

**Statements and Reports of  
the Methodist Church  
on  
Faith and Order**

**Volume One  
1933-1983**

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## CONTENTS

Preface to First Edition .....	1
Preface to Second Edition .....	2
<b>Part I The Church</b>	
The Nature of the Christian Church (1937) .....	7
<b>Part II Entry into the Church</b>	
Memorandum on Infant Baptism (1936).....	31
Statement on Holy Baptism (1952) .....	33
Parents and Infant Baptism (1966) .....	39
Ministers in Full Connexion and Baptism (1975) .....	41
A Service in Lieu of Infant Baptism (1976) .....	46
Conversion and Baptism: the Pastoral Problems (1981) .....	47
Conversion and Baptism: Suggested Guidelines (1982) .....	50
<b>Part III Membership</b>	
Report on Church Membership (1961) .....	55
The Use of the Term 'Confirmation' (1962) .....	67
Dual Membership (1970) .....	68
Reception of Members from Other Communion (1970) .....	69
Joint Confirmation Services (1976) .....	70
<b>Part IV The Lord's Supper</b>	
(i) <i>Who Presides?</i>	
Lay Administration of the Sacraments (1946) .....	75
Dispensations to Administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (1960) .....	77
Holy Communion (1966) .....	78
Lay Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (1975) .....	79
Authorisation to Preside at the Lord's Supper (1976).....	82
(ii) <i>Children at Holy Communion</i>	
Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion (1973) .....	84
Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion (1975) .....	86
Blessing Children at Holy Communion (1978) .....	92
<b>Part V Ministries</b>	
(i) <i>The Ministry of Word and Sacrament</i>	
Women and the Ministry (1933) .....	95
Women and the Ministry (1939) .....	98
Ordination in the Methodist Church (1960) .....	101
Ordination (1974) .....	108
Dual Ordination (1974) .....	120

*Part V Ministries continued . . .*

(ii)	<i>The Deaconess Order</i>	
	The Deaconess Order (1960) .....	121
	The Status of Deaconesses and the Admission of Women to the Ministry (1961) .....	122
(iii)	<i>Local Preachers</i>	
	The Place and Functions of a Local Preacher (1964) .....	135
(iv)	<i>Confidentiality</i>	
	Confidentiality and Pastoral Care (1980) .....	136

**Part VI Church Unity**

(i)	<i>Union Schemes</i>	
	Reply to the Lambeth ‘Outline of a Reunion Scheme’ (1939) .....	143
	Local Schemes of Union (1966) .....	148
	Full Communion with Other Churches (1968) .....	149
	Full Communion (1970) .....	150
(ii)	<i>Episcopacy</i>	
	Methodism and Episcopacy (1978) .....	151
	Episcopacy in the Methodist Church (1981) .....	153
	Episcopacy and Methodist Doctrinal Standards (1982) .....	181
(iii)	<i>World Council of Churches</i>	
	Response to the Edinburgh ‘Affirmation of Union’ and Proposed World Council of Churches (1938) .....	185
	The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund (1952) .....	188

**Part VII Other Faiths**

	Use of Trust Premises (1972) .....	193
	Inter-Faith Marriages (1972) .....	196
	Relations with People of Other Faiths (1983) .....	197

**Part VIII Miscellaneous**

	A Fixed Easter (1965) .....	201
	The Charismatic Movement (1974) .....	202
	Exorcism (1976) .....	206
	Exorcism (1977) .....	209

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

According to clause 31(b) of the Deed of Union the Conference has responsibility for interpreting the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church. Most of the papers in this collection were presented to Conference by the Faith and Order Committee, but they are not now Faith and Order Committee papers. Once adopted they became Conference papers and they carry the authority of Conference with them.

A glance at the Contents page reveals that the collection is very one-sided in its interests. There is much about baptism and membership and the Lord's Supper – especially with regard to who should preside at it – but little about the great doctrines of the Methodist tradition or about some of the great theological questions that our generation faces.

There are various reasons for this one-sidedness. In the first place, the Faith and Order Committee has, in the past, had little self-determination. It has done what it was told to do by Conference and little else. It may be that the mood is now changing and the committee will increasingly present papers in areas where it sees a need without waiting for Conference instructions, in which case Faith and Order reports over the next decade will show a different sense of proportion from the present collection.

Secondly, in the past two decades, the Faith and Order Committee has given a great deal of attention to the production of two foundation documents of our worship, *The Methodist Service Book* and *Hymns and Psalms*. Both these volumes have a theological scope far beyond what is found in these papers. Particularly the great doctrines of the Methodist tradition find their expression there.

Thirdly, other committees, divisions and working-parties have dealt with matters neglected here. The Faith and Order Committee has tended to be restricted to those areas where precise definitions of Methodist ecclesiology are needed. The collection includes one or two papers that were presented to Conference by other bodies – and we thank them for their co-operation – but, on the whole, we have recognised that these other bodies had their own policies regarding publication.

A fourth reason is that the last two decades have been much taken up with ecumenical discussion. It was inevitable that, in such times, attention would focus on the points on which the churches are divided. The major documents of the various schemes and projects are not included here. They are large enough and numerous enough to require a volume of their own.

Many of the statements here appeared in the *Agenda* and were adopted by the Conference but they were not reproduced in the *Minutes*. A committee consisting of the Rev David G Deeks, the Rev David H Tripp and the Convener has done its best to check that, save where a note indicates otherwise, all the statements were in fact adopted. Where alterations were made in Conference, the correction appears in a footnote.

There are frequent references to Standing Orders in these texts. The references are, of course, to the contemporary edition. Only in a few cases have the references been brought up to date.

It is hoped that, in future, papers of this kind will be made generally available every few years.

W David Stacey, Convener  
Wesley College, Bristol

August 1983

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The last sentence of the Preface to the first edition of what was then called *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order* expressed the hope that papers of this kind would, in future, be made available every few years. Since the publication of the *Statements*, a huge amount of material concerning the faith and order of the Church has been presented to the Conference by the Faith and Order Committee and other bodies, and it has been decided to publish this post-1983 material separately as *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, Volume 2, 1984-2000*.

The first edition was produced by copying the text of the various Conference *Agendas*. In this second edition, the documents have been entirely reset, thus greatly enhancing the appearance and readability of the book. The opportunity has also been taken to remove from what now becomes *Volume 1* a number of (mainly very short) reports which duplicated material found in other reports or seemed to be no longer significant enough for inclusion. These are listed below. The notes which follow the reports have been updated where necessary, and references have been given to later reports which are to be found in *Volume 2*.

It should be noted that the term 'Statement', once used fairly generally, has in recent years acquired a specific meaning. It denotes 'a document intended to be a considered Statement of the judgment of the Conference on some major issue or issues of faith or practice, and framed with a view to standing as such for some years'. Some documents in both volumes were 'received' or 'noted', rather than 'adopted', by the Conference, and, in *Volume 1*, the fact that a document is described as a 'Statement' is not necessarily an indication that it enjoyed the special status now implied by this word. For this reason, both volumes are now entitled *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*.

Neil Dixon  
Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee (1988-2000)  
June 2000

**DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THE FIRST EDITION,  
BUT OMITTED FROM THE SECOND EDITION**

*Procedure after a Baptism in Hospital (Agenda 1959, p. 241)*  
*Administration of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism (Agenda 1960, p. 311)*  
*Junior Membership (Minutes 1938, pp. 367-368)*  
*Conditions of Membership (Minutes 1939, pp. 411-418)*  
*The Methodist Service Book: A Clarification (Minutes 1982, p. 34)*  
*Dispensations Granted to Probationers (Agenda 1960, p. 301)*  
*Lay Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (Agenda 1968, p. 61)*  
*Dispensations to Preside at Holy Communion (Agenda 1979, p.52)*  
*Ministers Assisting at Ordinations (Agenda 1974, pp. 252f)*  
*A Teaching Ministry (Agenda 1938, p. 148)*  
*Ministers Serving External Organisations (Agenda 1957, pp. 47f)*  
*Ministers Wishing to Serve External Organisations (Agenda 1960, pp. 312-314)*  
*Ordination of Wesley Deaconesses (Agenda 1957, p. 47)*  
*Invitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury (Minutes 1946, p. 48)*  
*Free Church Federal Council: Report of Commission on Closer  
Co-operation (Agenda 1946, pp. 45-49)*  
*Replies to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Free Church Federal Council  
(Agenda 1947, pp. 66-68)*  
*Church Relations in England (Agenda 1953, p. 30)*  
*Invitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury (Agenda 1956, p. 12)*  
*Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Evanston (Agenda 1954, p. 32)*  
*World Conference on Faith and Order (Agenda 1955, p. 35)*  
*Nottingham Faith and Order Conference (Agenda 1965, pp. 42-44)*  
*Forms of Worship for Regular Use (Agenda 1960, p. 301)*  
*Authorised Services not printed in M.S.B. (Agenda 1975, p. 262)*  
*Recognition and Commissioning Services and the M.S.B. (Agenda 1982, p. 30)*  
*When a Baby is Still-born: Pastoral Action (Agenda 1983, pp.60f)*

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## **Part I The Church**

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# **THE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (1937)**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT**

1. The Meaning of the word *Ecclesia*
2. The Metaphors used to describe the Church; their Justification
3. The Nature of the Church
  - (i) Its Origin
  - (ii) Its Fellowship
  - (iii) Its Allegiance
  - (iv) Its Message
  - (v) Its Mission
4. The Ministry of the Church in the New Testament
5. Summary of the New Testament Teaching
6. Methodist Loyalty to the Principles of New Testament Teaching

#### **II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY** (The separate 'Churches' of today)

1. The Continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past
2. The Principles of the Protestant Reformation
3. The Place of Methodism within the One Church of God

#### **III. THE AFFIRMATIONS**

1. The Church as Witness to a Divine Revelation
2. Its Fellowship, Allegiance, Message and Mission
3. The Unity of the Church
4. The Privilege and Duty of Membership in the Church
5. The Place of the Methodist Church within the Catholic Church
6. The Task of the Church in the Transformation of the Life of Society
7. The Church on Earth and the Church in Heaven

## INTRODUCTION

The Church of Christ is the home of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore a family with a unique and developing life. It is a life of a distinctive quality, a life which under the guidance of the Spirit should be richer as time goes on, with fresh manifestations as new nations and races are added to the Church, and new apprehension of divine truth is given.

Christian fellowship means sharing in this developing life. It is therefore impossible to maintain that any one communion of Christian people, out of its own history and experience alone, can build up a complete doctrine of the nature of the Christian Church, or that any one period of history, even that of the first century itself, can furnish us with a complete statement. The purpose of the Conference is not to produce a dogmatic definition, distinctively Methodist, to be set side by side with other definitions of the past. Still less is it to produce a confession of faith by which loyalty or orthodoxy might be tested. It is rather to enable the Methodist Church:— (1) to think more clearly and definitely about the nature and purpose of the Christian community; (2) to maintain effectively the claim made in the *Deed of Union* (1932) that the Methodist Church ‘cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ’, (3) to recover, or increase, the sense of reverence for the Church as the Body of Christ; to appreciate the true meaning and privilege of Churchmanship, of participation in Word and Sacraments; and to do all this without, on the one hand, exaggerating the place of the Church, and clothing it, as Rome has done, with attributes that are properly predicable only of God Himself, or, on the other and, transposing our conception of the Church to a remote and ideal realm (as has been the practice of many Protestants in the last two or three centuries) where the word Church has apparently little relation with the visible companies of Christians round about us. It is a misfortune that the conception of the Church has been over-estimated in Catholicism and often under-estimated in Protestantism.

A description of the nature of the Church of Christ should take account of its origin fellowship, allegiance, message, mission and ministry: also of its continuity in history, and its present structure. While these subjects cannot be kept separate, since each involves the others, none of them can properly be omitted.

According to the Deed of Union of the Methodist Church,<sup>1</sup> ‘the doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds, are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice’. It is therefore natural, and indeed necessary, that in this document we should turn first to the New Testament for that account of the nature of the Church which was given by the earliest believers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Uniting Conference* (1932), 302; see also statement approved by the Wesleyan Conference of 1908.

## I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

### 1. THE WORD 'ECCLESIA'

The word *Ecclesia* is used in the New Testament (i) for the assembly of the people of God in Old Testament times; (ii) for the congregation of the Christians actually assembled in some particular place; (iii) for the whole company of believers in some particular place; (iv) for the assembly of Christians in a particular house; and finally, in the sense which concerns us most closely, (v) for the universal Church on earth, to which belong all who are called by God, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, to be members of His family.<sup>2</sup> Here we have a word which can be used both of a local community and of the universal company of Christians. The reality denoted is both visible and spiritual. It is visible because it is grouped in various local communities. It is spiritual because the call which has gathered them and the gift of the Spirit which they share, the allegiance by which they are bound, the destiny to which they move – all these are not of this world. They are not of man's contrivance but of God's gift.

### 2. THE METAPHORS USED TO DESCRIBE THE CHURCH; THEIR JUSTIFICATION

The Church of God, the company of Christians scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world, is described in the Epistles of St Paul by certain daring metaphors. It is the Body of Christ<sup>3</sup>, the Body of which He is the Head<sup>4</sup>. It is the holy temple in which the living God dwells.<sup>5</sup> Believers are the household or family of God,<sup>6</sup> and Christ is the firstborn among the many brethren<sup>7</sup> who are to be conformed to His image. The Church is even regarded as the bride of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

But it is impossible to rest content with setting down these lofty metaphors as though they were a complete description of the Church as viewed by the New Testament writers.

Two observations may be made. First, the writers were well aware of the disparity between such ideal descriptions and the actual state of the primitive Christian communities. The very epistle which contains the description of the Church as the one Body of Christ begins with a reproof of the party spirit which has marred its unity, goes on to refer to the impurity and self-indulgence which have stained its holiness, and then alludes to the failures in spiritual insight which have caused many to fall short of the true apostolic faith. Strictly speaking, therefore, the Corinthian community is not completely one, nor perfectly holy, nor fully apostolic. Nevertheless for St Paul it is 'the Church of God which is in Corinth'. Nor is this a solitary instance. No New

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<sup>2</sup> The following are examples:

(i) Heb. ii. 12, Act vii. 38; (ii) e.g. 1 Cor. xi. 18, xiv. 4, 19, 28; (iii) often; e.g. Acts v. 11, viii. 3; (iv) Rom. xvi. 5, Col. iv. 15; (v) Acts ix. 31, I Cor. xii. 28, Eph. i. 22, etc., Phil. iii. 6.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 13, 27; Eph. v. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. i. 22, 23; iv. 15, 16.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 17; 2 Cor. vi. 16; Eph. ii. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Gal. vi. 10; Eph. ii. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. viii. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Eph. v. 25-30.

Testament writer knows of a perfect Christian community. Everywhere there is a sense of contrast between the Church as God wills it to be, and the Church as it is, with all the lapses and disasters which human frailty and sin have brought upon it.

If this is true even of the Church of New Testament times, to which later generations have often looked back as to a golden age, history bears ample witness to the same contrast throughout the subsequent centuries. The visible Church of Christ has been an imperfect and fallible instrument of God's will.

Yet there is a second observation to be made. The New Testament descriptions of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the workmanship of God, are justified. Ideal as they may seem to us after the chequered history of the Church for nineteen hundred years, there are realities behind them.

The metaphor on which St Paul dwells most frequently, that of the Body of Christ, can only adequately be explained by reference to his description of believers as being 'in Christ'. The supreme significance of this phrase, 'in Christ', for the thought of St Paul, has been firmly established in recent times. It is sometimes used of the individual believer: 'there is a new creation when anyone comes to be in Christ'<sup>9</sup>. It is oftener used of the company of believers,<sup>10</sup> who know what it is to have 'fellowship in the Holy Spirit'. Fellowship with other Christians is implicit in the use of the phrase 'in Christ'. But the ground of the fellowship of believers with one another is their communion with Christ. This, then, is the essential fact which differentiates the Church from all other visible institutions in human history. It is the Church of God because Christians are in communion with God through Jesus Christ. All the metaphors are modes of describing that which is real, even if ultimately indescribable – that relationship to God, so intimate and undeserved, which God has established with those whom He has called to walk with Him. The decisive element in the New Testament conception of the Church is the presence of the living Christ in the midst of His own. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'<sup>11</sup>

Again, this relationship of Christians with one another, resting on their relationship with Christ, is differentiated from all other human relationships because it is avowedly based on God's revelation of Himself in certain historical facts. In the New Testament doctrine of the Church the first place belongs not to man but to God. The Church is not described by anything that man has done or should do, but by what God has done. It is His creation. The Church exists because God has sent forth His Son in the fullness of time. The Church is here because Christ has come, and He is the Lord, the Son of God, the Word of God. There had been a supreme revelation. The long-expected Kingdom of God had become present and manifest in the activity of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Jesus Christ had lived. Jesus Christ had died. Jesus Christ had been raised again from the dead in the power of God. There were witnesses of His resurrection, and the company of believers had received the gift of His Spirit. The living Christ was sending forth His Spirit into the hearts of those who were willing to receive His supreme gift. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the House or the Family of God, because God through His revelation of Himself in Christ has called it into being.

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor. v. 17; cf. 2 Cor. xi. 2.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Thess. i. 1; 1 Cor. i 30, xv. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. xviii. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Luke xi. 20 (Matt. xii. 28); Luke x. 23-24 (Matt. xiii. 16-17); Luke xvii. 20-21.

Once again, this revelation was a revelation of God's will for mankind. It was set forth in terms which carry the mind beyond the life of the present age to the life of the world to come. God's purpose, hidden from all ages and now revealed, was to sum up or gather together 'all things in Christ, whether things in the heavens or things upon the earth'.<sup>13</sup> It is in the light of this divine purpose that St Paul contemplates the significance of the Church. Out of a divided humanity God has created a new and united humanity in Christ.<sup>14</sup> This is the beginning of a world-wide process of reconciliation, which will only be complete when all things are brought into submission to the rule of God.

The Church is therefore the instrument of the divine purpose. Many indeed were called; a few responded to the call. These few were to regard themselves as consecrated to the mission of reconciliation which is God's will. This is the divine method, to create a redeemed community, however small, in order that it may stand out against the dark background of the world as a society enjoying the unexampled blessedness of communion with God. So will the Church by living in Christ draw all men to God, to Him, that is, from whom it derives its very life.

The Church of the New Testament, therefore, is not to be described as a certain number of individuals who have formed themselves into an association for a common purpose. It is not a club or a religious society of the type familiar in the Graeco-Roman world. As the Body of Christ, the Church is regarded as a company of those who are in communion with God, as owing its very existence to God's revelation of Himself, as pledged to be God's instrument for his age-long purpose. Since the attainment of this purpose is beyond the reach of human strength, the Church is utterly dependent on the bestowal of the inexhaustible resources of God. For such a destiny there is available the exceeding greatness of God's power, according to the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ. For such a life as Christians in virtue of their membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, are called upon to live, all things are ready, all things are given, all things are ours; the love of God, the grace of Christ, the fellowship of the Spirit, all are ours as we are Christ's.<sup>15</sup> St Paul appeals to the unsearchable riches which are available in Christ because he is confident that out of the divine resources Christians can find the strength to break down the barriers which separate them from one another. The divine love has been shed abroad in human hearts through the Holy Spirit. In virtue of this gift the Church may be called the Body of Christ.

### 3. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

#### *(i) The Origin of the Church*

Whether we regard the Church as founded directly by Jesus in His earthly life, or ascribe its beginning to the day of Pentecost, there is one significant conviction of the New Testament writers which we do well to heed. They hold that the life of Israel, the People of God, before Christ came, and the life of the Christian Church afterwards, is one continuous life. The word *ecclesia* is in the Septuagint a translation of the Hebrew word applied to the people of God. The language which the Old Testament applies to the people of God is applied in the New Testament to the Christian Church without

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<sup>13</sup> Eph. i. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Eph. ii. 14 ff.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 21-23

any explanation being thought necessary. 'Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light . . . Ye are now the people of God.'<sup>16</sup> So, too, for St Paul, the Church is 'the Israel of God',<sup>17</sup> the people under God's covenant, the true heir of the promises of God.<sup>18</sup> From this view of the life of the Church as continuous with the life of Israel two conclusions are drawn. First, the origin of the Church lies in the will of God before the world began. Ultimately, the founder of the Church is the Lord, the redeeming God of Israel. Second, all that Israel had from God the Church has through Christ. In Christ the promises have been fulfilled. There were significant and decisive differences between the Old Israel and the New. In Jesus Christ God Himself had visited and redeemed His people. God had given Him to be 'Head over all things to the Church'. The indwelling Spirit, whose activity was the source and guiding power of the life of the newly constituted community, was regarded as involving the abiding presence and activity of Christ Himself. A new era had been inaugurated by the Spirit as a result of the revelation of God in the whole work of Christ, in His earthly life, in His suffering on the Cross, in His resurrection from the dead. In this new era the old sacrifices had ceased; the old priesthood was now obsolete. In the Church all believers were priests,<sup>19</sup> because through the Spirit they had direct access to the holy of holies. Like their Lord they could say Abba, Father, to the living God. The new experience thus made possible by Christ, and created in believers by His indwelling Spirit, included a new consciousness of son-ship, a new sense of power, and a new confidence in His final victory.

(ii.) *The Fellowship of the Church*

In the New Testament the Church is described as having fellowship,<sup>20</sup> sharing in a certain distinctive kind of life. In the apostolic benediction (2 Cor. xiii. 14) this is characterised as 'the fellowship of the Holy Ghost', a sharing of the gift of the divine Spirit. All that Christians have ever learnt of the experience of God's grace, the divine indwelling which is granted us in Christ, must be invoked to elucidate the meaning of this familiar phrase. There is a fellowship which only the Spirit can give,<sup>21</sup> and believers know what it is. The fellowship of Christians from the earliest times was fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. The comprehensive word which describes the quality of this life is love.

Certain conclusions are drawn by the writers of the New Testament from the enjoyment of this fellowship of the Spirit which is the essence of the Church. First, the individual experience was never severed in thought from membership in the Christian community. As John Wesley said, 'The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness.'<sup>22</sup> The common experience issued in common

<sup>16</sup> 1 Pet. ii. 9, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Gal. vi. 16; cf. Phil. iii. 3; 1 Cor. x. 1; Rom. ii. 28; xi. 16-24.

