazing force to be reckoned with.

I've had the privilege for the past couple of years of attending the Open Doors World Watch List Launch at the Houses of Parliament. (Open Doors is a Christian charity supporting the persecuted church around the world and they produce a list each year of the most dangerous places to be a Christian). Over 100 parliamentarians attended the last time I went and I was encouraged when one of the MPs said that despite the media portrayal of the church, MPs of all parties and beliefs think highly of the church and know that we are involved in all aspects of society seeking to improve people's lives.

Every week we record and watch Songs of Praise which I know is a blessing to millions of people, especially during this time when people can't get to physically sing together in churches. I am often inspired by stories from ordinary

Christians across the nation who are doing amazing things for God as he leads them in their own communities. It's wonderful to hear stories of how God raises people up to develop innovative and creative ways of sharing the love of Jesus in their locality. I'm also encouraged to see the many different congregations taking part in the hymn singing crossing barriers of age, race and background – there truly is nothing like the church on earth!

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown, churches have been finding new ways of being church and it's been inspiring to see the flexibility and energy as churches have found new ways to engage with their communities, especially those who are isolated and vulnerable. It's also been encouraging to see all the different prayer initiatives and the incredible generosity of God's people as they seek to help those who are struggling, here and overseas. A person from a local church asked my husband, 'What is the church doing in this crisis?' He reminded her that the church is made up of each one of us and that even though we can't meet together physically at the moment, each of us has our part to play in being church to our families, our neighbours and our communities. Now more than ever we remember that the church is not the building but the people – we are the people of God, his family, and no amount of building closures can prevent the church from being who God intended us to be.

We often have a narrow view of the church and get bogged down with our local situations but I have a real passion for the Global Church of Jesus. One thing that I find awe inspiring about the church is that you can be anywhere in the country or the world and know that you can find family.

I have had the experience of worshipping with Christians in lots of different places in the world, most recently on my visit to the Methodist Church in Brazil. Here the church is growing at an amazing rate and I was blown away by their passion for God's word, their commitment to prayer, their systematic and strategic approach to evangelism, theological training and pastoral care and the exuberance and joy of their worship. During the year to come I hope to share some of the key principles of church growth that I have learned from the church in Brazil as I believe they can also be applied to our church here in the UK.

We also see the amazing work that is done in our nation and across the world by the many Christian charities which often cross denominational barriers. I know that most of you will be aware of the wonderful work that is done by our own relief and development fund, All We Can. I have been privileged to have been a trustee of AWC in the past and can't speak highly enough of the first class team and their amazing creative and professional work as well as the way that they honour God in all they do.

If we had been having a conference offering, my half of that collection was going to be sent to SAT-7, a charity I am privileged to know and support. They work across the Middle East and North Africa using satellite TV programmes to bring the Christian gospel, education, discipleship, encouragement and training to people who often can't worship freely in public. During the Covid-19 pandemic their work has been even more appreciated and they have been able to specifically create programmes addressing some of the issues faced by people under lockdown.

I believe that as individual lives are transformed by the love of Jesus, transformation of families, communities and nations will naturally follow – this is why I am passionate about evangelism. People don't need dead religion they need Jesus. Only he can truly transform hearts and attitudes and remove habits, addictions and prejudices in people's lives. In the Wesleyan revival which birthed Methodism, we see evidence of this – as people came under conviction of sin and turned to Jesus, they began to live differently and the society of the day was completely transformed – social justice was one of the fruits of lives and hearts changed by knowing Jesus. Oh how we need a revival of the Holy Spirit's power again in our church, nation and world.

Although we are individuals who make up the church and each have our part to play, I believe that we are stronger together as a corporate witness of God's love - as small groups, as societies, as circuits, as a connexion and ecumenically alongside our brothers and sisters in other churches. Together we shine more brightly in the darkness around us. I pray that it won't be long before we can actually worship together again and be an encouragement to each other as we share fellowship once again.

