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**Wednesday, 1 September 2021**

Dear friends

### **Circuit Pastoral Letter for September**

What does it mean 'to belong'? We all belong to the human race, whatever our appearance or our views, or our character and personality. We don't have a choice in the matter: we just are humans. Likewise, we are members of human families. Generally, we were born into them. We may or may not like our family members, but we are genetically linked to them. Similarly, we belong to this country, and our passports show that.

There are many other things that we may choose to belong to. In a way, they say something important about us - about our interests, our values, our way of doing things. Some of you may belong to the WI, others to sewing groups, while others may belong to a choir or a model railway society, or to an organisation like a Rotary Club. Belonging to something like this is a bonding together of different people under one banner - a shared common interest. It's important for us to recognise what brings us together.

However, belonging is not only a uniting factor. It can be divisive. Many of us recall the decades of the times referred to as 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland. According to the tradition into which a person was born, each citizen was classified as being Protestant or Catholic. Belonging to one group automatically meant exclusion from the other, often expressed in an antipathy towards and hatred of the other community.

St Paul had strong words to say about 'belonging' bringing about division to the early church in Corinth. They had divided into factions, and were arguing amongst themselves about which group was superior to the others.

*What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'*  
(1 Corinthians 1:12)

To Paul, Jesus was a unifying force. There should be no divisions. '*...there should be no divisions among you, but ... you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose*' (v10). I wonder what Paul would say to the Christian Church today!

These issues of divisions derive from a sense that the groups to which we belong are where we are rooted. Our nationality, our identity, our common cause with colleagues all speak of where our roots can be found.

I wonder what belonging means to people who have fled Afghanistan in the last few days. Where do they now belong? They probably feel no connection with the Taliban, and those who are in charge in their country now. But how can they feel that they belong in the UK, or the US, or wherever else they have gone? It must be more difficult for them than we can possibly imagine.

September is the start of the new year in the Methodist Church. You are receiving this letter because you have indicated that you feel that you belong to it. What does it mean to belong in this context? On one level, it may be about the church where your family worshipped and you (I hope) continue to attend. However, belonging is also about membership of the wider Methodist Church. In some denominations, such as the Church of England, there is no such thing as membership. Everyone in the parish belongs, whether they choose to or not.

Our tradition has made being a member something more. It expresses a chosen commitment, and intention to fully participate in the life of the church. It's about owning for oneself what is on offer for all. It's about demonstrating where we are rooted. It's also about being part of something bigger than just our local church. We are a 'connexional' church. No, that's not a spelling mistake. That's the way we spell it! It's the 18th Century version, used by John Wesley. But notice that at the centre of the word is a cross in the form of the letter x. That should say it all. To be a connexional church means that we are all linked to one another across the nation, as congregations, as individuals, as circuits. We belong to something far bigger than our own locality and situation.

Are you a member of your Methodist Church (and therefore the Methodist Church in Britain)? If not, have you considered joining? Maybe you have been a member for a long time, and would like to refresh your understanding of what belonging to our church should mean.

A group will be meeting for just 4 sessions to explore church membership, with the option at the end of it to decide to go ahead and make that commitment, or not, without pressure. It will be starting at 7.00pm on Tuesday 7th September at Penryn Methodist Church in the hall. If you are interested, please let me know - it would be good to see existing and potential members to discuss what it means to belong.

If you are interested, but can't manage the sessions starting on Tuesday, tell your minister. We can arrange for similar sessions at other times and places.

Meanwhile, we hope and pray that you feel that you belong...not only to your local church, or even just the whole Methodist Church, but, more importantly, to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Love

*Andrew*

**Rev Andrew Mumford**

**Superintendent Minister, Falmouth and Gwennap Methodist Circuit**