<sup>18</sup> Gal. iii. 29, iv. 7; Rom. viii. 17; cf. Heb. vi. 12, 17; Jas. ii. 5. In the Johannine writings we find the same conviction. The Church is the vine of God and the flock of God as Israel had been before; John x. 16, xv. 1-8; cf. Rev. ii. 9.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Pet. ii. 5.

<sup>20</sup> The word *Koinonia* is primarily used to describe this act of sharing, or the inward communion, rather than the community.

<sup>21</sup> Phil. ii. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. I, p. xxii.



worship, and this was expressed in the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in prayer, in preaching, and in the social activities of love.

Second, the experience is universal in its application. Life 'in the Spirit' can be lived in the world, amid the ordinary callings wherein men work, in the common vicissitudes of our human lot. It is in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ that we may see portrayed that care for the whole area of human life which should characterise the members of the community called by His name. Nothing that belonged to men to do or to suffer was outside His interest. He had a piercing insight into all the sorrows and hardships of human life. He understood the anxiety of common folk about common needs, and He longed to shepherd them to rest of soul. His parables prove how He delighted in all the healthful instincts and activities of humanity. The labour of men had an inexhaustible interest for Him. The busy life of His time was present to His mind because it was dear to His heart – landlord and tenant, employers and employed, women in their patching and their baking, shepherds, farmers, gardeners, merchants, bankers – all had their place in His talk. The New Testament writers were only being faithful to the mind of their Master when they applied their gospel of reconciliation to the common human relationships, and taught how husband and wife, master and slave, fathers and children, could live together 'in the Lord'.<sup>23</sup> In Christ the old barriers were done away; there were no longer Jews or Gentiles. The divine love which is the secret of reconciliation had transformed the old relationships. Life was lived on a new plane.

The process of claiming for Christ every activity of the Christian man and redeeming every department of the corporate life of the world began in those New Testament days. Though victory in the age-long struggle has been gradual and retarded, and though we do not yet see all things subject to Him, it is only in Christ that we see the promise of a guiding light for every region of the common life of man.

Third, there is another element in the life of the Church as a closely knit body which results directly from its consciousness of the conditions of its existence; the sharing of material goods and the mutual supply of material needs. The Johannine account of the conversation in the Upper Room gives special prominence to the Saviour's symbolical washing of the feet of the disciples, leading to the significant words, 'ye also ought to wash one another's feet'. The recognition of the duty of meeting the needs of the less fortunate members of the Church is seen in the voluntary pooling of resources for this purpose in the early days after Pentecost, and the care for the widows. That such mutual care was felt to be a natural function of the Church is clear from the Epistle of St James, and from the collection for the necessitous Churches in Palestine, which St Paul organised among the Gentile Churches. It was the natural result of the devotion with which the disciples had first given themselves to the Lord, and as such carried to a higher plane the traditional Jewish insistence on almsgiving. That it was a conspicuous element in the subsequent activity of the Churches is seen in the comments of pagan writers. Such giving is much more than what is commonly known as charity. It is not an act which the Christian may perform or not as he pleases. As a member of the Church, he must think of himself as a member of the family of which his heavenly Father is the head; and he will regard what he possesses as his own, only in so far as he uses it as his Father directs, and for the needs of those who are united with him as the objects of his Father's love and care.

This recognition of the needs of others, however, and the duty and indeed the naturalness of supplying them, was not limited to the members of the Christian family.

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<sup>23</sup> Col. iii. 18-iv.1; Heb. xiii. 1-5; I Pet. ii. 18-25; iii. 1-9; Jas. ii. 1-9.

The command of Christ that love should be shown to enemies and persecutors, the importance He attached to the feeding of the hungry and the visiting of the sick, and the wide extension that He gave to the term neighbour, led to a zeal and even a passion, in the members of the Christian Church, for almsgiving and other deeds of love to outsiders, which often surprised and sometimes astonished their pagan critics; and to a tradition of devotion to the poor which has never been wholly forgotten.

Fourth, the experience is open to all, and to be offered to all. Most of the followers of Jesus were slow in those early days, and indeed have ever since been slow, in recognizing and acting on this inevitable consequence of the Christian experience. Yet it was implicit from the beginning in our Lord's teaching on the nature of the love of God. No boundaries can be set to the message of a community whose goal is the reconciliation of all things to God, and which dares to take for its pattern the illimitable activity of the love of God himself.

(iii.) *The Allegiance of the Church*

The Spirit is regarded as the gift of Christ to His friends. 'Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath poured forth this.' The new-found experience in which they share inevitably involves a common allegiance to Jesus Christ. One of the earliest confessions of faith<sup>24</sup> is 'Jesus is Lord,' and St Paul declares that the power to make this confession aright is given in the new experience, and only to those who share it. According to St Matthew's Gospel,<sup>25</sup> our Lord Himself connected the building of His Church with the confession of His Messiahship. The same connection is made by St Paul. In a passage<sup>26</sup> from which John Wesley drew most of his teaching on the Church, he speaks of a sevenfold unity, in which the one Lord is central, and no form of earthly ministry is mentioned. Elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> apostles and prophets are mentioned as the foundation; and authoritative discipline certainly finds a place in the administration of the Church of the New Testament. But all is subordinate to the common allegiance, and this allegiance is due supremely to Jesus Christ, the One Head of the Church 'which is His Body'.

As Hort pointed out,<sup>28</sup> the founding of the Church at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians, was not due to the activity of any recognised Apostle. 'No Apostle had led or founded a mission; no Apostle had taught there.' But there Jesus had been preached as Lord.<sup>29</sup> Barnabas, the apostolic delegate, could not but see in the fact of the Christian congregation there 'the grace of God'. The disciples therefore in Antioch were recognised by the sign of their common allegiance as belonging to the Church of God.

(iv.) *The Message of the Church*

The message of the Church is the gospel, or Word of God. It is the function of the Church to understand, interpret and proclaim this Word. The relation of the Church to the Word of God is a living question which takes us beyond the problem of the

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<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 3; Phil. ii. 10-11; Rom. x. 9; xiv. 9; John xiii. 13.

<sup>25</sup> xvi. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Eph. iv. 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Eph. ii. 20.

<sup>28</sup> *The Christian Ecclesia*, 59-61.

<sup>29</sup> Acts. xi. 20-23

authority and place of the Bible, and beyond the place of preaching in the creation and the continuation of the visible Church. If we go back to the New Testament, the Word of God is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ Himself as manifested in time – in His earthly life, in His death, in His risen life. This is the meaning of the presence of our four Gospels in the New Testament. The burden of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that God has spoken to us His final word through His Son.<sup>30</sup> For St Paul, Christ is the image, or visible manifestation, of the invisible<sup>31</sup> God. The ‘mystery’ which once was hidden and which now is revealed is described as ‘Christ in you’; as<sup>32</sup> ‘Jesus Christ’, as ‘Christ crucified’,<sup>33</sup> as Christ who in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings may be known.

But this message must be proclaimed by apostles, prophets, and evangelists; for the world cannot hear without a preacher. We have, then, a second meaning of the Word of God. It is the Word as preached.<sup>34</sup> Only later does it become the Word of God as written in the Holy Scriptures. But when ‘Word’ is used in these secondary or derivative senses, the conviction is held by the early Christians that if the Word is to be effective, the Spirit of God must be operative both in the preacher and in the preaching – not only in the writing but also in the interpretation of the written Word. The Church, we say, *has* a message; but it can be delivered and understood only in so far as the Spirit of God is known, acknowledged, and operative in the community; only in so far as Christians are living in Christ, and representing Christ to the world. The Church of Christ proclaims Christ even more by what it is than by what it says.<sup>35</sup>

For the writers of the New Testament there is an intimate connection between the Word of the Cross and the way of life which the members of the Church are called upon to tread. If the Church is the Body of Christ, it will bear the marks of the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus may be manifested in that Body. These marks are not only the dying to sin, but the bearing of one another’s burdens, and the joyful acceptance of suffering for Christ’s sake. In such a world as this, love ever finds fresh burdens to bear. To go where sinners are, to refuse either to leave them, or to compromise with their sin; to devote oneself utterly to their recovery, to labour with a yearning which is given by God Himself till Christ be formed in them – this way of bearing sin is an inalienable part of the witness of the Church, because such love flows from the communion of Christians with their Lord. The sufferings which ensue, even the sufferings of death itself, are transfigured by the same power of God which raised Christ from the dead.<sup>36</sup>

It is this intimate communion between Christ and His people that gives fullness of meaning to the two sacraments. Baptism is for St Paul a symbol that believers have entered into communion with Christ in His death and resurrection. The Lord’s Supper is a symbol of the continuance and renewal of this communion, and a proclamation of

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<sup>30</sup> Heb. i. 2; cf. Rev. xix. 13.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Cor. iv. 4; Col. i. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Col. i. 27.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. i. 23, ii. 12.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Pet. i. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Matt. v. 13, 14; Eph. v. 8; Phil. ii. 15, 16.

<sup>36</sup> The passages on which this paragraph is based are (a) Gal. v. 13-25, especially 24-25; Gal. vi. 1-16; 2 Cor. iv. 7-15; Gal. iv. 19; cf. the whole of 1 Corinthians where the practical problems of the Church are faced in the light of the Word of the Cross, 1 Cor. i. 17-ii. 6; vi. 7, xiii. 4-6; Eph. i. 19-20; (b) 1 Pet. ii. 19-25; iii. 14-18; iv. 12-16; (c) Heb. xii. 1-4; xiii. 12-13.

the Lord's death, 'until He come'. Its purpose is marred when the Body of Christ is riven by factions or desecrated by selfishness.<sup>37</sup> It points forward to the richer life in the future, when Christ shall be manifested in the full glory of the Kingdom of God. Both Sacraments are therefore modes of proclaiming that Word which is Christ Himself, active in the life of the Church.

As a summary of the message of the Church of the New Testament, we may take the unanimous statement of the Lausanne World Conference on Faith and Order (1927), in the section entitled *The Church's Message to the World*:

'Jesus Christ as the crucified and living One, as Saviour and Lord, is also the centre of the world-wide Gospel of the Apostles and the Church. Because He Himself is the Gospel, the Gospel is the message of the Church to the world. It is more than a philosophical theory; more than a theological system; more than a programme for material betterment. The Gospel is rather the gift of a new world from God to this old world of sin and death; still more, it is the victory over sin and death, the revelation of eternal life in Him who has knit together the whole family in heaven and on earth in the communion of saints, united in the fellowship of service, of prayer and of praise.'

The Word of God, thus interpreted as Christ Himself living on earth, crucified, risen; Christ himself as preached; Christ Himself as revealed in the pages of the Scripture; – this Word of God calls the Church into existence, and perpetually sustains it. But once called into existence by the Word, the Church is sent forth so to manifest Christ in the glory of its life as to be itself God's message to men as well as the preacher of it.

#### (v.) *The Mission of the Church*

The task of the Church has been in part defined by the preceding account of its nature. Its mission is to be the instrument of the age-long purpose of God, to live this life of fellowship in the gifts of the Spirit, to be loyal to its supreme allegiance, to proclaim and live its message.

But in the early years of the Church the mission is understood more clearly and expounded more explicitly as time goes on. The primary task is the work of evangelism. When the Gospel of St Matthew comes to be written there is a general acceptance of the mandate of the Risen Christ to make disciples of all the nations.<sup>38</sup> His followers are to be his witnesses unto the uttermost part of the earth.<sup>39</sup> Gentiles are to enter the Church on equal terms with Jews. Personal religion is set in the forefront. The Church exists for the conversion of sinners and the multiplying and perfecting of saints. The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in one body through the Cross points forward to the ultimate goal of the Church, the reconciliation of all things to Christ whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens.<sup>40</sup>

The vision of this all-inclusive ideal does not blind the eyes of St Paul to the immediate practical duties which that ideal implies. While preaching and living out their message of reconciliation, Christians are called to be active in all the common

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<sup>37</sup> Rom. vi. 3-11; 1 Cor. xi. 17-34

<sup>38</sup> Matt. xxviii. 19; cf. Luke xxiv. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Acts i. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Col. i. 20; Eph. i. 9, 10.

tasks of love. Those who watch over the Church are eager that its members should care for the poor, show sympathy with the suffering, and restore those overtaken in a fault. They would have its members strong in the Lord and in the power of His might; they would have them resist unto blood, striving against sin; their growth in faith, obedience, and holiness, is essential if the mission of the Church is to be fulfilled. Indeed, the accomplishment of all the heightened moral demands found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the distinctively ethical sections of the Epistles, is an essential part of the work of the Church, for it is only by the power of the Spirit manifested in the life of the Church that such demands can be fulfilled. The aim is that the saints, or members of the Church, shall be perfected, that all should attain to unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Thus the Church will be God's instrument, entirely adequate for the purpose for which He intended it.<sup>41</sup> That purpose is to prepare the way for the goal and the consummation of all history, the final coming of the Rule or Kingdom of God, which has already been manifested in the redemptive activity of Christ.

A mission so universal, a function so comprehensive, may justly be called catholic. The true catholicity of the Church may be found in its mandate and its task.

#### 4. THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is not without significance that one of the chief New Testament passages on the nature of the Christian ministry is written when St Paul is contemplating the supreme end for which the Church exists;<sup>42</sup> and another, when he is dealing as a pastor with a local community which had misunderstood the nature of that love which is the real unity of the Church, and the Spirit's chief fruit.<sup>43</sup>

It must never be forgotten that the word 'minister' means properly 'servant'. The New Testament words for 'minister' and 'ministry' are applied widely to most varied types of service. Indeed, there is a universal ministry within the Church. As all Christians are priests in virtue of their access to God, so all Christians are ministers in virtue of their membership in the one body. Not only in St Paul's letters<sup>44</sup> but in I Peter (iv. 10) we find that the possession of any gift was regarded as implying a debt to others, the discharge of which would be a ministry. The commonest forms of kindness to others are spoken of by our Lord as a ministry to Himself.<sup>45</sup> Within the body the members are differentiated according to the gift bestowed upon them by the Spirit, and amid the large diversity of gifts certain ministries are noteworthy. In the early chapters of Acts we read of the Apostles and the Seven in the Church of Jerusalem. These apparently sufficed for the earliest period. But the preaching of Stephen, the subsequent persecution and the scattering of the members of the Church of Jerusalem, the spread of the Christian message – all these events gave rise to a missionary ministry, and to some form of organization in the local churches thus founded.

In 1 Corinthians the ministries are described as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healing, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues; in the Epistle to

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<sup>41</sup> Eph. iv. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Eph. iv. 11-13

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 27-31.

<sup>44</sup> Rom. xii. 4-7; 1 Cor. xii. 4-28. The word translated 'gift' is '*charisma*,' a gift of God's grace. According to St Paul, all gifts are '*charismatic*'.

<sup>45</sup> Matt. xxv. 44-45.

the Ephesians, as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. These lists testify to the rich variety of the ministries exercised in the early Church.

In the Epistle to the Philippians (i. 4) we read of the overseers ('episkopoi,' translated in A.V. and R.V. 'bishops') and the deacons. The overseers appear also in Ephesus, where they are identified with presbyters or elders (Acts xx. 17, 28), and in Crete, according to Titus i. 7, where the word overseer is apparently applied to the 'elders' of the preceding verses. The presbyters, or elders, were local officials. It is probable that 'presbyteros' is the title denoting the office, while 'episkopos' describes the function.<sup>46</sup> The itinerant ministry seems to have been formed by apostles (with whom prophets<sup>47</sup> were associated at an early date) and evangelists.<sup>48</sup>

The word apostle was used in a narrower sense, of the Twelve, but also in a wider sense. Certainly others besides St Paul were called by this name in addition to the Twelve. The Twelve were solemnly chosen and 'sent forth' by our Lord in His earthly life. In the wider sense the word apostle probably meant a Christian missionary solemnly sent forth by the Church acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to preach the Gospel and to form Churches. So Barnabas and Saul had been sent forth from Antioch.<sup>49</sup>

As to the relation of the apostle to the Church, we may notice (1) that while this form of ministry, whether of the Twelve or in the wider sense, was regarded as God's gift to His Church, so were all the rest, including some which certainly have not been perpetuated; (2) that the privileges which separated the Twelve from all others, their call by the Lord in the days of His flesh and the intimate personal companionship which ensued, were incommunicable; (3) that while there is no trace of a formal commission of authority for government to the Twelve from Christ in His earthly life,<sup>50</sup> the spiritual leadership which belonged to them as witness of the resurrection and as personal companions of our Lord gave them a certain authority in administration. So too St Paul claims divine authority for the edification or 'building up' of the church.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Apparently a local Church was normally governed by a body of presbyters. It is also possible that the presbyters correspond to the 'pastors' of Ephesians, iv. 11, the 'poimenes,' another descriptive title. Cp. the charge of St Paul to the presbyters (Acts xx. 28), to be shepherds of the Church of God; 1 Pet. v. 2; John xxi. 16. Of the teacher we know little but the name. Probably he took a large part in the catechetical instruction of new converts. cf. Luke i. 4.

<sup>47</sup> The prophets were conspicuous in the first century Church, and St Paul speaks of the Church as built on the foundation of apostles and prophets. The gifts of the prophets were those of inspired eloquence, with its power to edify, comfort, or arouse enthusiasm; insight into religious truth; the appeal to the hidden recesses of the conscience.

<sup>48</sup> Two evangelists are mentioned by name, Philip and Timothy. In later tradition Philip was called an apostle; (Eusebius iii. 31.)

<sup>49</sup> Acts xiii. 3; cf. 2 Cor. viii. 23; Rom. xvi. 7.

<sup>50</sup> The promise of binding and loosing (which according to Rabbinic parallels means the power of teaching what was right and what was wrong in cases of perplexity, and probably includes also the right of admitting to or excluding from the community) was made to St Peter, according to St Matthew, but was also made to the disciples as a body, representative of the Church (Matt. xvi. 19; xviii. 18). Spiritual authority resides in the Church as a whole, in so far as the Church is indwelt by the divine Spirit (John xx. 22-23).

<sup>51</sup> 2 Cor. x. 8.

From the foregoing description it is clear that we cannot speak of 'the threefold ministry' as claiming the authority of the New Testament. Further, there is no evidence that definite prerogatives or powers are to be transmitted. We have no information about the manner in which the elders were ordained. There are four passages in the New Testament in which the laying on of hands is connected with an act answering to ordination. In Acts vi. 6, there is the laying of the hands of the Twelve Apostles on the Seven at Jerusalem. In Acts xiii. 3, the representatives of the Church at Antioch laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, after the prophetic intimation had been received from the Spirit that they had been called to a particular work.<sup>52</sup> There are two passages in the Epistles to Timothy (1 iv. 14 and 2 i. 6), which appear to refer to some prophetic monition that Timothy should be set apart for his immediate task. There is no trace of any special prerogative attached to the ordination rite, but the gift, or *charisma*, which was 'given' with the laying on of hands by the elders, had already been recognised as potential in Timothy. It was an individual capacity which now received external recognition. The society gave an authorisation which strengthened the power and confidence of the individual. We may conclude that though it is highly probable that the laying on of hands was largely practised in the apostolic age as a rite introductory to many of the varied ministries to which members of the churches might be called, the New Testament tells us little, and therefore it is difficult to believe that any principle essential to the Church, or constitutive of the very being of the Church, was involved in that rite.

The dominant principle of the ministry in the New Testament is that of the manifold bounty or grace of God. This was distributed through all the varieties of natural dispositions and faculties, and through the new gifts disclosed as the result of revelation, so that both alike might be used for the building up of the holy temple of the Church.

The relation of all these varied ministries to the Church is expressed from two points of view. In 1 Cor. xii. and Romans xii., the Church, as the Body of Christ, is the recipient of the fullness of the divine gift of the Spirit, and within the body various members are given particular functions. The functions include those of the apostolate, the prophetic order, the teaching ministry, church government and the healing gifts. In these passages the ministry may be said to come into being through the Church.

On the other hand, in Ephesians iv., the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher are given by the glorified Lord to the Church for the building up of the Body of Christ. The stress here is on the gift of the ministry to the Church. It might even be said that the Church comes to its unity and fullness of growth through the ministry.

These two views, however, are complementary rather than contradictory. In 1 Corinthians and Romans the ministry is not created by the Church. It is created by the Spirit, whose divers gifts (*charismata*) mark out this man and that for special functions. The Church recognizes, relates, and disciplines the gifts and activities of different kinds of ministers.<sup>53</sup> In Ephesians again, no less than in 1 Corinthians and Romans, the one Body is the home of the one Spirit. It is the fullness (*pleroma*) of Christ Himself.<sup>54</sup> The gifts, though special to certain members of the Church, are possessed by the Church as a whole. Thus we may say that in the New Testament the

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<sup>52</sup> This was not ordination to the apostolate; cf. Gal. i. 1.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Cor. xiv. 26-33; xvi. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Eph. i. 23.

ministry of the Word and the Sacraments is a divine gift to the Church, and was in those early days an integral part of its organic life. It was a ministry within the Church, exercising in the name and by the authority of the Lord Who is the Head of the Church, powers and functions which are inherent in the Church.

#### 5. SUMMARY OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

The Church, therefore, as we find it in the pages of the New Testament, may in very truth be called the Body of Christ. Its members are 'in Christ'; through Him they have access in one Spirit unto the Father. It has come into being as the result of the redemptive activity of God in Christ, and knows the mystery of the divine purpose which has been hidden and is now revealed. The Church is in possession of the divine resources to equip its members for their task. It feels itself to be the true inheritor of the ancient promises made to the People of God. It is one in allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, one because its members share in the divine gift of the Spirit, one in the message proclaimed, and one in the mission to which it is called by God. Its unity is expressed in life and in common worship, particularly in the ordinances of Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. It is holy because it consists of men and women called out of the world to live a new and consecrated life. It is catholic because it consists of all the believers throughout the world who profess Christ, and who, grouped as they are in local communities, everywhere recognize one another as belonging to the Church of God. It is catholic also because of its mandate in the revealed purpose of God, and the task to which it is committed. It possesses ministries which are recognized as God's gift for the evangelization of the world and for the enrichment of the life to be lived within the Church. As an institution in time and space it is an imperfect embodiment of its great ideal. The whole Church, the local churches, the individual members, are continually failing in insight. They are frail in faith. They are tardy in the fulfilment of the tasks of love. Sometimes there are those who are overtaken in flagrant sins. But the spiritual realities are there, and they are shared within the Church and communicated to those without.