When I despair of the church it often helps me to reflect on what Jesus thinks of his church? In Ephesians 5 vs 25-27 we read:

'Jesus loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.'

We often feel that the burden of growing the church falls completely on our shoulders but in Matthew 16 vs 18 Jesus said to Peter:

'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.'

This reminds us that the church belongs to Jesus not to us – he is the centre – it's not about you or me or our preferences or desires but the church is here for Jesus. I heard a story of one congregation member on the way out after a service said to his minister, 'I didn't really enjoy worship today,' to which the minister replied, 'That's ok it wasn't for you anyway!'

The church is here to bring glory to Jesus and to show his love to the world. To do that we need each other so that each of us can use our skills and gifts and play our part in the body of Christ. As we read in 1 Corinthians 12 vs 12 – 31, each one of us is needed to make up the body and each of us has a role to play, however insignificant we may feel that role may be.

Nothing on earth is dearer to the heart of God than his church. If you hurt any part of the body you also hurt the head. And it must break God's heart when his church don't behave in a loving way and cause hurt and pain to people within and without.

You may be someone who is not a part of the church – either the Methodist Church or any other part of the body of Christ. Maybe you're someone who has never invited Jesus into your life. If that is you, I would encourage you to find out more about Jesus – maybe read the gospel of Luke in the Bible, join an Alpha course or other course that explores what Christianity is about or speak to a local Christian that you trust. Or contact me if you want to know more about what being a Christian is about.

Maybe you are someone who used to go to church but for some reason you stopped going. Perhaps someone offended you, hurt your feelings, overlooked you, disappointed you, discouraged you or didn't appreciate you. Maybe someone bullied or tried to control you, or perhaps someone abused you in some other way.

If that is you, I want to say sorry on behalf of the church and tell you that is not how God intended his church to behave. I encourage you to give all of your pain and disappointment to God and to allow him to take your grief, your pain, your anger, rejection, bitterness and grudges.

You may need to seek help and support if you have suffered abuse of any kind at the hands of the church. It may be a long process but I pray that you will allow God to bring you his healing. Then I would encourage you to seek to engage with the church family again. To use your skills and talents to serve and encourage others.

You may be someone who has been in church all your life but has never actually asked Jesus into your life. In the story of the prodigal son, we hear about the rebellious son who left the father's house and went his own way but there is another son in the story. This son had been in the father's house all along but didn't have a close relationship with his father. If you have never invited Jesus into your life or received an assurance that you are a child of God, I encourage you today to ask him into your heart and life.

If you are part of a church which has become a cosy club and has stopped being concerned for those around you, or know that your local fellowship is operating in a spirit of legalism instead of grace, I encourage you to put Jesus back at the centre and allow him to have his church back. To recommit to fulfilling the great commandment to love your neighbours and the great commission to make disciples of all people. To pray for the prodigals who have left the church because of the way they have been treated and to live like the welcoming, loving father instead of the self-righteous older brother.

For those of you faithfully serving God in and through the local church I want to bless you and encourage you to continue to use your gifts to play your part in the body of Christ. I pray that over this coming year I may have opportunity to encourage you and help you to grow in your walk with Jesus either through writing or by speaking to you, hopefully in person but if not, virtually! I also pray that we may have the opportunity to have some fun along the way!

My prayer is that each person hearing or reading this speech will know that you are loved by God, that you are immensely valuable to him and that he has a plan and purpose for your life. We are all part of one body – let us live in the truth of that so that all may see Jesus in us and be drawn to him, and find their life in him.

My remit for this speech was to tell who I was, to share a bit of my testimony, to tell the church what they need to hear and to encourage – I pray that with God's help I have fulfilled that remit and look forward to working with you all in the year to come as together we seek to bring glory to Jesus and extend his kingdom on earth. May we, Christ's body here on earth, work in love and unity so that his church may be pleasing to him and his name be praised through all the world. Amen.