#### 6. METHODIST LOYALTY TO THE PRINCIPLES OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

The foregoing pages contain a statement of the constitution and life of the Christian Church as it appears in the pages of the New Testament. The Methodist Church holds to the principles which have been expounded in the preceding paragraphs. We join with Christians of all communions in the confession that the history of the Church, including that part of it to which we own our loyalty, has fallen far short of the ideal outlined in the New Testament. But that ideal is our ideal. We make it our own, since 'the Methodist Church acknowledges the Divine Revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures, as the supreme rule of faith and practice'. We do claim that none of the forms of organization taken by the Apostolic Church should be determinative for the Church for all time. For example, while many among us may be firmly convinced that the order of the ministry as it has been developed amongst us closely resembles the order which apparently prevailed in the first century, we do not on that account regard it as a divine provision binding upon the whole Church of God. Such a claim is untenable by those who hold, as we do, that in the New Testament, order, important as it is, is never equated with faith. While all true ministries derive from Christ, none of the forms of ministry which prevail in the various Churches of Christendom today can legitimately claim the authority of our Lord in His earthly life.



Christ constituted a community of disciples and believers. They had two simple rites. He gave them what the early Church passed on, a new life in the Spirit, an experience of God, a store of teaching, a gospel, and a mission. The Church did not die. The Church, as we believe, cannot die. 'The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.' The historic continuity of the living Church is vital to Christianity.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

Owing to the course which the history of the Church has taken, there are today many separate religious bodies, which are called Churches in the accepted modern sense<sup>55</sup> of the term. Many of these claim special fidelity to the New Testament itself, while one, at least, even claims a unique authority as the Church of Christ. Hence it is necessary to state the place of Methodism in the Church Catholic. This statement will include, first, an exposition of the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past; second, a survey of the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation, so far as they affect our present subject; third, an exposition of the reasons for the existence of Methodism as a distinct body, or 'Church', in the modern sense, and finally, certain positive affirmations as to the nature of the Church, which should enable Methodism to make common cause with Christians of all communions in proclaiming Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Faith, and spreading Scriptural Holiness throughout the world.

### 1. THE CONTINUITY OF METHODISM WITH THE CHURCH OF THE PAST

The actual statement of the *Deed of Union* (1932) indicates the position of the Methodist Church with regard to its inheritance from the past.

'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic Faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread Scriptural Holiness through the land by the proclamation of the Evangelical Faith, and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission. The doctrines of the Evangelical Faith, which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds, are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation, of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.'

In the *Deed of Union* a continuity of Methodism with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is affirmed.

First, it is implied, inasmuch as the Methodist Church 'claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ'.

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<sup>55</sup> This is not the New Testament sense. See p. 7.

Second, it is asserted by the acceptance of the Apostolic Faith which we have inherited from the past.

Third, continuity is implied by the fact that the two sacraments are observed 'as of divine appointment and perpetual obligation'.

Fourth, continuity is asserted in the explicit acceptance of the fundamental principles of the historic creeds.

Fifth, the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past is asserted by its acceptance of the fundamental principles of the gospel, which were re-affirmed at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was in loyalty to those principles that other widely spread communions before Methodism have come into being within the one Church.

Sixth, the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past is asserted in the re-affirmation of the mission for which Methodism was raised up; it was and is our task 'to spread Scriptural Holiness through the land'.

The true continuity with the Church of past ages which we cherish is to be found in the continuity of the Christian experience, the fellowship in the gift of the one Spirit; in the continuity of the allegiance to one Lord, the continued proclamation of the message, the continued acceptance of the mission. All these we share with the New Testament Church. Our spiritual ancestry goes back through a multitude of saints which no man can number. The experience is communicated; the message is passed on. The bread of life is the gift of God, but it is broken from hand to hand. The influence of one human personality on others is the chief means used by God for propagating the truth by which the Church lives. Most men are won to Christian faith, or confirmed in Christian conviction, by the beauty of Christian character, the attraction of holiness embodied in personal form. Behind each believer of today there stretches a long chain, each link a Christian man or woman, till we find ourselves, with the first disciples, in the company of the Lord Himself. Through such a succession of believers Methodists may echo the confession of one of the early Apologists: 'Christians trace their genealogy from the Lord Jesus Christ.' In these genealogies there is no distinction between laymen and ministers, men and women. Indeed all Christians may be priests in this holy office. As Dr G G Findlay has said, 'Those who share St Peter's faith share his power. Each confessor of the Son of God is empowered to open to the penitent, so far as human hands may, that gate of faith through which he himself has passed.'

This is our doctrine of apostolic succession. It is our conviction, therefore, that the continuity of the Church does not depend on, and is not necessarily secured by, an official succession of ministers, whether bishops or presbyters, from apostolic times, but rather by fidelity to apostolic truth. The office is contingent on the Word, and not the Word on the office. Indeed, the apparent discontinuity of office has sometimes been due to a reassertion of the true and essential continuity of experience, allegiance, message and mission.

Nevertheless, the Word of Life has been transmitted to us by a multitude of ministries, known and unknown, remembered or forgotten. We humbly acknowledge that our present fellowship derives from those who have been our fathers in God, and we acknowledge our debt to the Church of the past which has endured from one generation to another, by the power of Him who would not suffer it to be destroyed by assaults from without or faithlessness within. We give thanks to Him that, even in the days of its feebleness and faithlessness, the Word and Sacraments of His Church have

never been wholly without power, and that men have been continually ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

## 2. THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In considering the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past, account must be taken of its deep and permanent debt to the Protestant Reformation, a debt which is avowed in our *Deed of Union*.

It must be regretfully confessed that while there has been a true continuity of faith, experience, witness and sanctity within the Church, this continuity did not prevent disastrous breaches of fellowship in Christendom, the effects of which persist to this day. The Great Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, which was completed by the anathema laid on the Patriarch of Constantinople by Pope Leo IX in A.D. 1054, and the breaking away of the Church of Sweden and the Church of England from the Papacy in the sixteenth century, demonstrate that Churches which claim the unbroken succession of their Bishops from apostolic times have been unable to preserve the outward unity of the Church. The guidance of the Spirit had been promised by our Lord to ensure that the growth and development of the Church might be in accordance with the will of God. But it is evident that not all the changes which have befallen the Church have been the result of the Spirit's guidance. At various periods accretions from paganism have become embedded in worship, in practice, even in doctrine, and secular aims have governed the thought and policy of the accredited rulers of the Church. Such a period was the early sixteenth century.

The Protestant Reformation was primarily an appeal to the revealed will of God against the corruptions which had infected the practice of the Church in the course of many centuries. It was a rediscovery of the heart of the gospel. This appeal to the Word of God against practical abuses determined the emphasis of the Reformation message, and led to a further appeal against unevangelical accretions in the realm of doctrine.

First, stress was laid on the gospel truth that salvation is by faith alone. By the word 'faith' Luther understood that 'believing in God which means that I put my trust in Him, give myself up to thinking that I can have dealings with Him, and believe without any doubt that He will be and do to me according to the things said of Him. Such faith which throws itself upon God, whether in life or in death, alone makes a Christian man'.<sup>56</sup> This faith was set over against the popular belief, which was fostered by the whole penitential system of the mediaeval Church, that man must make himself fit to receive the grace of God.<sup>57</sup>

Second, the stress of the Reformation message was laid on the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ as the one Mediator between God and man, by His life on earth, and by his one perfect sacrifice upon the Cross. By this appeal to the apostolic gospel, the popular invocation of other intercessors, who were supposed to share with our Lord the procuring of pardon, was swept away.<sup>58</sup> Luther and Calvin held firmly to the faith of the old Church as expressed in the historic creeds. But the Reformation introduced

<sup>56</sup> *Works* (Erlangen ed.) xxii, 15; cp. Calvin, *Inst.* III ii, 7. 'Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour towards us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Inst.* III, iv, 3 and 25.

<sup>58</sup> Augsburg Confession, Art. xxi.

into the world a deeper understanding of the Person and the Work of Christ than had prevailed since the apostolic age. Both the Person and the Work of our Lord were indissolubly joined in Luther's thought. The humanity of Jesus in His earthly life, which had always been a dogma of the Church, became an article of practical piety. 'We are undone,' said Luther, 'if we cannot say this *Man* is God.' So, too, Calvin said, 'When Christ is known, we have the sum of the gospel.'<sup>59</sup> Fixed on this blissful centre believers could rest and find certainty.

Third, the Protestant Reformation laid a new stress on the New Testament teaching as to the priesthood of all believers. The God who had manifested Himself in Christ was accessible to every believing man. Again, by this rediscovery were dispelled the popular beliefs as to the power of Pope and priesthood to bar the way to God. 'At the Eucharist,' says Luther, 'we all kneel beside our priest or minister, and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, all holy priests together, sanctified by the blood of Christ. We are there in our priestly dignity . . . We do not let the priest proclaim for himself the ordinance of Christ; but he is the mouthpiece of us all, and we all say it with him in our hearts with true faith in the Lamb of God who feeds us with His Body and Blood.'

The re-statement of the central gospel at the time of the Reformation included the revivification of the New Testament doctrine of the Church. The appeal to the revealed will of God as contained in the Scriptures proved that the principle governing any definition of the limits of the Church must be the Gospel, the Word of God which it proclaims and which ever creates it anew. The Word of God is primarily Jesus Himself, the Incarnate Lord. This evangel is proclaimed and heard in the congregation. It is also set forth in the Sacraments, where it is the visible word (*verbum visibile*). The Sacraments are Sacraments of the Gospel. The essential thing in them is not what we say and do in them but what God in Christ says and does in them. Accordingly the Church on earth, as the Augsburg Confession defined it, is 'the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments rightly administered.'<sup>60</sup> By the 'congregation of the saints' the Reformers mean the whole company of believers. The presence of hypocrites or unbelievers in the Church does not destroy its true character as the community of those who have faith. Luther saw as early as 1513 that this was what St Paul meant by 'saints'. He speaks often of the Church as 'the communion of saints' and regarded it as the living fellowship indwelt by the Spirit of God, 'where one labours for another as one member in the body for another'.

It was a tragedy that after this bold proclamation of forgotten truths, the heralds of such a message were regarded as heretics, and cast out of the official Church. As a result, the whole visible structure of the Church was changed. There have come into existence a number of separated 'Churches', of which the Methodist Church is one. Since the early sixteenth century most of the various communities in Western Christendom have formulated their message in confessions of faith, which have had a potent influence on subsequent religious history. Thus the faith of the Lutheran Church is formulated in the Augsburg Confession (1530), that of the Reformed Church in various other confessions, the chief of which, perhaps, are the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Westminster Confession of the Scottish Presbyterians (1647). So, too, the Anglican Church formulated the Thirty-nine Articles (1562), and the Roman Church itself became a community of this type by the adoption of the decrees of the

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<sup>59</sup> *Commentary on Acts*, viii. 35.

<sup>60</sup> Art. vii. Compare the *Thirty-nine Articles*, Art. xix.

Council of Trent (1545-1563). When Methodism came into being a special emphasis was laid on its evangelical witness by the choice of Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his sermons as containing the evangelical doctrines, to which the Methodist preachers were pledged.

### 3. THE PLACE OF METHODISM WITHIN THE ONE CHURCH OF GOD

At this point it is fitting that we should indicate the relation in which Methodism stands to the one Church of God. Within that one Church Methodism has undoubtedly been from its birth. Like the other communions which arose in Protestantism it was begotten by the Word of God. John Wesley regarded the movement which he led as raised up by God to 'spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the land'. In its message, the Fatherhood of God, and the Deity both of the atoning Saviour and of the witnessing and sanctifying Spirit, came to be freshly recognised, in contrast to the Deism and Socinianism which were prevalent in eighteenth century England. Fresh emphasis was laid on certain neglected truths:- the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the universality and completeness of the redemption wrought by Christ, the necessity of the New Birth. In the name of Jesus Christ the Methodist preachers offered a free, full, and present salvation based on the sacrifice of the Cross, bestowed on condition of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and certified inwardly by the witness of the Spirit of God, outwardly by a life of holy obedience and love. This was also the message of the other Methodist Churches united with the Wesleyan Methodists in 1932.

Particular stress has always been laid on three features of the original message, – (1) the doctrine of Assurance, or the Witness of the Spirit, that is, the personal certainty of the forgiveness of sins and of restored sonship; (2) the need for believers to press on towards holiness or perfect love, a goal that is attainable in this earthly life; (3) the practice of Christian fellowship. With all their failures to rise to the height of their calling, Methodists are still profoundly conscious of their unexhausted mission.

It was the desire and intention of John Wesley and his brother that the Societies which they organized and tended should be closely linked with the Church of England, within which the Movement had originated. But the Methodist Societies were never an integral part of the Church of England.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore incorrect to declare that those Societies 'separated' from the Church of England, without far-reaching qualifications.

The movement was regarded with suspicion, hostility or indifference by most of the bishops and the clergy of the Church of England in the eighteenth century. As early as 1738 John Wesley was, as he said,<sup>62</sup> 'almost universally excluded from the pulpits of the Established Church.' He based his action in preaching in the parishes, both in the open air and in meeting-houses, against the will of the parochial clergy, on his authorization to preach received at his ordination,<sup>63</sup> and also on his position as a Fellow of Lincoln College. None the less, his action did not conform to the order of

<sup>61</sup> Overton and Relton, *History of the English Church* (1906, 1924), vii. 6, 74-75; J. S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism* (1925), 149-151; so Dr J. H. Rigg, whom Dr Simon quotes.

<sup>62</sup> Overton and Relton, vii. 77; cf. Simon, *John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to C. Wesley, June 23, 1739.

the Church of England. Wesley's principle was, 'Church or no Church, we must attend to the business of saving souls'. Or rather, as he said elsewhere, he would keep in view the interests of Christ's Church in general, and of practical religion; not considering the Church of England, or the cause of Methodism, but as subordinate thereto.<sup>64</sup>

Further, Wesley laid great stress on sacramental worship in the parish churches. But Methodists were frequently repelled from the Lord's Table, and this became one of the reasons which led Wesley, and after his death the Conferences to authorize some of the preachers to administer the Sacraments.

A third factor in the situation was the conviction born in Wesley's mind as the result of his reading of Lord King's book<sup>65</sup> that the New Testament knew no distinction between *episcopos* and *presbyteros*, and that therefore he was 'a scriptural *episcopos* as much as any man in England or in Europe'. Acting on this conviction he ordained superintendents and presbyters for America, when he failed in his efforts to induce the Bishop of London to ordain. Later, he ordained presbyters for Scotland and England. Again it was the need for the Word and the Sacraments which influenced his action. In the fourth place, there were large numbers among the early Methodists who had no spiritual home; there were many others who had been Dissenters. To all these, already outside the Established Church, the rules of Anglicanism meant nothing.

Thus in spite of Wesley's ardent desire that the societies should be within the Church of England, Methodism was compelled to become a distinct religious community. It was guilty of no 'schism'.

Methodists can never surrender the conviction that the evangelical revival in the eighteenth century was the work of God. Methodism has been vouchsafed the fruits of the Spirit, in evangelization, in religious experience, and in the lives of its children. However far its adherents have fallen short of the perfect love to which all Christians are called, their avowed ideal has been to be 'the friends of all, and the enemies of none' who own the one Lord and the one faith.

The Methodist Church, like other world-wide communities within the one Church, cannot be content with the present broken communion of Christendom. Not one of these communities can legitimately claim to be the whole of the Catholic Church on earth. Neither are these separate communities analogous to the local 'church' in primitive Christianity. Today the Church of Christ on earth means all the believers, in whatever community they are found, who confess Jesus as Lord, to the glory of God the Father. We acknowledge that all the communities which make this confession and maintain it among their members, whether the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Eastern, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican or Free Churches may humbly claim to belong to the Body of Christ.

### III. AFFIRMATIONS

1. God, who has given us the Gospel for the salvation of the world, has appointed His Church to witness by life and word to its redeeming power. Through His revelation in Jesus Christ He has called His people to live under His rule and to be the

<sup>64</sup> Letter to S. Walker, September 3, 1756.

<sup>65</sup> *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church*; published in 1691.

instrument of His eternal purpose. The Church of the living God rests ultimately not on the will of men, whether as individuals or societies, but on the creative will of God. As members of the Church, men have freely and gladly rendered their consent to the call of their Father, but it was His choice of them and not their choice of Him, that is the origin and renewing power for the life of the Church. Of this Church Jesus Christ is the Head, the Holy Spirit its continuing life.

2. The Church of Christ on earth is a redeemed society of believers, whose duty and privilege it is to share in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to enjoy that communion with God the Father which has been granted in the forgiveness of sins through our Lord Jesus Christ. As they share in that gift, so they share in their allegiance to Jesus Christ who gave it; they share in that message not only by preaching Christ, by worshipping Christ in the Sacraments and assemblies for fellowship, but also by shewing forth Christ in daily life. The mission of the Church is to be the instrument of God's purpose for mankind; to multiply the number of those redeemed persons who share the gift of the Spirit and reveal the power of God in their lives; to bring every human activity into the obedience of Christ; and, as a sacramental society, to testify that ordinary life may be holy, and that the common things of God's creation may be the revelation and tokens of His love. The message of the Gospel is to be carried by the Church to every creature; all men and nations, all races and classes, are to be reconciled by the power of the Cross of Christ to God and to one another. The age-long task of the Church will be to build up all its members, thus redeemed, in holiness and perfect love, and so to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom in glory.

3. The Church today is gathered for the most part in certain denominations or 'Churches'. These form but a partial and imperfect embodiment of the New Testament ideal. They are already one in Christ Jesus; they have not to create that unity; it is there; and it is the gift of God. But it is their duty to make common cause in the search for the perfect expression of that unity and holiness which in Christ are already theirs.

4. In the light of the foregoing description of the nature of the Church, it is clear that the full Christian life can only be lived in fellowship, and within the communion of the Christian Church. It is the privilege and the duty of Christian people to honour its ordinances, especially the public preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, to claim their inheritance in the rich and varied traditions of worship, sanctity, and missionary ardour which come down to us from its past, and to make common cause with all who own allegiance to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in spreading the gospel of universal reconciliation throughout the world.

5. While the true life of the Methodist Church consists in its fellowship with the whole Church of God, as already described, it possesses those marks whereby, since the days of the Apostles, the Church has been known of men. Such are: the possession and acknowledgement of the Word of God as given in Scripture, and as interpreted by the Holy Spirit to the Church and to the individual; the profession of faith in God as He is incarnate and revealed in Christ; the observance of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and a ministry for the pastoral office, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. But while the nature of the Christian Church must be described by what it has, as well as by what it is, the real significance of what it is can only be understood when its members manifest that living faith which is fellowship with God and Jesus Christ His Son, and which is expressed in prayer, in worship, in all the means of grace, in the acceptance of the task to preach the gospel to every creature, in the pursuit of holiness, and in the service of love to all mankind.

6. The Church is an institution, pervaded by the Holy Spirit, whose members are enabled and inspired by His presence to share with one another all that they have received from God. Nothing makes this function of the Church more clearly manifest to those who are outside than the extension of this activity to include not only the faith and the consolations, the rites and the ministry of the Church, but also all that its members could value in the material means for human well-being, alike in mind, body and estate. Moreover, just as the Church recognizes the paramount duty of evangelization, whereby its spiritual gifts and possessions are imparted to others, and others are drawn into its fellowship with the Father and the Son, so in the name of Him who bore the griefs and carried the sorrows of mankind it must set itself to work the works of God in combating disease and poverty, ignorance and vice, and the whole mass of social evil in the world. This activity may involve far-reaching changes in the structure of society. But since self-seeking and callousness and greed are the contradictory of the spirit of the followers of Christ, the Church is of necessity set under our Lord to be both the critic and the saviour of the world, the corrupt society which 'lies in the evil one' and yet is the object of the love of God. It cannot rest, therefore, until, at whatever cost to itself, that society has been transformed.

7. Since the Gospel brings victory over sin and death, God has knit together the whole family of the Church in heaven and on earth in the communion of saints, united in the fellowship of service, of prayer, and of praise; and the Church on earth looks forward to the vision of God, the perfect consummation of its present fellowship in the life of heaven.

*(Agenda 1937, pp. 365-402)*

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The above statement was superseded in 1999 by *Called to Love and Praise* (see Volume 2, pp. 1-59).



## **Part II Entry into the Church**

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## **MEMORANDUM ON INFANT BAPTISM (1936)**

### **The Origin and Catholicity of the Sacrament of Baptism.**

The New Testament teaches that our Lord Himself submitted to the baptism of St. John, and that by His authority the rite was instituted in the Christian Church. From the day of Pentecost onwards Baptism was the Sacrament by which believers were received into the Christian Community, and this apostolic practice has continued in the universal Church unto this day. While there are many differences within the one Church, and while some of these affect the interpretation of this Sacrament, yet, as every Christian community which practices Infant Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity accepts the validity of the baptism of every other, this Sacrament is a great symbol of Christian unity.

### **How Infant Baptism Arose**

The Sacrament of Baptism is the 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,' and when administered to adults and received in faith, the outward sign is in itself a conscious means of grace. The word of the Saviour, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God,' placed them among His people, and since Baptism was the outward symbol of initiation into the Church, this rite was naturally extended to the children of Christian parents. In the early Christian centuries, the desire of Christian parents that their offspring should be included in the Church to which they themselves belonged, led to the baptism of their children even in infancy.

### **The Sacramental Difference between Adult and Infant Baptism**

While the Spirit of God is present and active in every child, whether baptised or unbaptised, from birth onward, the special object of Baptism is to claim the child for the Kingdom of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In this Sacrament, when administered to infants, the outward sign and the inward grace are in some ways to be distinguished. The outward act anticipates the day when the child will consciously accept the inward grace. Our hope and confidence is that, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, in answer to the prayers of the Church, and through the influence of Christian nurture to which the parents pledge themselves, this Sacrament will be inwardly completed and made effective when the child through faith in Christ responds to the grace proclaimed and pledged by the rite.

### **Infant Baptism is the Sacrament of Initiation into the Church on Earth and a Symbol of Universal Grace.**

By adult Baptism, Christians are outwardly identified with the 'congregation of Christ's flock,' the visible fellowship of His disciples in which the Holy Spirit dwells. This Sacrament is thus, not only an outward symbol, but also a channel of inward grace. Membership of the Church involves for all who voluntarily seek it a covenant both with Christ and with His Church. Since an infant is incapable of entering into conscious fellowship with the Lord and His people, the child's membership is necessarily incomplete. By Baptism the child is brought into the household of faith, and as such should be regarded as remaining therein, in hope of the time when he will personally receive Jesus Christ as His Saviour and Lord. Meanwhile, alike in infancy,

childhood, and youth, the ministries of the Church are his, as are those of his home, though he may be little aware of either.

#### **What Baptism Symbolises for the Church and for Parents.**

For the Church and for the natural guardians of the child, Infant Baptism has an immediate symbolic and spiritual value. Christ is the minister of His own Sacrament, and the covenanting parties through whom He works are the Church and the parents. In this Sacrament, the Church as representative of Christ, pledges itself to instruct and train the child in the doctrine, duties, and privileges of the Christian religion. In like manner, the parents on their part pledge themselves to be the ministers of God to him for good, to make for him a Christian home, and to share with the Church in the Christian nurture and care of the child.

#### **Responsibility taken for the Child an Essential Element in the Baptismal Service.**

Whenever Baptism is administered to an infant, there ought to be those present who take definite responsibility for the religious upbringing of the child, and the Order of Service provides for this. Without such undertaking, vital parts of the Sacramental Service are neglected. It is the plain duty of all who administer this Sacrament to assure themselves as far as possible that the person or persons who present the child are taking real responsibility for its Christian training. Baptism is degraded to something little better than superstition unless the parents or guardians of the child are participators in the Sacrament along with the ministrant of the rite.

#### **The Baptism of Unfortunate Children.**

Normally it is the duty and high calling of parents to take the responsibility. There are, however, cases for which special provision must be made – e.g. orphans, or children born out of wedlock. In such instances the Church should appoint its own representatives to take responsibility for the training of the child, and, if need be, to answer the questions put to parents in the Baptismal Service.

#### **The Christian Obligation of Infant Baptism.**

We assert in common with the general body of the Church of Christ, that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, and thus to honour the ancient ordinance whereby they are joined to the visible community of Christ's people.

*(Minutes 1936, pp.400f)*

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This Memorandum was composed with special regard to the publication of the *Book of Offices* in 1936.

## STATEMENT ON HOLY BAPTISM (1952)

### PREAMBLE

In issuing this Statement the Conference Committee does not seek to impose on the Methodist people any one of the varying interpretations of the Sacrament of Baptism which have been held amongst us. It is no dogmatic definition that is offered in this document; still less is it a Confession of faith by which orthodoxy or loyalty might be tested. Our purpose is primarily practical. This document moves forward to certain practical recommendations at the end. The purpose is to make sure that the use of this Sacrament shall never be casual, thoughtless, or unenlightened; to enable the Methodist people to appreciate the meaning of Baptism, as the practice emerges in the Primitive Church; and to face the fresh problems arising when parents who have only a nominal connection with the Christian Church present their children for Infant Baptism.

### (I) THE OBLIGATION OF BAPTISM FOR THE METHODIST PEOPLE

The Methodist Conference, since the Union of 1932, has by no means left the Methodist people without guidance on the obligation of Baptism. The Deed of Union itself declares as one of our doctrinal standards, that 'The Methodist Church recognizes two sacraments, namely, Baptism and Lord's Supper as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation, of which it is the privilege and duty of Members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.' It also states: 'According to Methodist usage the Sacrament of Baptism is administered to infants, and regular oversight should be given by the local Church and its Minister to all who have been dedicated to God by this sign.' Among the Committees appointed by the Uniting Conference was one to revise the Book of Offices, and another to prepare a special Statement on Infant Baptism. Both Committees concluded their work in 1936, when their documents were finally approved by the Conference.

'The Order of Service for the Baptism of Such as are of Riper Years' begins with the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, and declares in the words of Scripture that Baptism is unto the remission of sins, and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. One of the questions asked of the candidate for Baptism is: 'Thus having pledged yourself to Christ, will you seek to fulfil the ministry He appoints you in His Church as a member of His Body?' Immediately after the Baptism the Minister says: 'We receive this person into the congregation of Christ's Church'; and this is followed by a prayer 'that he may have grace to build up the Body of Christ.'

The Order of Service for the Baptism of Infants repeats the promise of Christ's redeeming grace 'to you and to your children, and to all that are afar off', and the promise of the Holy Spirit. At the climax of the service the Minister declares that we receive the person baptized into the congregation of Christ's flock.

Both services are therefore services of reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Statement on Infant Baptism of the Conference of 1936, however, declares that the child's membership is necessarily incomplete, but that by Baptism the child is brought into the household of faith, and should be regarded as remaining therein, in the hope and expectation of the time when he will personally receive Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. The statement concludes:

‘We assert in common with the general body of the Church of Christ, that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child, rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, and thus to honour the ancient ordinance whereby they are joined to the visible community of Christ’s people.’

There can, therefore, be no reasonable doubt that every member of the Methodist Church is under a solemn obligation to submit in penitence and faith to the ordinance of Christian Baptism, if for any reason he has not been baptized, and also to bring his children to be baptized.

The spread of unbelief, indifference to religion, and nominal Christianity in Western Europe has created a difficult situation in relation to the administration of Infant Baptism. The mixed character of a community which is neither Christian nor pagan gives rise to acute practical problems. It is notorious that many parents who do not themselves attend Church, seek baptism for their children, often with the most vague and erroneous ideas about its meaning, and with no intention of accepting the solemn obligations involved.

We are called to proclaim that the Gospel is for all men, that in Christ all were created and in Him all have been redeemed. When non-Christian parents bring their children for Baptism we are presented with an evangelical opportunity which we may not neglect. Yet we dare not pass lightly over or omit the solemn responsibilities involved in Holy Baptism. Therefore the Methodist Church in this country offers Baptism to all, and denies it to none, whose parents or guardians, after due instruction in their meaning, are willing to make the solemn promises contained in the service of Holy Baptism in the Book of Offices.

## (II) THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM AND ITS VITAL CONNEXION WITH JUSTIFYING FAITH

From the Day of Pentecost onwards Baptism was the symbol of entry into the Church of Christ.<sup>66</sup> There is insufficient evidence for the assertion that infants were baptized in New Testament times, but on the other hand it is nowhere stated that their baptism had to be postponed until they became believers in the full sense. In any case those writers from whom we learn the New Testament’s doctrine of Baptism clearly have the Baptism of believers in mind.

Jesus was believed by the early Church to have commanded the Baptism of all converts,<sup>67</sup> and His own Baptism<sup>68</sup> was the example of Christian Baptism. According to the Evangelists it was not simply the ‘Baptism of John’, but Baptism by water and the Spirit, and the Voice that He heard, with its strong reminiscence of the Servant Songs in Isaiah,<sup>69</sup> shows that in submitting to Baptism by John He was accepting the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord. Thus it became to Him the symbol of His suffering and death, and of His triumph over death which released the powers of the

<sup>66</sup> Acts ii.38

<sup>67</sup> Matthew xxviii.19. The unhesitating practice by the early Church of water Baptism from the first, in spite of the words of John the Baptist implying that it would be superseded (Mark i.8, and parallel passages; cf. Acts i.5; xi.16), strongly suggests that this belief was correct.

<sup>68</sup> Mark i.9-11, Matthew iii. 13-17, Luke iii.21, 2.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., of Isaiah xlii.1; ‘Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delighteth.’

Kingdom of God to all mankind.<sup>70</sup> Further, the Baptism of Jesus is directly associated in all the Gospel narratives not only with descent of the Spirit but also with the acknowledgement of His divine Sonship. The triple association of Baptism with Christ's death, with the gift of the Holy Spirit and with 'Sonship,' also forms part of the apostolic teaching about Christian Baptism.

Thus, with the Baptism, death, and resurrection of Jesus in his mind, St Paul sets forth Christian Baptism, which is also by water and the Spirit, as signifying our dying to sin and our rising again to the life of righteousness through communion with Christ.<sup>71</sup> At the same time he closely connects it with the sonship of God which is ours because we are in Christ.<sup>72</sup> In the same way St John relates it to the birth from above through which we become sons of God by the activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup> Baptism is an active expression of the Gospel of Grace. By our incorporation into Christ we become members of His Body, which is the Church, and inherit the powers of the New Age which He inaugurated; and Baptism is the sign of that incorporation.<sup>74</sup>

The New Testament speaks also of the two Covenants. Under the Old Covenant children of Abraham were heirs by birth of the promises of God and members of His Chosen People; and their membership was sealed by circumcision.<sup>75</sup> Under the New Covenant we are born anew of the Spirit; and become by repentance and faith members of the New Israel, the Church; and the seal of our membership is Baptism.<sup>76</sup>

The New Testament plainly teaches that we are justified by the grace of God through faith.<sup>77</sup> It is apparent, too, that in New Testament teaching and practice, faith in Christ is followed by Baptism.<sup>78</sup> This faith (itself a divine gift), is, in the New Testament linked with Baptism in the most intimate possible way.<sup>79</sup> Yet in this Sacrament of the Gospel it is God's action which is primary. In it God comes and gives Himself to us, and claims us for His own. Our action is the answer of faith, but the emphasis must always lie not on what we do, but on what God has done and is waiting to do for us in Christ. Christ Himself is the minister of Baptism, and the Sacrament is made effectual through the gracious working of God, whereby what He accomplished once for all in the death and resurrection of Christ is more and more realised in the life of those who increasingly make the divine gift their own.<sup>80</sup>

### (III) INFANT BAPTISM AND THE GRACE OF GOD

The New Testament doctrine of Baptism is primarily concerned with the Baptism of believers. In what sense is it possible to understand the riches of the promises which in the New Testament are comprised in Baptism, when the recipient of these promises is an infant?

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<sup>70</sup> Luke xii.50, Mark x.38.

<sup>71</sup> Romans vi.3-7, Galatians iii.27.

<sup>72</sup> Galatians iii.26.

<sup>73</sup> John iii.3-5

<sup>74</sup> 1 Corinthians 12-13

<sup>75</sup> Luke iii.8, Philippians iii 5.

<sup>76</sup> Acts ii. 38; 1 Corinthians xii.13.

<sup>77</sup> Romans iii. 22-4, Ephesians ii. 8, etc, etc

<sup>78</sup> Acts ii, 38; viii. 36, 38; xvi. 31-3, etc., etc

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Romans ii. 21-8 with v.3-6.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Romans vi. 3-8 with Ephesians ii. 4-6.

These spiritual benefits are summed up in the word 'Grace'. Grace should never be understood as a mere quality or disposition, but as the redeeming activity of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The essential mark of the Gospel sacrament is not what we do, but what God does. Just as Jesus welcomed the little children in the days of His flesh, so in Baptism now He receives them into His company. Baptism is God's authoritative acknowledgement of them as His children. In Baptism Christ Himself through His Church takes the children in His arms and declares what He has done and what He will do for them. Thus they come to belong to His people and receive access to the teaching, the worship, and the example of Christians. In this sense they have entered the realm of grace. Grace is the Love of God, spontaneous and unearned, active in Christ, and therefore in His Church, for the redemption of all men from the habit and bondage of sin.

Grace comes before faith, and awakens faith. In that sense it is always 'prevenient'. The Sacrament is never administered without the response of faith, the faith of the assembly of believing people, who dedicate the child to Him. Baptism signifies the act of God, whereby He shows Himself graciously calling forth the faith of His Church, and setting the Child amongst them as an inheritor of His promises. But the conscious response in the infant is always delayed. This fact should not prevent us from recognising that the love of God, active and redemptive, is the thing signified and present in the sacrament of the Baptism of infants, and will be accessible to every child brought up in the fellowship of believing people. The practice of Infant Baptism is in itself an impressive witness to the truth that the Grace of God comes before our response, and is wholly apart from our deserts.

But though the child baptized in infancy is an heir to the promises of God, he does not always or inevitably claim his inheritance. As he comes to riper years, a continued working of the Holy Spirit is necessary, if he is to give any conscious response. He must see his sin and his need. He must put all his trust and confidence in Christ, both for his life here and for his hope of life everlasting. This full response, this saving faith, he cannot produce in his own unaided strength. It is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, and is essential to life in Christ. Whether this work is called 'Conversion', or 'the New Birth', whether it is regarded as sudden or gradual, or as both process and crisis, it is true that without the gift of saving faith those baptized in infancy can never attain to their privileged life as sons of God. While Methodists recognise that Christ is the true Minister in Baptism and that therein Christ sets the child in the company of His people, they also declare that the personal appropriation of the promises of Christ by the child should be prayed for and expected.

Both Sacraments point forward to the end, to the final consummation. As we partake of the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death 'until He come'. So, according to St Paul, Baptism proclaims the death and burial of the old self with Christ, and our rising again with Him to a new life in which we ever look forward to His final manifestation in glory. This promise is not only for those who are of riper years. It is also for little children.

The Methodist Church believes the Baptism of Infants to be in accordance with the mind of Christ. Not only is it sanctioned by the practice of the Church since very early times; it proclaims and offers the grace of God, who is eternally active for the salvation of all men, and receives even the youngest into that realm where His promises are gloriously fulfilled. Sin is not simply a matter of individual wrong-doing; each one of us is also involved in the sin of the world, in the community of evil. When an infant is



baptized, he is received into the new Israel of God, which is God's answer to the community of evil.

#### (IV) PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) Baptism is an obligation resting upon everyone desiring to be a member of the Methodist Church, and where it has not taken place in infancy, provision is made in the Book of Offices for a service of 'Baptism for such as are of Riper Years'. It is important that those being prepared for Church Membership should be asked whether or not they have been baptized. If they were not baptized as infants, it should be expected that they present themselves for the service of Baptism for those of riper years before being received into Church Membership.

Under the conditions of the Mission Field, it is recognised that Baptism for those who have reached years of discretion is likely to be a normal Methodist practice.

(b) In common with the general body of the Church of Christ, we affirm that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, which claims for them all the benefits of His redeeming work and signifies their admission into the visible community of His Church.

We likewise affirm the joint responsibility of the Church and the parents or guardians of the child presented for Baptism for the due honouring of the pledges solemnly undertaken in this Sacrament; and we emphasise the great importance of such procedure as shall ensure that, so far as lies in our power, the undertaking shall be entered into with understanding and sincere purpose, since otherwise the Sacrament may be degraded to the level of mere social custom or superstition.

We are presented with cause for serious misgiving by those parents who request Baptism for their children but themselves acknowledge no vital relationship with the Christian Church. In view of the considerable number of these today, we recommend a certain normal procedure as highly desirable. In the Methodist Church, with its widely varying local conditions, there are difficulties in obtaining detailed uniformity, but we strongly urge the attempt to follow as faithfully as possible the principles set forth in the following recommendations. Their purpose is to ensure that the use of this Sacrament shall never be casual or unenlightened, and that the consideration set out in this Statement shall be safeguarded to the utmost of our power. The due and proper administration of Holy Baptism is an essential part of the pastoral office of the Church.

- (i) *Intimation.* Before every administration of Baptism seven days' notice (save in exceptional circumstances) should be required of the parents or guardians to the Minister, in order to permit of interview and preparation.
- (ii) *Preparation.* As soon as possible after notice has been given, full enquiry should be made and all necessary instruction and exposition of the service given by the Minister, a Deaconess, or some other competent and instructed Leader. For this purpose the parents or guardians should be visited in their home, or they should be asked to attend at the Church or at a convenient hour. Instruction should be regarded as particularly necessary in the case of a first child, or of the first Baptism from the home according to the Methodist rite. If the parents or guardians cannot pledge themselves to give the promises contained in the Service of Baptism, the Minister may defer the Baptism of the child.

- (iii) *Administration.* Normally the Sacrament of Baptism should be administered in the Church and by an ordained Minister, preferably at a service of public worship. Baptism should take place at home only in the case of the child's prolonged or serious illness. Where administration by an ordained Minister is impracticable, the Sacrament may be administered by a Probationary Minister in pastoral charge, by an ordained Deaconess, by a Probationary Deaconess in pastoral charge, or by a Lay Pastor or a fully accredited Local Preacher, in consultation with the Superintendent or one of his colleagues other than in exceptional circumstances.

Members of the Church should always be present and take part in the service. The service should include the appropriate words of Our Lord, the substance of the promises contained in the service in the Book of Offices, and Baptism with water 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'; the service in the Book of Offices should commonly be used. Every effort should be made to secure the presence of both parents or guardians at the service.

The Minister shall see that all necessary particulars are inserted in the Register of Baptism and that the parents receive a Certificate of Baptism.

- (iv) *After Baptism.* Since the parents or guardians and the Church together accept solemn obligations for the spiritual nurture of the child, the utmost care should be taken that these obligations are fulfilled. It is the duty of parents, guardians, and teachers to teach baptized children the meaning of their Baptism and so to lead them to personal faith. Personal faith leads on to reception into full membership of the Church and thus the process of incorporation into the Church, begun in Baptism, is completed.

A Roll of all baptized children should be kept in every church, and the child's enrolment should be signalled at an early date after Baptism by a suitable Service in the Sunday School. The Sunday School, as the nursery of the Church, naturally bears responsibility for the next stage of the child's relationship to the Church. But the co-operation of the senior members of the Church is needed. It is highly desirable that suitable members be enlisted who will undertake to visit at regular intervals the homes of children who are, or have been, on the Baptismal Roll, and to maintain a spiritual oversight; such 'sponsors' should report to the Minister, through the Roll Secretary, at least once a year.

Periodic meeting of parents whose children are on the Baptismal Roll, and even beyond that stage, conducted by some responsible person, are strongly recommended.

*(Minutes 1952, pp. 225-230)*

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The Conference of 1964 drew attention to the last sentence in Section (1) of this statement, 'Therefore the Methodist Church . . .' See Agenda 1964, p.15.

## PARENTS AND INFANT BAPTISM (1966)

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- (iii) *Administration.* Every effort shall be made to secure the presence of both parents or guardians at the service.
- (iv) *After Baptism.* Since the parents or guardians and the Church together accept a solemn obligation for the spiritual nurture of the child, the utmost care should be taken that these obligations are fulfilled. It is the duty of parents, guardians and teachers to teach baptized children the meaning of their Baptism and so to lead them to personal faith. Personal faith leads on to full membership of the Church and thus the process of incorporation into the Church, begun in Baptism, is completed.

Periodic meetings of parents whose children are on the Baptismal Roll, and even beyond that stage, conducted by some responsible person, are strongly recommended.

The Committee is well aware that the problems caused by parents who do not carry out their promises made in the Baptismal Service have increased, rather than the reverse, since 1952. It has these and other problems fully in mind as it revises the Order of Service of Holy Baptism, and it intends to bring proposals to the Conference, the carrying out of which, it believes, will help both the Church and the parents of baptized children in the better fulfilment of their pastoral task. Meanwhile it urges ministers and laity alike to follow faithfully and carefully in each case the procedure laid down in the Statement on Holy Baptism made by the Conference of 1952.

*(Minutes 1966, pp.253f)*

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A major report, *Christian Initiation*, was adopted by the Conference of 1997 (see Volume 2, pp. 63-101).

## MINISTERS IN FULL CONNEXION AND BAPTISM (1975)

1. Conference of 1974 directed the Faith and Order Committee 'to consider whether only those ministers may be in full connexion with the Conference who are willing to baptize infants and to give a detailed report to the Ministerial Session of the 1975 Conference' (*Daily Record*, Ministerial Session, 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1974, p.2, No.11).

2. This topic was discussed by the Faith and Order Committee in 1972-3 when the Connexional Probationers' Oversight Committee requested advice on the case of a probationer minister who was unwilling to baptize infants. The advice given at that time was:

'Where the matter of Infant Baptism is an open one for a student or probationer, he should be helped in every possible way to understand and accept the Methodist position. If, however, he is not willing to baptize infants he should not be ordained into the ministry of our Church'.

3. We suggest that Conference try to decide on this matter in terms of discipline and pastoral practice, rather than by raising the whole question of the theology of (infant) baptism. We are encouraged in this position by the refusal of the 1974 Conference to initiate a general enquiry into the theology of our initiation practices. (*Daily Record*, Representative Session, 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1974, p.22, No.31, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1974, p.60, No.23.)

4. To many the answer to this question is obvious, namely that Methodist ministers are and ought to be expected to baptize infants in situations where the stated requirements have been fulfilled. The fact that in the past men have resigned from our ministry over the issue of believers' rather than infants' baptism bears out this point.

5. Such an answer is not acceptable to all, however, and the fact that the Conference of 1974 raised the issue and remitted it for detailed examination indicates the desire that it should be considered again.

6. The evidence from our documents is as follows:

- (a) The Deed of Union, Clauses 30 and 33, indicates a firm doctrinal commitment to the Sacrament of Baptism (Clause 30, *CPD* p.62), but bases the practice of baptizing infants upon 'the Methodist usage' (Clause 33(c), *CPD* p.63). It is not entirely clear whether the less rigorous approach of 33(c) stemmed from the general assumption that the practice was widely accepted, or from an awareness that any stronger wording would have produced unresolvable division of opinion.
- (b) Statements, Memoranda and Reports from Conference during the past forty years (1936 Memorandum, 1952 Statement, 1961 Report on Church Membership) do not put the issue beyond doubt either way. They defend and adumbrate the practice of baptizing infants, and they exhort Christian parents to present their children for baptism. But it is not a condition of the parents' continuing in membership that they should do so.

- (c) The responses in the Ordination Service (p.G9) are relevant at this point. The third and fourth questions, concerning doctrine and discipline, might seem to be the most appropriate. The point they raise is whether baptism of *infants* is one of ‘the doctrines of the Christian faith as this Church has received them’, or whether – as ‘usage’ – it belongs to the question on accepting ‘the discipline of this Church’. Or is our usage in this matter part of the assumed general interpretation of the doctrine of Baptism? If so, is it properly a matter for discipline if a minister refuses to baptize according to our usage?

(One further comment here concerned the setting of the third and fourth questions in Ordination in relation to the second and fifth. What happens if a minister, in accepting and studying the Holy Scriptures as he promises to do in ordination, reaches the conclusion that his position on that basis must now be different from the accepted one in his denomination?)

- (d) Question (A) 2 of the Agenda for the Spring Meeting of Synod – Ministerial Session (CPD p.400), has the clarifying note that our doctrinal standards are to found in the Deed of Union, Clause 30 (i.e. Baptism but not *Infant* Baptism as in 33(c)). No definition of ‘our discipline’ is offered.
- (e) In connection with candidates for the ministry we noted that, prior to the Conference of 1974, SO. 700 *Qualifications*, Clause (2), included the sentence, ‘He shall also have read and approved an authorised statement on the polity of the Methodist Church’. It is not clear which ‘authorised statement’ this referred to, but presumably Clauses 30 and 33 of the Deed of Union would be included. In any case it seems reasonable to assume that every candidate knows that Methodist ministers are required to baptize infants.
- (f) The General Directions for the Baptism of Infants (*Entry into the Church* p.A2 ff), begin with the words, ‘A solemn obligation rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism . . .’ (9) and later (12) state that, ‘Normally the Sacrament of Baptism should be administered in the Church by an ordained minister’. It does not say that he should be the minister in pastoral charge of the Church concerned, but references to ‘the minister’ in 10, 11 and 15 would seem to reflect another aspect of our ‘usage’, namely that he would normally be the ‘local’ minister.
- (g) On the basis of the above evidence – the weight of our ‘usage’, the solemn obligation laid upon parents to present their children for baptism, the general setting which each of these provides for candidature, ordination and pastoral ministry – *there would seem to be a clear obligation upon the Methodist Church so to order its life that a minister is available to administer infant baptism when the stated requirements have been fulfilled*. In particular Deed of Union 33c, the Statement of 1952 and the General Directions for the Service of Infant Baptism seem to provide a *normative standard* rather than simply a *descriptive account*. *If that is the obligation of the Church then prima facie it is the duty of each individual minister to play his part in fulfilling it.*

7. In favour of a greater degree of flexibility than has previously been understood to be our practice one could advance the following reasons:

- (a) The documents establish a prima facie obligation upon ministers to baptize infants, but there are good grounds for seeing it as only prima facie.
- (b) If one takes the case of parents who are Methodist members, it is clear that while they are exhorted to present their children for baptism there is no suggestion that they should be disciplined for not doing so. This presumably applies equally to ministers as to laymen in their capacities as members and parents.
- (c) In the same way one might ask whether, in view of the comparative imprecision of Deed of Union 33c, a doctrinal or disciplinary charge could be sustained against a Methodist minister for declining to baptize infants. Can a minister be charged for refusing to do what is not *explicitly* stated to be his duty? And if the Church could not or would not dismiss a minister on these grounds, is it right for moral pressure to be exerted upon him to dismiss himself?
- (d) In a responsibly handled pastoral situation it would be perfectly possible for the minister to explain his position and for his people to understand – without necessarily agreeing with – his convictions. In such a situation alternative arrangements for infant baptism could be made. The overall result could well be a deepening of respect and of mutual pastoral care, as well as a greater awareness of the uncertainty which prevails at the theological level on this subject.
- (e) In any case Conference Statements reflect the view of Conference at a particular time. The present situation in Methodism contains a wide variety of outlook on this particular matter. Whether or not it would justify a change of position by the denomination, it does suggest the wisdom of allowing exceptions rather than excluding ministers who have reached and hold their positions thoughtfully, and who wish to remain Methodist ministers (see paragraph 6(g) above). This is particularly so if we see it as important, in determining our doctrine and practice, to bear in mind not only the evidence and traditions inherited from the past, but also the way in which the Christian church is moving towards an ultimate wholeness of belief and action, in this as in other matters.
- (f) The analogy of re-marriage of divorced persons is near enough to show that exceptions of this kind, where biblical evidence is ambivalent (as it is in both the re-marriage of divorced persons and baptism), are manageable in our system. (Standing Order 830, under which no minister is obliged to re-marry a divorced person contrary to his conscience.)
- (g) This would be particularly so if ministers who do not wish to baptize infants were to give assurance, as they should be required to do, that they will not stand in the way of parents wishing infant baptism for their children, but will make the necessary arrangements for them to receive it.
- (h) The social influences upon church practices must be remembered. Infant baptism is closely related to a ‘Christendom’ situation: ‘Believers’ baptism to a missionary situation. Since we are moving from the former to the latter it is not the moment for rigidity over infant baptism.

8. Over against this position, and indicating a line of action which does not allow exceptions, are the following considerations:

- (a) Our documents, while not explicitly requiring every Methodist minister to be willing to baptize infants, reflect the norm within the denomination, and this gives particular meaning to general doctrinal comments about baptism in our services, etc., including Ordination.
- (b) The candidate and student-in-training for the Methodist ministry knows what is expected of him in this matter, since baptizing infants is part of a Methodist minister's work according to our usage.
- (c) The statement of ministerial responsibilities set out in Standing Order 520:

The Superintendent and other minister or ministers appointed to the several Circuits is and are appointed by the Conference to preach and perform all acts of religious worship and Methodist discipline in each of the Methodist chapels and other preaching-places approved by the Conference already erected or to be erected in each Circuit respectively, within the space of twelve calendar months, at such time or times and in such manner as they find proper; subject, nevertheless, to the Superintendent minister and to the existing laws and regulations of the Conference.

which is printed as a preamble to the stations in each draft and in the *Minutes of Conference* as required by Standing Order 737(4), can hardly be construed as not including the baptism of infants.

- (d) The fact that Methodist parents are urged to present children for baptism, and that they present them in a church which receives pastoral care from one minister, makes it natural to expect that that minister will baptize the children so presented.
- (e) The role of the ordained man as – in a special way – the representative of the Church, raises questions about how a minister can fulfil such a role if he is out of agreement with his denomination on such a fundamental issue concerning our usage.
- (f) A better analogy than that of re-marriage of divorced persons (see 7 (f) above), would be that of a minister refusing to administer Holy Communion because of convictions like those held by some members of the Salvation Army or the Society of Friends.
- (g) Further to this there is the responsibility not only to perform the functions required of a minister, but also to advocate and teach the position held by his Church on matters such as Baptism.
- (h) There is the pastoral problem of the effect on a congregation of a minister's refusal to perform what the denomination exhorts them to seek; a situation which could seriously hinder the minister's general pastoral relations and effectiveness.
- (i) It could create problems of stationing by shifting an important boundary within which all ordained ministers have previously been understood to function.



- (j) Although it can be argued that in an ideal pastoral situation this problem could be handled, in fact there is more likely to be an awkward muddle since some action has to be taken.
- (k) So long as Methodism has a stance on this matter her ministers must stand by it. The force of the argument for exceptions really points towards a re-examination of our whole position.

9. Having made the detailed examination outlined above the Faith and Order Committee judges that our discipline and pastoral practice do not allow exceptions in the matter of Methodist ministers being willing to baptize infants.

*(Agenda 1975, pp. 249-53.)*

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The Conference adopted the report and resolved to add the following to Standing Order 718:

- (7) Only those may be received into full connexion with the Conference who are willing to baptize infants in appropriate circumstances.

The Conference adopted a further report, *Infant Baptism and Ministerial Discipline*, in 1988 (see Volume 2, pp. 102-111).

## A SERVICE IN LIEU OF INFANT BAPTISM (1976)

The Committee has, directed by the Conference (*Daily Record* 1975, p.29f), considered the production of a form of service for Thanksgiving and Dedication of a child for use when parents either have conscientious scruples or are unwilling to make the vows of Infant Baptism.

The Committee reports as follow:

- (a) The service of Infant Baptism raises difficulties for some of our people; it is the subject of much informed theological debate; there is at present a wide variety of views on the matter both in the Connexion and outside.
- (b) The pastoral needs of those who are conscientiously unable to present their children for Baptism must be given due consideration.
- (c) Methodist usage is clear. 'Baptism is administered to infants' (*Deed of Union* 33c. *CPD* p.63). 'A solemn obligation rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism' (Methodist Service Book A2). The action of the Conference of 1975 in adopting the report 'Ministers in Full Connexion and Baptism' (*Agenda* 1975 pp.249-53) confirmed rather than questioned this usage.
- (d) A service authorized by the Conference does not provide the answer in this complex situation. Such services have a function as theological documents. Through them the Methodist people develops its theology and by them others assess what Methodism stands for. To promote, on the authority of the Conference, a service which departs from our usage would be likely to confuse the Methodist people.
- (e) Conscientious scruples must be respected, however, and pastoral considerations met. Individual ministers have considerable liberty. They are free to draw up and conduct services of Thanksgiving and Dedication without Baptism wherever they judge it to be advisable. The existing service *Thanksgiving of Parents after the Birth of a Child* was not intended for this purpose. It is normally used in addition to Baptism and it does not include the element of dedication of the child. Those who wish to conduct a service of Thanksgiving and Dedication without Baptism should not, therefore, use this service. They should also emphasize that the service they conduct is not a substitute for Baptism, which should follow at some later date.

The Committee finds that the production and distribution, with the authority of the Conference, of a service of Thanksgiving and Dedication of a child without Baptism is not advisable at present.

(*Agenda* 1976, p.293)

## **CONVERSION AND BAPTISM: THE PASTORAL PROBLEMS (1981)**

The Conference of 1980 in its Ministerial Session, in the course of dealing with a particular question, affirmed that the practice of baptizing as adults those who have already been baptized as infants is contrary to our practice and implies a view of Baptism incompatible with our doctrines: it directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the pastoral problems of those baptized in infancy who, through an experience of conversion or renewal of faith, seek appropriate ways of affirming their faith. The committee, having considered the matter, reports as follows.

It is a fundamental principle of the Christian Faith that the rites and sacraments of the Church should reflect and celebrate the religious experience of the individual and the community. Rites that do not correspond with the realities of the life of faith are meaningless and to be avoided. Equally, religious experience that does not find expression in the corporate worship and activity of the Church suffers impoverishment.

Broadly speaking, religious experiences are of two kinds, what one might call the singular, that is to say, those that occur once only in a life-time, such as marriage or a first experience or conversion, and the recurrent, that is to say, those that are regular features of growth, such as forgiveness and other daily experiences of grace. Both kinds need expression, and Christian tradition has not failed in this. Regular worship, including the sacrament of Holy Communion, has represented in word and action the recurrent experiences of believers. Week by week experiences of gratitude, exultation, hope, love, concern, need, aspiration, and so on, are expressed in our services; and the critical points in the life of faith are similarly marked by special rites.

For a long time those special rites have, for most Christians, formed a simple progress of four elements: baptism to celebrate entry into the family of God, confirmation to celebrate personal commitment, marriage to celebrate a change of status and responsibility, and the last rites to celebrate hope in the presence of death. In between these critical points the regular worship of the church supplied every need. For centuries this simple pattern proved broadly satisfactory, though there has been much discussion and a great variety of usage in relation to the first two elements.

The essence of the problem is that an experience of renewal may come at any time and the common pattern hardly allows for this. Not only is conversion in midlife a far from rare phenomenon, but adolescence itself is today greatly extended, and an adolescent may experience radical renewal years after being made a full member of the Methodist Church. It is natural that those who have such an experience should seek to celebrate it in an appropriate way, that is by introducing another service into the series.

The actual rite to which many who have an experience of renewal of faith are attracted is baptism by immersion; and their reasons are not hard to discover. The rite is ancient and scriptural; it has a dramatic quality that befits a radical experience; the symbolism of submersion and emergence represents the new birth; there is an opportunity for personal profession of faith.

For those who have not been baptized already this rite presents no problems. It is indeed provided for in the Methodist Service Book (see pp. A27-41). Contrary to popular assumption there is no Methodist objection to baptism by immersion. The

reason that immersion is not the common method is simply that most baptisms are of babies for whom immersion is not suitable.

A problem arises when those who have been baptized already ask for a rite of immersion after a radical experience of renewal. The difficulty is partly pastoral and partly theological. From a pastoral point of view the apparent repetition of baptism is likely to disturb those who have been baptized as children, who have accepted the common pattern as sufficient, and who have come to the new life in Christ by a gradual experience of conversion. There is a danger that two categories of Methodist will emerge, formally distinguished from each other, the once-baptized and the twice-baptized.

The doctrinal difficulties are equally serious. Though some elements in the service of baptism might bear repetition, the representation of entry into the family of God cannot. The acceptance of a rite of immersion of those baptized as infants but newly converted can only mean that they are held not to have entered the family of God before. So this element in infant baptism is, by implication, invalidated. (The reason why some Baptists baptize as believers those who were baptized as infants is simply that they do not regard infant baptism as baptism at all.)

Furthermore the stress on conversion or some similar experience as the ground for the second rite implies, as most who contend for believers' baptism would readily agree, some prerequisite for baptism, namely repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are, of course, the work of the Spirit, so the prerequisite is not a human achievement. Nevertheless most accounts of believers' baptism lay some stress on the candidate's readiness for the rite. The alternative view is more concerned with the divine initiative and the promise of grace, to which repentance and faith are a response.

For these reasons the Methodist Church has resisted the pressure to countenance second baptism. The MSB says firmly, 'no one shall be baptized who is known to have been baptized already', and the Ministerial Session of the Conference of 1980 supported the judgement of the Doctrinal Committee that the practice of baptizing as adults those who had already been baptized as infants was contrary to our practice and implied a view of baptism incompatible with our doctrines.

Nevertheless, the need to mark experience of renewal by appropriate celebration remains. Those who have not been baptized can be baptized, by immersion if they so wish. Those who have been baptized but not confirmed, can be confirmed. Here it is well to note that the rite of confirmation, where it involves the laying on of hands, loses nothing in comparison with believers' baptism. The laying on of hands is also ancient and scriptural, dramatic and symbolic; the use of this sign allows equal opportunity for a personal profession of faith. (The use of the right hand of fellowship, though common in our usage, is less securely grounded in Scripture. The one occurrence of the sign, in Gal. 2.9 is concerned with resolving a dispute rather than giving a blessing.)

The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, faced with a similar problem, has devised a service which involves the immersion of the worshipper as a sign of entry into new life and self-dedication, but not of baptism. This service has the advantages that it makes use of the vivid symbolism of immersion and that it can be related directly to conversion without denying the fact and significance of infant baptism.

Nonetheless, the following arguments against it must be considered:

1. The relation of the service to confirmation is not clear. Reference is made in the text to previous baptism, but no mention is made of previous or subsequent confirmation. Indeed, at the moment of immersion, the officiating minister says, 'now I confirm to you the . . . gift of God's Spirit.' A reasonable inference from this would be that the service was a substitute for our MSB service of 'Public Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation'. It is undesirable that the Church should have two different services of confirmation, one for those who enter into the fulness of the life of Christ by a sudden experience and one for those who enter by growth. If the service is not intended as confirmation, it is certainly liable to confusion with it.
2. The service makes use of a familiar ritual action of immersion, but appends to it an unfamiliar and slightly obscure meaning. Many people would misunderstand this ritual and see it as believers' baptism.
3. It is hard to believe that this service would not threaten our theology of infant baptism and, by stressing the believer's experience, cast doubt on the primacy of grace.

So we are left with the problem of those who have a deep experience of renewal after confirmation. None of the services associated with singular experiences is appropriate and available. There remain the services that mark recurrent experiences suitably adapted for the special occasion. Two suggest themselves, Holy Communion and the Covenant Service. Into them extra elements of thanksgiving, profession of faith and testimony can be inserted. The Covenant Service is particularly appropriate where a number of people are concerned, as, for example, at the end of a special mission.

In this matter it is important that the Church should find a safe way between two dangers. On one hand the significance of dramatic conversion must not be minimised. On the other those whose discipleship has not involved such an experience must not be discouraged. Methodist usage has expressed sound doctrine and wise pastoral concern in the past. It is now necessary for us to be sufficiently sympathetic and imaginative in our worship and pastoral care to be able to adapt to the present situation and so, not merely avoid its dangers, but also reap spiritual benefit from what is happening in our midst.

*(Agenda 1981, pp. 59-61)*

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In connection with this report the Conference introduced a new Standing Order, S.O. 800.

## **CONVERSION AND BAPTISM: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES (1982)**

The Conference of 1981 adopted the Faith and Order Committee's report on this matter but requested the Committee to provide further practical and pastoral guidelines. The Committee responds as follows.

When a person requests baptism after an experience of radical renewal, the following guidelines should be borne in mind:

1. Such a request may come from someone who has not been baptised or confirmed, or who has been baptised but not confirmed, or who has been both baptised and confirmed. It will be necessary to discover which is the case before deciding on the appropriate response.
2. But first it is important that the request be welcomed because of its importance for the person making it. The experience which motivated it should be explored for all that may be learned from it. This will take time. A number of pastoral sessions on a one-to-one basis or in the company of others will be required for the fuller understanding of what has happened, and in preparation for the next step to be taken.
3. It should be recognised that there are aspects of the experience itself which point beyond the immediate request for baptism. The primary element is normally a new knowledge of the reality and love of God, and the fundamental response is one of praise, which may be expressed in joy, song or 'in tongues', and spilling over into a need for deeper commitment. Such gifts are for the benefit of the whole body of Christ, and should be honoured as such.
4. At the very outset a prayer of thanksgiving and a blessing, perhaps with laying-on of hands, such as might be used in any pastoral relationship, would be an appropriate personal response. If thought fitting, such a prayer could include reference to the grace of God signified in baptism and powerfully experienced now.
5. The person should be helped to understand the experience more fully within the larger context of the Christian life of service, fellowship and worship.
6. Expectation of further refreshment and renewal should be encouraged, as should expectation of the absence of such experiences. Both should be shown to be inescapable and complementary elements in the Christian pilgrimage.
7. The importance of giving practical expression to the experience should be explored, including possible vocations to particular tasks or offices in the church and the wider community.
8. Arrangements should be made for further teaching to be given about the faith and its individual and corporate expression – if possible in the company of others, as in a pre-confirmation or post-confirmation class.

9. If the person has not been baptised, baptism – by immersion or otherwise as desired – would be the appropriate sacrament. It could include opportunity for the person to share the experience with the worshipping congregation, as well as opportunity for the congregation to join in affirming their faith. Indeed, every service of baptism affords such opportunity for the congregation.
10. If the person has not been confirmed or received into membership, confirmation – with the laying-on of hands as an act particularly fitting the experience – would be the appropriate next stage.
11. If the person has already been baptised, the reasons why re-baptism is not possible should be explained:
  - (a) It would suggest that the first baptism was not a true expression of the grace of God acting through it, or of the incorporation into God's family the church which took place then.
  - (b) It could unsettle the faith of others who have not had a vivid experience of conversion or renewal, but who nevertheless have grown in grace through faith in Christ without desiring a second baptism.
  - (c) It would divide the church into the once-baptised and the twice-baptised; would thus be injurious to the peace and unity of the church; and would sow doubts in the minds of many about their own standing in the Christian community.
  - (d) It would encourage the belief that, even for those who have been previously baptised, baptism upon confession of faith is necessary for all who seek full Christian commitment.
12. The use of water as in baptism should be discouraged, even when the rite is stated not to be baptism. This is because of the powerful association between the elements, the actions and the words in the sacrament of baptism through the centuries and around the world, and because such an act would cause confusion between what is baptism and what is not. For the sake of the corporate life of the church, such confusion should be avoided.
13. When public confession of an experience of renewal is nevertheless deemed to be desirable, the sacrament of holy communion should be explained as being the appropriate sacrament for this kind of sharing.
14. Specially recommended for inclusion in such a service would be:
  - (a) An opportunity for the person to testify to the experience of renewal after some guidance as to how this might most helpfully be done.
  - (b) A prayer of thanksgiving for the blessings received, such as in Alternative Thanksgiving B on pages B33 and 34, MSB.
  - (c) A renewal of the covenant vows by the person and the congregation, as in paras. 16 and 17 on pages D9 and 10, MSB.
  - (d) All the above could follow the sermon which would prepare for them.

- (e) Opportunity for the person to assist in the distribution of the elements, where deemed desirable, as a further sign of sharing, commitment and ministry.
  - (f) Alternatively the covenant service in its entirety, including an opportunity for testimony as above, could be used.
15. Further opportunity for development in faith and action should be provided through participation in a class or fellowship group, and through guidance and help with any vocational responses which might be made.

*(Agenda 1982, pp. 27-9)*



## **Part III Membership**

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## REPORT ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP (1961)

### PREFACE

The Conference of 1958 directed the Committee 'to consider and report on the place of our baptized young people in the body of Christ, defining clearly the conditions under which they should be received into membership, bearing in mind the claim of the Methodist Church to a place in the Holy Catholic Church and the particular situation surveyed in section IV 3 (g)<sup>81</sup> of the report of the Commission on Rural Methodism'. Section IV 3 (g) of this report reads:

'It is useless to urge that greater care should be taken in the preparation of young people for church membership when the very people we ought to be preparing were lost to us four years earlier. We are convinced that unless Methodism is prepared to recognise children of the 12/14 age group as part of the Church – and we think 12 years, when the child comes to new status in the secondary school, is a significant age – in a formal ceremony in every country village, and as part of our regular evangelical work, there is little prospect of our village societies ever being able to produce a well balanced church family. It is a very serious matter that under present conditions the work of our village Sunday Schools bears so little fruit in terms of adolescent conversion and church membership.

We are not happy about the equivocal status of Junior Membership in our Church theory, or of the lukewarmness with which it is – perhaps consequently – applied in so many quarters. We judge that the time is more than ripe for the Methodist Church to make up its mind firmly, and without delay, on the theology of its membership. When Methodism was a Society within the Church of England, according to its origins, admission was rightly restricted to adults, and exclusion could be ruthlessly applied to those who failed to maintain its high standards, because neither the one nor the other was related to communicant membership of the Church. Now that Methodism claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church it should define clearly the place of its baptized young people in the Body of Christ, and consider when, and under what conditions, they should be received into membership.

We would ask the question – If it be right (as Methodism asserts that it is) to ask a boy of 12 years to 'decide for Christ' on Young People's day, and if we expect that a decision so given shall be a real decision accompanied by a real experience of Christ – and we have no right to seek it otherwise – then by what process of reasoning or theological argument do we hesitate to bring him into the fellowship of the Church, and receive him after due preparation and testing, as a real part of the Body of his Lord sharing in the Communion of His Body and His Blood? It is obvious that he could not assume his constitutional responsibilities and privileges until he becomes 17 or 18 – an event that might be celebrated as a 'coming of age' – but this is something quite distinct from the matter of church membership itself.

We believe that if this matter were settled it would resolve one of the most critical problems of our country youth work, and would bring many more young people into the fellowship of the Church than are coming at present, whether through

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<sup>81</sup> Erroneously referred to as 'section IV 3 (b)' in the Minutes of Conference 1958. p.58

Methodist or Anglican doors, and would enable us to nurture them in the faith in a way that is impossible today.

Until this issue is settled we commend the 'Order of Service in which the Church rejoices with Boys and Girls who have given themselves to Jesus Christ', published by the Methodist Youth Department and the Church Membership Committee, though we are not happy about the title. With suitable emendations this might be the basis for an order of service for receiving this lower age group into church membership should Conference eventually decide on such a policy.'

The Conference of 1958 and 1959 also referred to the Committee the suggestion that 'Confirmation' be adopted in place of 'Public Reception of New Members', and the Conference of 1959 asked the Committee to report on the suggestion that Junior Membership be abolished.

### **THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM**

The question of Church Membership according to the teaching of the Methodist Church cannot be understood except in reference to its teaching on Holy Baptism, which is set out at length in the 'Statement on Holy Baptism', adopted by the Conference of 1952.<sup>82</sup> This makes it clear that the 'Order of Service for the Baptism of Infants' is a service 'of reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'; and that 'when an infant is baptized, he is received into the new Israel of God'. Thus every child who is baptized with water in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, has been received at Baptism into the congregation of Christ's flock.

Moreover 'a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church and the child, rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism'; 'Baptism is an obligation resting upon everyone desiring to be a member of the Methodist Church', and in case of those not baptized in infancy 'it should be expected that they present themselves for the "service of Baptism for those of riper years" before being received into Church Membership'.

### **ENTRY INTO THE CHURCH IN THE BIBLE AND IN SUBSEQUENT HISTORY**

In the Bible the outward sign of entry into the Church is Baptism, on which we have no need to repeat what was said in the report of 1952. But the Bible throws no direct light on the problems connected with the entry of children. There are, however, certain passages which refer to a rite subsequent to Baptism, namely the imposition of hands, in connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The one clear case is Acts 8, 14-17, where Baptism was not followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit did come after the imposition of hands. In Acts 19, 1-7, both Christian baptism and the imposition of hands immediately precede the gift of the Spirit. In Acts 9, 17-18, the imposition of hands is partly connected with healing, though the Spirit is also mentioned; in any case, it precedes Baptism. In the more normal procedure Baptism also is immediately followed by the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2, 38; 1 Cor. 12, 13), or even, exceptionally, preceded by it (Acts 10, 44, 48)<sup>83</sup>. Thus it is not possible to say

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<sup>82</sup> Minutes, 1952, pp. 225-30

<sup>83</sup> There are other references in 2 Tim. 1, 6, which may, however, refer to ordination, and in Heb. 6, 2.

that the outward sign of entry into the Church must consist both of Baptism and of some subsequent rite; only the former is of divine institution.

Nevertheless out of a variety of practice there eventually emerged a pattern of the outward sign of entry into the Church. After a long catechumenate in which the candidate received instruction and professed the faith, there followed (i) Baptism; (ii) one or more out of a number of other rites, very variously arranged in different Churches, such as the imposition of hands, anointing with oil, and making the sign of the cross; and (iii) the first reception of Holy Communion. In the East these three parts still normally take place all on the same day, even for infants, but of course infants are not instructed and do not themselves make profession of the faith.

In the West, however, the pattern was split. Often, and eventually almost always, the second and third parts were deferred for some time after the first part, even in the case of adults. When infants were baptized, the later parts were deferred for some years. From the fifth century onwards the second part was often called *confirmation*; the meaning was that God confirms what was done at Baptism and confirms, i.e., strengthens, the candidate. The use of the word was no doubt encouraged by those scriptural passages which speak of God strengthening or 'stablishing' us. There are also passages in the writings of the early Church which refer to our confirming our confession.

Both before and after the Reformation there were further changes in the Churches of the West. The most important of these is due to the Reformers, who were generally insistent that Confirmation should be preceded by instruction and by a profession of faith. Usually this profession of faith became incorporated in the actual service of Confirmation, often in the form of the ratification or confirmation by the candidate of the vows made by others on his behalf when he was baptized as an infant. Instruction and profession of faith had originally preceded Baptism, but had gradually fallen into some neglect. The prevalence of Infant Baptism caused them to be virtually disused; it was thus a logical step to attach them (in most cases) to Confirmation.

The question what gift this service symbolizes or conveys has been much discussed. It has been widely held, largely under the influence of Acts 8. 14-17, and other references to the imposition of hands mentioned above, that Confirmation is especially connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet even when the service includes the imposition of hands, this is not being done in the same circumstances as in the New Testament instances. By studying the subsequent period when Baptism and these other rites were regularly performed on the same occasion, it is not easy to determine precisely what would be the effect of any part of the whole process if it occurred in isolation. But when, still later, the rites became separated in time, the question demanded an answer. Some have held that Confirmation is an integral part of Baptism, so that without it Baptism is virtually incomplete: Protestants generally have held this view to be unscriptural, for the sacraments instituted by our Lord in the Gospels are Baptism with water and the Lord's Supper, and not any rites or ceremonies additional to these. Some have stressed the idea of strengthening; in Confirmation prayer is made that the Holy Spirit, who is already at work in the hearts of infants and children, may grant those further gifts which are needed to strengthen the candidates for the tasks of their riper years.

The question is sometimes put in the form whether Baptism is complete in itself. It is complete in that it is the only sacrament divinely instituted for this purpose, and is in itself an effective sign of all the blessings of the new covenant; it is also, however, incomplete, as our Methodist emphasis on conversion reminds us, in that these

blessings need to be appropriated by faith; it is proleptic; it sums up that which has to be progressively realised. Thus, while we must always emphasize what God does, it is appropriate that there should be a service to supply that which the service of Infant Baptism necessarily lacks, the candidate's own profession of faith, when also prayer is made that God may in the power of the Holy Spirit both continue to bestow those blessings which He has already granted and also bestow those fresh blessings which are appropriate to one who has professed his faith. He thereby also enters a new stage in his membership of the Church.

When Methodism was a Society within the Church, it was not particularly concerned with this question. Reception into membership of the Society had originally nothing to do with Confirmation, just as the Reception of Preachers into full connexion had originally nothing to do with Ordination. But when Methodism became a Church, then the entry of previously uncommitted persons in the Methodist Society became their entry into the committed membership of Christ's Church. A service such as we have described is obviously appropriate to mark this step; but as the New Testament does not consider this precise question, we have a certain freedom in ordering its form.

### CONDITIONS OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

In Methodism 'membership of the Church' has two different senses: (a) the membership which is conferred at Baptism, and (b) the membership which is entered upon at the Service for the Public Reception of New Members. Indeed, as we have seen, all Churches which practise Infant Baptism have the task of relating two kinds of membership in their formularies and practice – the membership conferred by Baptism and the membership which follows personal commitment. Methodism, however, began as a Society, and was obliged to lay down the terms appropriate to membership of a Society. Thus it had to reckon, historically, with *three* kinds of membership. When it became a Church, it combined the membership of the Church which comes from personal commitment with membership of the Methodist Society, and has framed its formularies and practice accordingly. It has never cast any doubt on the membership conferred at Baptism.

The Methodist Church has laid down the conditions of the later membership in these terms: 'All persons are welcomed into membership who sincerely desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and evidence the same in their life and conduct, and who seek to have fellowship with Christ Himself and His people by taking up the duties and privileges of the Methodist Church' (Deed of Union, CPD p.266). It is further laid down by the Methodist Church that 'it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves of the two Sacraments, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper', and, 'as membership in the Church also involves fellowship, it is the duty of all members to seek to cultivate this in every possible way' (CPD p.5). Moreover, 'all members are expected, as far as they are able, to contribute to the funds of the Church, and to engage in some form of Christian service' (ibid.).

Thus the later membership is distinguished from the membership conferred by Baptism by three features:

- (i) The 'desire to be saved from one's sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ'. This is not the language always used by a boy or girl today. But if he feels a sincere desire to fulfil the purpose of God for him in his life, he will certainly become aware of his inadequacy and turn to Christ.

- (ii) 'Evidence of this in life and conduct'. This includes, among other things, the willingness to receive instruction in what a Christian believes and in the nature of the life in Christ and of the Christian hope.
- (iii) 'Seeking to have fellowship with Christ Himself and His people by taking up the duties and privileges of the Methodist Church'. In seeking this he is making a personal offering of himself to serve Christ in His Church, and particularly in the fellowship of the Methodist people.

All this culminates, after the candidate has been accepted as a member by the Leaders' Meeting, in a solemn service of Reception into Membership. In the Methodist Service for the Public Reception of New Members, as in those of other Churches which practise Infant Baptism, the following elements are of great importance:

- (a) personal commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour and expression of the desire to serve Him in His Church;
- (b) offering of prayer that the gifts and graces which Christ by the Holy Spirit has already given may be continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit;<sup>84</sup>
- (c) welcome of the member by the Church upon his entry into those privileges and duties within the Church which are appropriate to those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and which include the receiving of Holy Communion.

As in Holy Baptism a child is received into the Holy Catholic Church, so a member who has been publicly received is not a member of the Methodist Church only, but also of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, in which the Methodist Church holds and cherishes a true place. The words at the climax of the Service read: 'We now joyfully welcome you into the fellowship of Christ's Church'.<sup>85</sup>

It is not appropriate for this service to be used for those who are being received by transfer from other denominations or have been confirmed in the Church of England, though some form of welcoming them should certainly be used.

### **THE APPROACH TO MEMBERSHIP**

In Baptism a child is received into the congregation of Christ's flock, so that he may grow up within the fellowship of the Church and receive the gifts which God has in store for him. It is impossible to fix the dates at which he will reach the various stages of his spiritual development, but if he is truly cared for by those who have the responsibility for him he will enter more and more into the knowledge of Jesus Christ and of His power and grace. We have every reason to hope and pray that on Young People's Day, or on some other occasion, he will be converted by the Holy Spirit into

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<sup>84</sup> This element is not brought into sufficient prominence by the present Service, and any revision of the Book of Offices should pay careful attention to this point, in the light of Methodist experience of inward religion, of personal awareness of Christ and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

<sup>85</sup> This sentence tends to obscure the importance of the relationship between Baptism and Reception into Membership. It might well be amended in a future revision of the Order of Service.

the new life in Christ; or it may be that by a series of experiences of the divine grace, no less real, he will be steadily led into that way of life. The Holy Spirit will do His work in the way that He knows to be the best.

The Methodist Church has never laid down the precise age for Reception into Membership, since spiritual development takes place in different ways with different people, and is bound up with intellectual and emotional development; moreover, the educational and social circumstances of those who are growing up vary from age to age and from place to place. In recent years it is probable that the customary age of Reception into Membership has been in the neighbourhood of sixteen to seventeen. But there is no doubt that over the country as a whole emotional development tends to be more rapid than it was, and the practice of the Church must take account of this. For the great majority of children the age of leaving school is still fifteen. For these reasons it has become highly desirable that the Church should take effective steps to train and prepare boys and girls to be received into membership at or about the age of fifteen, and sometimes at a lower age than that.

If this course is to be followed with good effect, the pastoral care of baptized children must be very greatly improved and deepened. As soon as a child is baptized the Leaders' Meeting of the Society in which he was baptized has the responsibility for his spiritual welfare and is charged with his pastoral care. It must do everything in its power, through those who are appointed for the purpose, to remind his parents of their great responsibility in the matter and help them in friendly and personal co-operation to discharge it. The Church's own agencies, and most of all the Sunday School, have the large and continuing task of training the children committed to it in prayer and worship and Bible study, and of giving imaginative instruction, as often as possible in concert with the teachers in the Day School which the children attend, in the central truths of the Bible and the faith, and in the essential principles of Christian living. They are charged with the duty of bringing home to them the privileges and duties of active, vital membership of the Church, and above all of confronting them with the claims of Jesus Christ on their whole life. With these ends in view the Church should be constantly aware of the need for teachers in the Sunday School with a real vocation for the task, and do everything in its power to recruit, train and equip them; it should never cease to support them by prayer and personal encouragement in every part of their work. Attention is drawn to the Resolution of the 1956 Conference on these matters.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> In order to raise the general standard of Sunday School teaching the Conference urges all Local Youth Councils or Sunday School Committees

- (a) to encourage all newly appointed General Superintendents and Secretaries to familiarize themselves with the training schemes of the Department and to encourage all newly appointed Departmental leaders and teachers to take the Sunday School Teachers' Diploma;
- (b) to appoint a Training Secretary to take charge of the training of all new Helpers and prospective Sunday School Teachers and Youth Leaders;
- (c) to encourage every new Sunday School Helper to take the introductory Course of training arranged by MYD;
- (d) to satisfy itself on the following points, before appointing anyone as a fully accredited teacher:
  - (i) A spiritual outlook and experience and a personal interest in the life of the Church.
  - (ii) A clear sense of the unity of the Church and School, and a willingness to serve where he can be most useful.



In rural and semi-rural circuits the pastoral care of the young is often very difficult, since the minister has the care of several Churches, and may live a long way away from those who have especial need of his help. There may be very few children in any one Society, so that is not feasible to gather them into a suitable class. It is clear from the Rural Methodism Report that, after being brought up in Methodist Sunday Schools, children are often claimed by the Church of England incumbent as candidates for confirmation, on the ground that they were baptized in the Parish Church, and after confirmation frequently do not attend either the Parish Church or the Methodist Church; some of these children, although coming from Methodist homes, have been baptized in the Parish Church because of social custom, or because the Methodist minister has seemed not to be available at the time in question.

These difficulties are not easily overcome, especially while the worshipping life of so many rural Societies lacks vitality and appeal to the young. It is clear that Methodist parents should in all cases be urged to bring their children to the Methodist Minister for Baptism, and more use could be made of the service for the Thanksgiving of Mothers. In areas where transport is reasonably easy, it is possible for the children from several village Societies to be brought together for Sunday School, for fellowship and instruction, to the Circuit Church, or to another one which is the centre of a section of the Circuit. The pastoral care of the young is an insistent task for the Minister, and he should be given all possible help and encouragement to do it thoroughly in spite of all the difficulties.

But in both town and country the success of our work, in this as in all other respects, depends on the quality of our Church life. Where worship is real, reverent and well-ordered; where prayer is regular and sincere, sensitive to the will of God and to the needs of the world; where the work and thought, the characters and lives of Church members display and adorn the Gospel which they profess; where the older people are as interested in the activities and ideas of the young as they are in their own: to such a Church children will come and bring their friends, and in such a Church they will stay.

According to an essential Methodist tradition, which springs from the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers, the pastoral care of all those associated with our Church, from the cradle to the grave, belongs to the whole People of God, Ministers and laymen together. Many charges are taking place in Sunday School work, the effect of which will be to link the Sunday School much more closely to the worshipping life of the whole Church. It is calamitous to suppose that youth work is the job of Sunday School teachers and other youth workers alone. It belongs to the whole Church; and the keener the personal interest taken in the children of the Church, and in the Sunday School, the greater is the probability that those who grow up in it will come to belong to it in the fullest sense. From quite an early age children should be encouraged to take part in the worship of the Church, and to give active service to it. Thus they will be more and more incorporated into its family life, and come into that experience of Jesus Christ which is the mark of a committed member of His Church.

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- (iii) Full sympathy with the evangelical aims of the work and a readiness to seek further equipment for the work through Bible reading and other studies.
  - (iv) A readiness to share in a Teachers' Training Class and to attend a District Training Conference or an Easter or Summer School.'

## **THE TRAINING OF MEMBERS**

The Leaders' Meeting should keep in continual review the names of the children growing up in the Society, and provide for their needs at each stage of their development. Sunday School teachers have a vital part in this matter, and if the recommendations of this Report are carried out they will do more than ever before in the training of those received into the Church by Baptism.

There is a very special need for the pastoral care of children from the age at which they leave the Junior School for the Secondary School. When young people at this or a later stage sincerely desire to serve Jesus Christ, and are receiving regular instruction in the Bible and the Faith, their names should be brought before the Leaders' Meeting, and if they are approved, they should be entered as 'Members in Training', and gathered into classes which meet regularly under suitable leaders appointed by the Leaders' Meeting. The choice of the right Class Leaders for children between the ages of eleven and fourteen is of the highest importance. Part of the urgent appeal and direction of the 1956 Conference Address to the Methodist Societies runs as follows: 'Conference directs the Leaders' Meetings to ask for the name of every boy and girl of eleven to fourteen years of age in our Schools and Youth organisations and to appoint someone to be pastorally responsible for them.'<sup>87</sup>

When it is desired to hold a service to signalise the entry of a group of children on the status of 'Members in Training,' there is available 'An Order of Service for Members in Training' (see end of this Report). This order of service makes quite clear the difference between itself and the service of 'Reception into Membership'.

The effective carrying out of this procedure for Members in Training will be arranged differently in different circumstances. It is suggested that in some cases classes in the Sunday School, or Junior Church, should be rearranged to include one for such Members; in some cases a class for Members in Training could be organized on a Circuit basis. Such a class could be held either on a Sunday or on a weekday. It is to be hoped that future Sunday School Lesson Notes can be arranged and written in such a way as to give the greatest possible help to those who are leading these classes.

The status of 'Members in Training', understood in this way and brought fully into effect under the continuous care of the Leaders' Meeting, conserves all the spiritual values for which 'Junior Membership' stands, and may avoid some of the misleading connotations which this term has in the minds of many people. It could, therefore, take the place of 'Junior Membership' in the language of the Methodist Church. Members in Training would be on Trial, and subject to the provisions of SO 268.

## **PREPARATION CLASSES AND PUBLIC RECEPTION**

When, after a period under due pastoral care and instruction, a boy or girl is ready to express personal trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the time has come for Public Reception into Membership. Careful and patient preparation for this event should be given in special classes, normally by the minister, and there should be no exceptions of any kind to this. It is essential that the high importance of the Service of Reception in the spiritual life of those who are to be received should be made plain both to the young people personally concerned and to the whole Church by the impressiveness, dignity and reverence of the Service. It should be so prepared for,

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<sup>87</sup> This whole procedure should be made the subject of a Standing Order.

arranged and conducted that it remains a landmark in the experience of those who take part in it. Casualness, haste or inefficiency can easily rob it in the minds of the young of the deep significance which it ought to have. Many circuits have found that the significance of the occasion is enhanced by inviting other ministers such as the Chairman of the District and the Superintendent to take part. Often it can be made an event for the whole circuit. Others have found it useful to print the order of service with the names of those who are to be received.

When the Book of Offices is revised and the Order of Service for the Public Reception of New Members comes under review, the inclusion of a suitable and worthy act of symbolism at the point of actual reception should be seriously considered. Meanwhile the words of reception: 'In the Name of God, the giver of all grace, we now joyfully welcome you into the fellowship of Christ's Church', should be said separately to each person as he is received, and the words should be accompanied by an outward sign of welcome and blessing.

It is a disastrous mistake to act as if after Reception into Membership the pastoral care of those received can be allowed to decrease or even lapse altogether. On the contrary, it is more than ever necessary that the members of the Church growing into manhood and womanhood should be given every kind of help in fellowship classes and groups which meet regularly and include instruction, discussion and worship. The utmost care should be taken in the appointment of the leader of such a group, and he should receive the greatest possible support from the whole Church. In country circuits it may well be desirable for such groups to meet on a circuit basis; the essential thing is that they should meet, and should be effective, inspiring and vital.

### **THE EXERCISE OF DISCIPLINE**

Membership of the Church Universal involves membership of a particular denomination. It is therefore part of Methodist discipline, which is primarily pastoral and remedial, to scrutinize regularly the list of members, to remind those who absent themselves without good cause from the means of grace that they are cutting themselves off from the fellowship of God's people, and in cases of definite refusal to accept the privileges and responsibilities of membership, to remove their names from the roll of full members of the Methodist Church; but also to seek and use all means of bringing them back into fellowship. Attention is drawn to SO 271 (1): 'Any member of the Methodist Church who without sufficient reason persistently absents himself from the Lord's Supper and from the meetings for Christian fellowship shall be visited both by his Leader and his Minister. The name of any person who by prolonged absence severs himself from Christian fellowship shall be removed from the Classbook by the Leaders' Meeting, and he shall thereupon cease to be a member of the Methodist Church'. When such people are readmitted it is not appropriate to use again the service of Public Reception.

### **THE PROPOSALS OF THE RURAL METHODISM REPORT**

The Conference Report on Rural Methodism has this to say about 'The Effect of Anglican Confirmation':

'We are concerned with the unfortunate effects on our work of Anglican Confirmation as it affects our children in some areas. In a great many villages it is the custom to include all children of about twelve years of

age as candidates for Confirmation. Sometimes the parents of our children desire it as a social event. Sometimes pressure is brought to bear on these parents by the incumbent on the grounds that the children were baptized in the parish church – a custom which owes not a little to the difficulty of getting in touch with the distant Methodist minister, as against the ready availability of the parish priest when a mother wishes to ‘get churched’. The practical consequences of such Confirmation is that all too frequently the child breaks his connexion with us, but fails to become a regular communicant of the Anglican Church. He feels he is no longer a Methodist, but because far too often the parish priest regards his job as done and makes no further provision for his spiritual growth the child is lost to both of us’.

It is in the light of such facts as these that the proposal is made that children should be publicly received into membership at the age of twelve, after ‘a real decision accompanied by a real experience of Christ’ and ‘an adequate period for testing and due preparation’. It has further been suggested that after suitable and thorough training in the succeeding years those who have been received into membership at the age of twelve should, as adults, reaffirm their faith and claim their full status as responsible members of the Church, and at that point enter on the privileges and duties and voting rights of churchmanship.

The facts brought to the notice of the Church by the Rural Methodism Report, whether they apply to the country as a whole or only to certain parts of it, are very disturbing and call for definite and constructive action, if the life of our country Societies is to be preserved. But as they spring from the social customs of the countryside, and not from any religious or theological conviction, they do not furnish sufficient reason in themselves for holding a solemn Christian ceremony at a certain stage in a child’s life. This is justifiable only on grounds of Christian theology and experience. The ‘decision for Christ’ often made at the age of twelve or thereabouts is a fitting basis for entering on the status of ‘Members of Training’, with all that is involved. But the solemn vows of lifelong allegiance to Jesus Christ which are taken in the Service of Public Reception should be reserved to a later age; however sincere it is, the earlier decision for Christ lacks the stability and maturity of understanding which are proper to a life-long commitment. The result of widespread reception of children at the age of twelve might well be a custom purely social in its significance. Nor does there seem to be good reason for *two* services of Reception into Membership, at the age of twelve and a few years later.

The constructive Methodist policy in the difficult situation described in the Rural Methodism Report is the Christian education of Methodist children from the earliest possible age by the personal interest of the adult members of the Church, and by the careful instruction of Members in Training in the ‘privileges and duties of the Christian religion’ and in habits of prayer and worship, culminating in an impressive Service of Public Reception, and continued into adult life by the practice of Christian fellowship and service in a truly worshipping community of Christian people.

#### **THE NAME ‘CONFIRMATION’**

There is little doubt that the original intention of the Service for the Public Reception of New Members was reception into the Methodist *Society*. But the Methodist Society is now also the Methodist Church, and the intention of the Service

has now necessarily been changed, and it is widely thought of by Methodists as a service for the confirmation (properly understood) of members of the Methodist Church. The *Statement on Holy Baptism* of 1952 makes it clear that Baptism in the Methodist Church is a service of 'reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. The membership of those 'publicly received' in the Methodist Church is membership of the same One Church.

The proper meaning of Confirmation, as it is practised in the Orthodox, Roman, Lutheran and Anglican Churches, is twofold: (a) the confirmation by the candidate for confirmation, by public confession of faith, of the membership on which he entered by Baptism; and (b) prayer that God by His Holy Spirit may complete His purposes in him by confirming, strengthening and increasing the gifts and graces which He has already given.

The present Order of Service in the Book of Offices does not fully express this meaning and intention. Nevertheless the name 'Confirmation' is allowable, so long as it is not used simply to assimilate Methodist terminology to that of other Churches.

### **AN ORDER OF SERVICE FOR MEMBERS IN TRAINING**

This service may be used as part of Public Worship on the Lord's day, at which some of the following passages may be the Lessons: Deuteronomy 30, 15-20; Psalm 119, 9-16; Mark 1, 14-20; Ephesians 6, 10-18.

The service may begin with the hymn: 'See Jesus, Thy disciples see', or other appropriate hymn.

The congregation standing, the Minister shall say:

Dearly beloved, we purpose now to recognise as Members in Training these young people who desire to follow Jesus Christ. At their Baptism Christ received them into His flock. Their parents promised to provide a Christian home for them. The Congregation promised to maintain a fellowship in which they might grow in grace and enter more and more into their Christian inheritance. Now of their own accord they wish to serve Jesus Christ in the Church, that they may come to know Him and love Him more and more. We on our part as members of the Church wish to acknowledge afresh our responsibility to care for them, and to instruct them in the doctrines, privileges and duties of the Christian religion. And as we make or renew these vows we shall pray that the Holy Spirit may enable us to keep them, and that these young people may come to enjoy those blessings which were promised at their Baptism, and enter ever more fully into the fellowship of the Christian Church.

The Minister shall read the names of those who are to be admitted as Members in Training, and shall say to them:

Do you promise to follow Jesus Christ, your Lord and Saviour?

*I do so promise, God being my helper.*

Do you promise to pray and read the Bible, and to join in the worship of God on Sundays?

*I do so promise, God being my helper.*

Do you promise to meet regularly with others, so that you may continue to be trained as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?

*I do so promise, God being my helper.*

Then shall the Minister say:

May God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has heard these promises, enable you to keep them. Amen.

Then shall the Minister address the Leader(s) appointed to lead the Class(es) of Members in Training:

Will you give friendship to the boys and girls whom we commend to your care, and train them with sympathy, imagination and diligence, until they are ready to accept all the privileges and responsibilities of full membership of the Church?

The Leader(s) shall reply:

*I will, God being my helper.*

The Minister shall say:

Members of the Church, will you endeavour to maintain here a fellowship of worship and service in the Church, that these disciples of Jesus Christ may continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord?

The Congregation shall reply:

*We will, God being our helper.*

Then all present shall pray together as follows:

Thanks be to Thee, our Lord, Jesus Christ, for all the benefits Thou hast won for us, for all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for us. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may we know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly, now and ever. Amen.

Then the Minister shall say:

O heavenly Father, bless these Thy children, who have now made their vows before Thee. Grant to them that they may ever remain Thy faithful soldiers and servants, and to us who have the care of them that we may be faithful in our charge, that none of them may be lost through sin or folly. And keep us all in the company of Thy people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Here may be sung the hymn: 'Let Him to whom we now belong'; or 'What shall I render to my God?'; or 'O Jesus, I have promised'.

*(Agenda 1961, pp.34-48)*

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An extensive Interim Report on Church Membership had been presented to the Conference of 1960.

The Conference adopted this report omitting the section headed, 'The Name "Confirmation"'.

## **THE USE OF THE TERM 'CONFIRMATION' (1962)**

The Report on Church Membership, adopted by the Conference of 1961, includes the statement that the following elements in the 'Service for the Public Reception of New Members' are of great importance:

- (a) Personal commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour and expression of the desire to serve Him in His Church:
- (b) offering of prayer that the gifts and graces which Christ by the Holy Spirit has already given may be continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit:
- (c) welcome of the member by the Church upon his entry into those privileges and duties within the Church which are appropriate to those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and which include the receiving of Holy Communion.

In a footnote to (b) above it is pointed out that the element of prayer that the gifts and graces bestowed by the Holy Spirit may be 'continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit' is not sufficiently prominent in the present Service, and that 'any revision of the Book of Offices should pay careful attention to this point, in the light of Methodist experience of inward religion, of personal awareness of Jesus Christ and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer'.

It is abundantly clear from this, and from the whole Methodist understanding of the faith and life of Christians, that no change in the name of the Service could be recommended which obscures the fundamental importance of personal commitment to Jesus Christ, personal knowledge of Him as Lord and Saviour, and the conversion which is brought about by the Holy Spirit in those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ.

Confirmation, as practised in the Roman, Lutheran and Anglican Churches, has, properly understood, two dominant meanings: the confirmation by the candidate, by public confession of faith, of the membership entered upon by Baptism; and prayer that the Holy Spirit may confirm, strengthen and increase the gifts and graces which He has already given.

Thus there are resemblances between Confirmation as administered in the Anglican Communion, and the Methodist Service for the Public Reception of New Members. But there are also differences. The Methodist Service, for instance, does not include the laying on of hands by a bishop. Moreover, it places great stress on the element of personal commitment, but not so much on prayer for the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is evident that the two titles, 'The Public Reception of New Members' and 'Confirmation' are not simply interchangeable, but, when properly understood in the way suggested above, refer to different aspects of a complex whole.

If these considerations are carefully borne in mind, and the traditional Methodist witness to the necessity of the New Birth, which in every believer is the work of God's saving Grace, is thereby maintained, there is no objection to the use of 'Confirmation' as an alternative title for the 'Service of Public Reception'.

The present name, 'Service for the Public Reception of New Members', is not, however, wholly satisfactory in itself. For, according to Methodist doctrine, those who are baptized are received into 'the congregation of Christ's flock'; when at a later stage

they commit themselves consciously and personally to Jesus Christ and desire to have fellowship with Him in His Church, the membership which is theirs in Baptism is completed. The service in which they are received is properly called 'The Service for Public Reception into Full Membership'.

The full title should therefore be 'The Order of Service for Public Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation', and in any revision of the Book of Offices this should be printed, with an explicit foreword as to its meaning.

The following should be the foreword, printed in italics at the head of the Order of Service:

In this Service those who desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who evidence the same in their life and conduct, and desire to have fellowship with the Methodist people, having been baptized and having been approved by a Leaders' Meeting, are publicly received into full membership, with all its duties and privileges, of the Methodist Church, which is within the Holy Catholic Church. As they commit themselves to Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour, prayer is made that the Holy Spirit may strengthen them by confirming the gifts which He has given.

*(Agenda 1962, pp. 16-18)*

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In adopting this report, the Conference added the words, 'who alone makes them new creatures in Him', after the words 'Holy Spirit' in the last line but one.

## **DUAL MEMBERSHIP (1970)**

*A Circuit Meeting had suggested that statistics gathered from union churches involving a Methodist Church and another Free Church were misleading.*

The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the two forms of membership in united Churches now practised in existing unions (i.e. (a) the arrangement by which each member of a united denomination becomes a member also of all the other uniting denominations, and (b) the arrangement by which each member of a uniting denomination is placed on the roll of the United Church, while remaining a member of his own denomination) should continue, and be allowable in new ventures. The Committee further holds that the effect on statistics of the first of these two methods is not serious enough to be called misleading.

*(Agenda 1970, p. 262)*



## RECEPTION OF MEMBERS FROM OTHER COMMUNIONS (1970)

That the Conference recommend these procedures for the reception of members from other communions and directs that they be printed in the General Directions in the Services for Entry into the Church when that booklet is revised:

- (i) Persons being received from other Christian communions, if they have not been previously baptized, should be baptized.
- (ii) If they have not been confirmed or full members of another Christian communion and now wish to be full members of the Methodist Church, they should be confirmed and received into full membership.
- (iii) If they have already been confirmed or full members of another Christian communion from which they can be received by transfer, they should be received into full membership of the Methodist Church by being admitted into membership of a local society without any public service, like members being received by transfer from another Methodist society.
- (iv) If they are confirmed or full members of another Christian communion from which they cannot be received by transfer, then the Minister shall ascertain that, after due consideration of the teaching and practice of the Methodist Church, they desire to take up its duties and privileges, and the Leaders meeting shall admit them into full membership: and then, if pastoral reasons so require, they may be publicly received in this way, preferably after the Sermon, at a service which is to include the Lord's Supper:

The Minister shall say:

*N.*, you have been a member of another communion within the Church of Christ. Do you, having duly considered the teaching and practice of the Methodist Church, desire to take up the duties and privileges of membership?

Answer: I do.

The Minister shall give to *him* the right hand of fellowship saying:

*N.*, we welcome you into the full membership of the Methodist Church and the Society in this place.

Prayer shall be offered for the person newly received, and *he* shall afterwards receive the Holy Communion.

*(Agenda 1970, pp. 260f)*

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See *The Methodist Service Book*, pp.A42-44.

## JOINT CONFIRMATION SERVICES (1976)

The Conference of 1975 noted that, by a ruling of the House of Bishops (Minute 18 of 20.3.75), Joint Confirmation Services might be held in Areas of Ecumenical Experiment, with the agreement of the diocesan bishop, provided that the services included a form of confirmation authorised by the Church of England. The Conference commended the practice, in Areas where the Church of England and the Methodist Church were involved, of adding as a preface to any such service a 'note on its meaning' taken from the Anglican-Methodist Joint Liaison Commission Agreed Statements of 21.6.73, and directed the Faith and Order Committee 'to explore the matter further with a view to giving advice to Methodists involved in Areas of Ecumenical Experiment' (*Daily Record*, 21f, 48).

The Committee has examined the service at present in use in the Bristol District and commends it as a good example of a Joint Confirmation Service. The Committee suggests that, wherever it is used, careful attention should be given to the following notes and guidelines:

1. This service has been commended by the Conference, for use in Areas of Ecumenical Experiment, as a good example of a Joint Confirmation Service, by which those who are confirmed are received into communicant membership of all the participating Churches.
2. The House of Bishops has declared that, if the diocesan bishop agrees, Joint Confirmation Services may be used in Areas of Ecumenical Experiment.
3. It is stipulated by the House of Bishops that the confirmation prayer must be in one of the forms authorised for use in the Church of England; that is, in practice, the form to be found in Series Two. This service complies with this stipulation.
4. It is because some of the words of the confirmation prayer may cause difficulty for Methodists that a note on the interpretation of the service is included as a Preface. The note is an agreed statement of the Anglican-Methodist Joint Liaison Commission, and must be printed entire.
5. If alterations are made to enable Baptists with their different baptismal beliefs and practices to participate, the alterations should be in harmony with notes 3 and 4 above. A further paragraph at the end of the Preface expressing and safeguarding Baptist doctrine might be considered.
6. It is laid down by the Conference and the House of Bishops, and is required by all the Churches, that there be proper instruction in the teaching and discipline of each Church before the confirmation. The full procedure of the Methodist Church in relation to those received into full membership should be followed, and their names placed on the membership roll of the appropriate society. Each Church will wish to follow its own procedure in this matter.
7. The Methodist officiating minister may be the local minister, the Superintendent of the Circuit, or the Chairman of the District.
8. Any arrangement by which people from outside the Area of Ecumenical Experiment receive 'ordinary' confirmation on the same occasion should be avoided.

9. This service of Joint Confirmation should be used in an Area of Ecumenical Experiment even when all those to be confirmed are of the same denomination.

Copies of the service used in the Bristol District and of these notes and guidelines are available from the Secretary of the Connexional Ecumenical Committee or from the Convener of the Faith and Order Committee.

*(Agenda 1976, pp. 295f)*

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Further reports on the relationship between reception into membership and Confirmation are to be found in Volume 2, pp. 112-120.

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## **Part IV The Lord's Supper**

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## **(i) Who presides?**

### **LAY ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS (1946)**

#### **I. Affirmations.**

(a) The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments, namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as of Divine Appointment and of perpetual obligation, of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves. Therefore the first consideration must be to provide for the orderly and regular administration of the Lord's Supper. It is desirable, wherever possible, that the sacrament should be administered monthly and under no circumstances less frequently than once a quarter.

(b) The general usage whereby the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered by Ministers shall continue to be observed.

(c) The Committee accepts the principle of duly authorised lay administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper throughout Methodism.

#### **II. Observations.**

(1) The Standing Order No. 226, paragraph (6), provided for a transitional period during which there would be different usages throughout the united Methodist Church. This period will have continued for fourteen years at the Conference of 1946.

(2) The existence of different usages does create practical difficulties. The fact that Churches can continue their pre-Union practices has blocked the way to local amalgamation in some areas. There are varying practices within Circuits, even though the Standing Order does provide for a policy in amalgamated Circuits. Such continued variation, which in spite of this provision is justified generally by the Standing Order, has created acute differences in some circuits.

(3) It could never have been anticipated that differences of practice in administration should be perpetuated, and the time would appear to have come when so many amalgamations have been carried out, that a common policy for the whole Church should be adopted. Circuits have been reduced from 1,775 to 1,137. The settlement of this question of administration will help to facilitate the further amalgamations which are necessary.

(4) The Standing Order, in setting out a policy to be adopted in amalgamated Circuits, does indicate in our judgement the kind of policy which should belong to the Church as a whole. This, in brief, is the general usage of administration by Ministers but with provision for lay administration where it is needed or required. The general experience acquired in recent years suggests that it would be a great mistake to attempt to exclude lay administration. Not only would this create very real difficulty in respect of some Circuits where lay administration has been very strongly held as a principle, but it would also be regarded as unfortunate by some other Circuits where the absence of lay administration has led to very infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **III. Suggestions. (Adopted by the Conference.)**

(1) When it can be shown to the Superintendent of the Circuit and the District Home Mission and Chapel Committee that a Circuit considers that any of its churches is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of Ministers, the Circuit concerned may apply for the authorisation of persons other than Ministers to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper when appointed to do so on the Circuit plan.

(2) Suitable persons, being members of Society within the Circuit, shall be nominated by the March Quarterly Meeting to administer the Sacraments within the Circuit. These persons, having been approved by the District Synod, shall, if accepted by Conference, be authorised by Conference for that service.

(3) The responsibility for the choice of persons for this solemn office should rest upon Quarterly Meetings, Synod, and Conference.

(4) The authorisation shall be renewable every three years. It shall be cancelled by cessation of membership, removal from the Circuit, resignation, or resolution of the Conference.

(5) Persons so authorised should receive instruction in the administration of the Sacraments by the Chairman of the District or a Minister appointed by him; the forms of service in our *Book of Offices* being used as a basis of instruction.

(6) All authorised persons (if not already set apart for the purpose) shall be inducted into their office at a public service under the direction of the Chairman of the District or a Minister appointed by him.

### **IV. The Sacrament of Baptism.**

This subject raises issues which cannot be dealt with by this Committee. Our present position is chaotic. The problems raised are both doctrinal and practical. The relation of this Sacrament to the Pastoral Office, the conditions under which this Sacrament should be administered, the use of the form of Service under which the Sacrament should be administered, the use of the form of Service authorised by the Conference to prevent superstitious notions from gaining encouragement in our Church, the relation of baptised children to the Church, carry us far beyond our terms of reference. But they are not unrelated to the subject committed to our consideration, and we feel we are within our province in asking the Conference to review the subject as a whole.

*(Minutes 1946, pp. 203f)*

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Section 1(b) continues the provision previously made in the Deed of Union, clause 32, which was removed from the Deed itself by the 1948 Conference. (*Minutes 1948, p. 213.*)



## **DISPENSATIONS TO ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (1960)**

Under God, all authority within the Methodist Church belongs to the Conference, as representative of the whole Church. In the exercise of this authority the Conference gives Dispensations (that is, authorisations to depart from the normal practice) to some who are not ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, to administer Holy Communion in specific areas for a specific length of time.

The practice, which obtained till recently, of granting such Dispensations to practically all Probationers without an examination of the special needs which gave rise to the request for them, has created the impression that there is no distinction between ordained ministers and Probationers, and contradicts Methodist teaching on the subject of ordination. The need for a Dispensation exists only where many members of the Methodist Church would otherwise be denied the Holy Communion for long periods. Dispensations are to be granted either to Probationers or to laymen only when, after very careful investigation, the Conference is satisfied that the need exists. The Conference of 1958 'directed . . . the Ministerial Session of each District Synod through the Ministerial members of its District General Purposes Committee to forward with relevant evidence such applications as they recommend to the Committee appointed by the Conference to consider these applications' (Daily Record, 1958, No. 8, p. 58; Minutes 1958, p. 51). The employment of this procedure will remove a serious abuse. In the Overseas Districts, where for the most part changes of Station take place mid-way between one Conference and the next, it is necessary for the President, acting on behalf of Conference, to deal with applications from Synods for Dispensation to be granted to Probationers.

The procedure for the granting of Dispensations to laymen is laid down in CPD, pp. 123f. Applications from Quarterly Meetings are considered by the District General Purposes Committee and the Synod and, if endorsed, are forwarded to Conference with a statement of the need. Dispensations are granted for three years in each instance, and are cancelled by cessation of membership, removal from the Circuit, resignation or resolution of the Conference. It is further laid down that persons so authorized shall receive instruction in the administration of the Sacraments from the Chairman of the District or a Minister appointed by him, the forms of service in the *Book of Offices* being used as a basis of instruction.

*(Agenda 1960, p. 311)*

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This appeared as Appendix A to *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, 1960. The matter is now dealt with in S.O. 011 (2000).

## HOLY COMMUNION (1966)

CPD states in its general account of the Methodist Church (page 4): 'The general usage of the three uniting Churches whereby the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered by Ministers shall continue to be observed'. This is sometimes taken to mean that not only the task of presiding at the Lord's Supper, but also the distribution of the elements, is confined to Ministers, but this meaning is by no means required by the words. The Book of Offices, containing the forms of Service authorised by the Conference for use, has a rubric as follows: 'Then shall the Minister himself first receive the Communion in both kinds, and afterwards deliver the same to the other officiating Ministers, if any be present, and then to the People in order, into their hands'. These words, taken literally, would preclude distribution by others.

But practice in the Methodist Church has, in fact, varied. In some societies the distribution has been restricted to Ministers; in others the sharing of lay people in the distribution of the elements, either because reception in the pews is preferred, or because the Minister needs assistance in dealing with large numbers, is an unchallenged practice.

In the Church of England, although a Bishop or Priest must preside, an ordained deacon may distribute the wine and the authorisation of Lay Readers to distribute the wine is now in force in several dioceses. In the Church of Scotland, where the minister must preside, lay elders distribute both the bread and the wine.

The Committee is of the opinion that the renewal of worship in the Methodist Church will be greatly assisted if in the Service of Holy Communion lay people join much more actively in the parts already assigned to them, if sometimes they read the lessons and lead the intercessions, if they say with the presiding Minister the Prayer of Humble Access, and if they bring the bread and wine to the Table as now they bring the Offertory for the Poor. In this way the corporate nature of Christian worship and the variety of gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to the Church will be rightly emphasised.

There is no theological objection to the distribution of the elements by lay people. The sentence above quoted from CPD does not preclude this, and it is wholly in accord with what the Church throughout the world is being led to see about the nature of worship.

At the present time experiments in liturgy, and not least in the administration of the Order of Holy Communion, are taking place in all Churches. The Methodist Book of Offices is under revision by the Faith and Order Committee and the questions raised by the Oxford and Leicester District Synod are being kept carefully under review. In view of the fluidity of the present situation and the prospect that the Faith and Order Committee will in due course make various suggestions to the Conference for the Order of Holy Communion and its administration in the Methodist Church, the Committee thinks it premature at present to make any regulations about the distribution of the elements.

*(Minutes 1966, pp. 252f)*

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The quotation from CPD, with which the report begins, is taken from the brief general introduction to the contemporary edition (4th edition 1963). The words come originally from a passage in the Deed of Union dealing with the period of transition after Methodist Union. As such they were dropped in 1948 (*Minutes* p. 213). In a slightly shortened form, however, they appear in the statement *Lay Administration of the Sacraments* 1946 (see above).

## LAY ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (1975)

At the Conference of 1974 two Memorials were submitted as follows:

'42. Deaconesses and Sacrament of Lord's Supper. – *The Nottingham (Mission) (22/6) Quarterly Meeting* (Present: 53, Vote: Unanimous) requests the Conference to grant dispensations, where necessary, to ordained deaconesses for the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion in the homes of our members.'

'43. Lay Agents and Sacrament of Lord's Supper. – *The Exmouth and Budleigh Salterton (23/13) Quarterly Meeting* (Present: 58. Vote: Unanimous) requests the Conference to review the question of the Lay Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, especially in regard to circuits which make appointments of lay agents with pastoral responsibility under S.O. 244 and then apply for a dispensation for the persons so appointed to administer the Sacrament in churches within their pastoral care.'

The same reply was given in each case. It was:

'The Memorials Committee understands that the question of the 'Lay Administration of the Sacrament is to be considered by the Faith and Order Committee during the Connexional Year 1974/75 and recommends that this Memorial be referred to that Committee.'

### 1. Theological Stance

Some sentences from our report on Ordination to the Conference of 1974, and adopted by that Conference, express the theological point of view from which we consider this matter:

'But as a perpetual reminder of this calling (to be the Body of Christ to men) and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets apart men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focused and represented, and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world.'

'Furthermore, we see in such a view of the ministry a sufficient reason why it should normally be ordained Ministers who preside at the eucharist. The eucharist, which sacramentally expresses the whole gospel, is the representative act of the whole Church, and it is fitting that the representative person should preside.'

This theological stance with its reference to 'normally' and 'fitting' leads logically to Standing Order 011:

'*Lay Administration.* (1) A Circuit which considers that any of its churches is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of ministers may apply for the authorisation of persons

other than ministers to administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper when appointed to do so on the circuit plan.'

## 2. Deprivation

The question here is: what do we mean, and what should we mean, by claiming that a church is deprived of reasonably frequent and regular administration through lack of ministers? The present practice of the Committee on Lay Administration, which acts for the Secretary of the Conference in the matter, working on a rule of thumb that a church should have a monthly Lord's Supper if so desired, is to divide the number of churches in a circuit by the number of ministers and after taking into account the mobility of the ministers, the size of the churches, the availability of supernumeraries, sector ministers and other ministers without pastoral charge and the number of churches with less than two services per Sunday, if the result is five or more to agree that a condition of deprivation exists.

In framing our answer to the above question we wish to make three points, each of which leads us to the same conclusion:

- (1) Lay administration apart, very few of our people consider themselves deprived of the Lord's Supper. For a number of reasons, many people in our smaller churches would not feel deprived if the Lord's Supper were 'planned' only once a quarter or even less. And this, not for the reason advanced, for example by the Church of Scotland, that infrequency stresses the importance, but the opposite. As for celebrations in homes or in hospital most of our people would find a Scripture reading and a prayer adequate to their need.

We are aware of the objection that if this situation, which we regret, were improved there might be an increased demand for Lay Administration. Our answer is, first, that we have to deal with Methodism as it is now, and second, as we shall argue later, increased demand might well be met by the ordained ministry. We would welcome such a demand and would encourage it, but the fact that it does not at present exist means that situations of genuine deprivation are very few.

- (2) The question of ministerial priorities needs careful examination in this context. If the administration of the Lord's Supper is seen as a top priority for a minister then, in our judgement, many more celebrations could take place than is now the case. The recognition of this priority is particularly important where, as a result of a growing realisation of the proper place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the local church, the demand for eucharistic worship increases. Celebrations in homes and hospitals, where they are required, should also be included. It could well be that the need is not for dispensations for the unordained, except in a very few cases, but for a reappraisal of the sacramental theology and practice of the ordained ministry.
- (3) There could be much more flexibility exercised within circuits (the inevitable unit at present) in the arrangement of celebrations of the Lord's Supper than is now the case. Some use could be made of week-nights, though there are obvious limitations; some of united sacramental services both within Methodism and outside it. But it is the hours of Sunday which most lend themselves for this purpose. If we were to break away from the

11 and 6.30 complex and feel free to 'plan' sacramental services at any hour when the people could conveniently come together and the minister conveniently be present we could meet the sacramental needs (both what they are and what they ought to be) much more effectively than we do now. The monthly celebration referred to above would present few difficulties. Easter Day would not be easy to arrange in some circuits but we are not convinced that the difficulties even there are insurmountable.

These three considerations lead us to the conclusion that there should be a tightening up of our practice in the granting of dispensations for laymen (including deaconesses) to preside at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If there are few situations of deprivation now and if, by the adjustment of ministerial priorities and the exercise of flexibility in 'planning', more – perhaps many more – sacramental services conducted by ministers become possible, then we would require fewer dispensations to be granted to lay people. In our judgment the number used by the Committee on Lay Administration of the Sacrament should be raised.

### **3. Memorials 42 and 43 (1974)**

Both these Memorials link presidency at the eucharist with pastoral care. The argument behind them seems to be that if a person is authorised in a local church to have a share in the pastoral care of the flock then that person ought also to be able to preside at the Lord's Table, whether it is in the church or in a home.

We do not find this argument convincing. Admittedly, there has usually been in the history of the Church universal some degree of association between pastoral care and presidency at the eucharist: and we are hardly in a position to question the rightness of that, since one of the factors in the rise of our own Methodist ministry was the desire of the Methodist people to receive the sacrament at the hands of the men from whom they received the ministry of preaching and pastoral care. But no Church, including our own, has ever held that all who exercise any measure of pastoral care (in Methodism one thinks of class leaders) thereby become the proper persons to preside at the Lord's Supper. Contrariwise, in all Churches the eucharist may be presided over by any person who has been ordained to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Church as a whole, even though he may hold no local pastoral responsibility for the particular place or group in which the sacrament is being observed. As for deaconesses, there seems to us to be no case for the intrusion of 'Word and Sacrament' into their ministry of pastoral care at this point. On the contrary, it is our view that such occasions as are described or assumed in the two Memorials are opportunities for clear demonstration that the local society (43) and the members in their houses (42), both with their 'pastor', are not self-contained units but part of a larger whole, part of a circuit, part indeed of the Church universal. The introduction of the ordained minister as 'representative person' at this point is evidence of universality.

If in addition the Memorials are assuming situations of deprivation, and the words 'where necessary' in Memorial 42 imply this, we consider we have answered this above.

We therefore suggest the following reply to Memorials 42 and 43 (1974):

The Conference holds that some degree of pastoral responsibility does not of itself constitute an entitlement to the administration of the Lord's Supper. It draws attention to the existing Standing Order 011 which provides for cases of deprivation.

*(Agenda 1975, pp. 253-6)*

## **AUTHORISATION TO PRESIDE AT THE LORD'S SUPPER (1976)**

1. The Conference of 1975, in adopting the Committee's Report on Lay Administration of the Lord's Supper, directed it to 'give further attention to the present distinction between probationers and other laymen with regard to dispensations to preside at the Lord's Supper, and to bring forward appropriate resolutions.'

2. Since the 'present distinction' is largely one of practice, by no means apparent from the constitutional documents, it is necessary to explain briefly what the practice is.

3. **Probationers.** Applications are initiated by the Circuit Meeting, in accordance with Standing Order 011(2), but are then considered by the ministerial members of the District General Purposes Committee and by the Ministerial Session of Synod and, if approved, sent forward, by annual direction of the Ministerial Session of the Conference (*e.g.* 1975 Minutes, p.15) to a committee appointed by that Session. That committee normally recommends as of course the grant of authorisations to probationers in 'ordained men's appointments'; other applications are considered by reference to the criterion of 'deprivation'. The committee's report is not printed in the Agenda; the authorisations granted by the Ministerial Session of the Conference are printed in the Daily Record but by reference to Circuits only, not names.

4. **Other Applications.** Applications are initiated by the Circuit Meeting and considered by the District General Purposes Committee and Synod, all in accordance with Standing Order 011(1) and (2). Thereafter, however, although clause (3) of the Standing Order seems to envisage the direct presentation of applications endorsed by the Synod, with supporting reasons, by the Secretary of Conference to the Conference, the practice is for a committee appointed by the connexional General Purposes Committee to give them further scrutiny, with special reference to the criterion of 'deprivation', and to present to the Conference in the Agenda of the Representative Session only the names recommended by the committee, and without reasons.

5. These distinctions can be criticised both as being contrary to the theological basis of such authorisations implicit in the Report on Ordination accepted by the Conference of 1974 and explicit in that on the present subject adopted in 1975, and as being unconstitutional.

6. The theological argument is that since it 'should normally be ordained ministers who preside at the eucharist' (Report on Ordination) deprivation through lack of such ministers is the only justification for the authorisation of other persons (Report on Lay Administration). It seems clear that if this is the criterion it should be applied to all probationers as well as to other applications and that if it is to be applied consistently a single body should consider all applications at each stage.

7. The constitutional argument is that since such authorisations, whether for probationers or not, are not placed within the province of the Ministerial Session of the Conference by clause 17 of the Deed of Union, they are by that clause all within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Representative Session and cannot be split.

8. The Deed of Union, which is primary and overriding, is therefore clear. On this topic Standing Orders, the subordinate legislation, are more confused. Standing Order 481, consistently with clause 17, does not include the subject in those within the

province of the Ministerial Session of the Synod. Similarly Standing Order 011 is expressed by clause (1) to apply without qualification to authorisation of 'persons other than ministers', and clauses (2) and (3), prescribing the normal procedure, on their face apply equally to all applications. On the other hand some of the later clauses of that Standing Order hardly seem apt in their present form for application to probationers (or indeed deaconesses), while the Agendas for the District General Purposes Committee and Synod reflect the practice of divided treatment described in paragraphs 3 and 4 above.

9. If the constitutional position is as set out in paragraph 7 the only legislation required to give effect to the theological argument relied upon in paragraph 6 is: (i) to give express sanction to the review of all applications at connexional level by a single committee, the status of which should, we think, be recognised by its being officially appointed (it would most naturally be within the Division of Ministries), (ii) to make the slight modifications to the later clauses of Standing Order 011 required to accommodate probationers and deaconesses, and (iii) to bring the relevant Agendas into accord with the Deed of Union and Standing Orders.

10. We bring appropriate resolutions. We have included some minor verbal clarifications, brought up to date the reference to the Book of Offices in Standing Order 011(7), and codified the existing practice by which emergency authorisations are granted by the President. Clause (5) of the Standing Order seems to serve no useful purpose and is omitted, as is clause (8), which is generally disregarded. We propose the expression 'preside at' in place of 'administer', with consequential changes elsewhere.

*(Agenda 1976, pp. 294f)*

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Further reports on Presidency at the Lord's Supper appeared during the following twenty years (see Volume 2, pp. 123-162).

## **(ii) Children at Holy Communion**

### **CHILDREN AND THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION (1973)**

By the sacrament of Baptism we receive children 'into the congregation of Christ's flock', yet the relation of children to the Sacrament of Holy Communion has not always been so clear. With the growth of the practice of Family Worship within which the Sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated, the question has arisen as to how children of varying ages should share in that service. The practice of 'blessing' young children who accompany their parents to the communion rail has been adopted in some churches and this seems wholly appropriate. However, as children mature this practice seems childish to them which may be an indication that they are ready for fuller participation. There is also some evidence that parents would like their children to receive the bread and wine at an age earlier than that at which we have customarily received young people into full membership\*. Even more important, our new insights into the processes by which a child learns and grows into maturity have led us to reconsider the place of the child within the Body of Christ.

The normal procedure of baptism followed by Church membership, or confirmation, and first communion may need re-examination. Two possibilities are open to us:

- (a) that children should be received into full membership\* at an earlier age, or
- (b) that they should be admitted to Holy Communion at an earlier age and received into full membership\* later.

There is much force in the view that where a child has expressed a desire to receive the bread and wine and has received appropriate instruction he has fulfilled the requirements of full membership\* (Deed of Union Clause 33(a)); equally it may be argued that commitment to full membership\* ought always to be connected with the duties and responsibilities of adult life, especially as it carries with it voting rights. We, therefore, hesitate to recommend that young people should be received as full members† at an earlier age though we recognize that some ministers and Leaders Meetings may wish to take such a course. Those who do not take this course nevertheless affirm that the child has a status in the Church by reason of his baptism. That this is a developing status has been recognized in the past by the establishment of Junior membership and latterly in the status of Members in Training. Members in Training are those who 'sincerely desire to serve Jesus Christ, and are receiving regular instruction in the Bible and the Faith'. (S.O. 288). We have thus already recognized that Christian commitment is a progression towards the fullness of Christ. For some young people their first Communion may mark an important stage in their developing commitment towards full membership\*. Such young communicants might indeed be recognized as Members in Training. Flexibility and experiment are to be encouraged and we would not wish to question the action of any minister who, in conjunction with his Leaders Meeting and with the consent of parents, encourages baptized children who sincerely desire it to receive Holy Communion after brief instruction at an earlier age than has been customary, whether or not this involves full membership\*.



Early Communion without full membership\* may give the impression that full membership\* is an optional extra for those who are already communicants. We, therefore, urge that where this course is taken ministers and Leaders should stress the importance of full membership\* and give the same pastoral oversight to young communicants as is required for members in Training (S.O. 288).

While we recommend flexibility we would draw attention to difficulties that may arise where, for example, a child who has been accustomed to receive Communion in his home church presents himself at another church where this is not the practice, and we urge that pastoral considerations should be regarded as paramount in such situations.

We do not wish to recommend any constitutional or liturgical changes at this time but to stress the importance of (a) exercising imaginative pastoral care over all our baptized children within the church and within the home, (b) underlining the centrality of Holy Communion, (c) recognizing the developing nature of commitment, (d) doing nothing to diminish the goal of all Christians which is 'mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ', and (e) recognising the importance of continuing the discussion at every level of Church life.

\* or Confirmation

† or Confirmed

*(Minutes 1973, pp. 50f)*

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This report was presented to the Conference by the Youth Department after consultation with the Faith and Order Committee. The Conference resolved that this Report be printed in the Minutes of the Conference and directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on this matter to the Conference of 1974.

## CHILDREN AND THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION (1975)

The 1973 Conference resolved that the Report 'Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion' be printed in the *Minutes of Conference* (see pp. 50-51 of the Minutes of that year) and directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on this matter to the Conference of 1974. The 1974 Conference gave leave to the Committee to present its report to the Conference of 1975. Having considered the Report, the Faith and Order Committee believes that its most helpful action would be to advise the Conference on some of the implications, theological and practical, of adopting the policy suggested in the Report. In so far as the policy suggested in the Report would in some respect mark a departure from current general practice, the Committee thinks it right to set out the arguments which may be advanced in favour of keeping to our existing position. Support for our present position and for a greater flexibility were found both in the working party appointed by the Faith and Order Committee and in the Committee itself.

### 1. Constitution and Usage:

The historic tradition of Methodism about the admission to communion of children and others who are not full members is somewhat ambiguous. Wesley sometimes gave communion to children, though only after the most careful enquiry. The accounts of such events are very few and the circumstances plainly exceptional – 'an uncommon awe resting upon them' (Journal VII 23). Admission to communion at the services of the Methodist societies was rigidly controlled, and restricted to members, save in exceptional circumstances. This may be reflected in the statement in the Deed of Union: 'The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper as of Divine Appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of Members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves' (Clause 30). Statements by the Conference (e.g. On Holy Baptism, 1936 and 1952, and Church Membership, 1961) have been concerned with the relation of Baptism to membership in the Church and do not comment upon the relationship of children to Holy Communion. However, the dominant tradition has been that communicant status is related to acceptance into full membership and some have thought that this norm has been re-inforced by the tendency to assimilate reception into full membership to Anglican confirmation. On the other hand there has been widespread usage throughout Methodism in this country by which non-members are not only permitted but welcomed to receive communion. The phrase 'All who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth' is so common that it is often taken to be an official formula, though this is not the case. But those who make this invitation, it may be assumed, are thinking of people who, though not members, have the same level of commitment to Christ that is expected of members. If they are not communicant members of other churches and come to communion with any frequency they are usually invited to consider taking up the responsibilities and privileges of membership of Society. It may, however, be fairly said that there is nothing in the constitution of Methodism which decisively restricts communion to full members or denies it to children.

## 2. In favour of the Current General Practice:

In liturgical matters the Conference tends to act in an advisory rather than a legislative manner. It has set out norms of practice that the Methodist people are encouraged to follow. As far as the matter under consideration is concerned the pattern suggested is: infant baptism followed by nurturing within the life of the Church and, after profession of faith, public reception into full membership (or confirmation) which carries 'the privilege and duty' of Holy Communion and the responsibilities of being a member of a Society.

The advantages of this policy can be stated as follows:

- (a) Initiation into the Christian community has rarely been on the basis of baptism alone. Communicant status has been granted by baptism *plus* either chrismation or episcopal imposition of hands or evangelical faith. Our British Methodist tradition has emphasised the third of these. The present Methodist policy keeps the order of baptism, confirmation and first communion that has been characteristic of Christian initiation for many centuries.
- (b) The public nature of reception into full membership has emphasised the need for decisiveness in faith. This service allows an appropriate expression of conversion or evangelical faith that may come at an important stage in adolescence. To grant communicant status before confirmation would shift the emphasis away from evangelical experience.
- (c) Full membership (or confirmation) leads not only to communicant life in the Church but to responsibility in the total life of the Methodist Church. If communicant status were granted before full membership (or confirmation) it might lead to a loosening of the commitment to the institutional life of the Church: 'membership' being then considered as an optional extra.
- (d) It is believed that a relatively mature understanding of the implications of sharing in the eucharist is required before participation in it, and that we create problems of a pastoral nature if we encourage people to enter into something for which they are not ready. Though John Wesley did admit children to Holy Communion he first talked with them to assure himself that they possessed what he called 'a degree of faith' (cf. Journal VII 23; Letters III 138). Those who support this policy would not desire to lay down any firm rule as to what age is appropriate for confirmation and entry into the eucharistic life of the Church. If the considerations above were taken into account, the age of admission would be related to profession of faith and readiness to accept responsibility in the life of the Church.
- (e) Those who wish to retain our present practice do not believe that adequate biblical, theological, historical and pastoral evidence has been advanced to support a policy which, while described as 'flexibility and experiment', would disturb our traditional balance between infant baptism and the individual response of faith.
- (f) It is felt that unless the Connexion as a whole adopts the policy of admitting children to communion there will be a number of difficult consequences. When families move they will run the risk that children received at communion in one place will not be so received at another. Moreover, churches will be put under undue pressure to change their position because

of the arrival of such a child. It could also produce a further complication in the stationing of ministers.

- (g) Differences between churches exist with regard to many things, but it could be considered that in initiation policy the Church should act uniformly.
- (h) Those who advocate a retention of the present norm would draw attention to the great difficulty in establishing adequate criteria on which to base a judgment as to whether a child should be admitted to Holy Communion before confirmation. If the criteria are not clearly laid down then the tendency will be either towards indiscriminate admission or admission only when accompanied by parents.

### 3. In Favour of Greater Flexibility:

The Report did not advocate a total abandonment of the position described above. It recommended 'flexibility and experiment' in encouraging 'baptized children who sincerely desire it to receive Holy Communion after brief instruction at an earlier age than has been customary, whether or not this involves full membership or confirmation'. The implication is that in some cases children could be confirmed younger than is customary and in others admission to communion could precede reception into full membership. Some would welcome the former course: they hold *both* that it is right for many children to receive communion at an earlier age than is customary *and* that public reception into full membership or confirmation should precede this. They thus wish to abandon the idea that public reception or confirmation is concerned with entry into adult status or the assumption of full responsibility for the institutional life of the Church. This course which they advocate would not involve any departure from current practice as regards the order of events: baptism; then public reception into full membership or confirmation, leading at once to first communion; but drastically to reduce the customary age, though fully permissible under our constitution, would constitute such a departure from our usage that ministers and Church Councils might not feel able to do so without encouragement from the Conference. The latter course, communion before confirmation, is an even greater departure from our practice. The Report indicates some of the reasons for the departure and some of the safeguards that would have to be introduced if this course were to be followed responsibly. In this section we shall look at the reasons afresh and in the following section set out and extend the pastoral requirements of such a policy.

In Methodism we use the word membership in a variety of ways, but it is predominantly used to speak of the link people have with the institutional life of the Church. Members are members of a Society that has its place within the Methodist Church as a whole (cf. *Ministry, Baptism and Membership in the Methodist Church*, 1962, p. 20). But few would dispute that the baptized are also, in some sense, members of the Holy Catholic Church in which 'the Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place' (*C.P.D.* Clause 30, p. 61). Those who receive the sacrament of Holy Communion can also be properly called communicant members for in it, receiving the body of Christ, they are incorporated in the Body of Christ, the Church. The existing norm brings membership of Society and communicant membership together. But it is possible to regard these forms of membership as being appropriate expressions of commitment to Christ at different stages in human development. Willingness to become a member of Society implies a commitment to share in the missionary obligation of the Church and the institutional life that goes with it. This is a form of commitment that is suitable at the time when a person is accepting civic and other responsibilities and entering upon a vocation in the life of the world. It is an

inappropriate form of commitment for a young child. A different, but no less genuine, form of commitment may be expressed by a young child in receiving communion. Holy Communion has been experienced as a means of grace in a wide range of human situations. Similarly many responses to it have been possible, touching at different times and different levels the intellectual and emotional elements in the person who receives it. A young child, or even an adult, may not bring to it a great deal of the intellectual understanding that may be possible at a further stage in his development, yet he can make an appropriate response according to his capacity at that particular point in his development. The child may thus be admitted to communicant membership on the basis of his baptism *plus* the faith of which he is capable. John Wesley himself went further than this in seeing baptism giving 'union with the Church, a share in all its privileges' (Works X 191) and consistently ignored confirmation. A child thus introduced into the sacramental life of the Church can grow through it to that form of commitment we associate with 'conversion' and take on the responsibilities of membership of Society.

It can be asked: If we had no historical tradition in this matter would we believe it to be in harmony with what we find in the New Testament to admit children to Holy Communion? This question could be approached by asking: Do children have a place in the Kingdom of God? The actions and words of Jesus are taken by some to imply that they have. In this case it would be natural to admit to the Lord's Supper where this sacrament is viewed in the light of 'the Messianic banquet of the Kingdom'. If the eucharistic allusions in the accounts of the feeding of the multitudes are given weight then children would be involved in the eucharist as the boy is in the feeding story (John 6v. 9f.). So it could be argued that, if baptism introduces a person to the life of the Kingdom, baptized children are eligible to come to the Table of the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, we cannot cut ourselves off from historical traditions. It is generally accepted that initiation into the Church was from early centuries through a three-part rite – baptism, confirmation and first communion. In the West, however, confirmation and communion both became at different times separated by some years from a baptism that was still given to infants. It could be argued that if the Church allowed a change of such dimensions it should also be free now to change current practice and bring baptism and communion closer together.

The importance of 'conversion' in the spiritual development of the Christian is not in doubt. But Methodism has never stated that people must be converted before becoming members of the Church or communicants. Conversion is a free work of the Holy Spirit and is not essentially tied to any sacrament. It is difficult to state a compelling theological reason why baptized children should not be sharers in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Since this is a means of grace it should be available to all who can profit from it. The proposal to admit children to Holy Communion before reception into membership takes seriously the role of the sacrament in forming faith and shaping convictions.

Some believe that the policy now proposed in the Report would be in harmony with modern understanding of the processes by which a child learns and grows into maturity. Above all some see it affirming baptism as initiation into the Body of Christ.

#### **4. Implications of a Change of Usage:**

If a policy on these lines were adopted, there would be need for sensitive pastoral care at two points.

1. A child could be admitted to communion if (i) he is baptized, (ii) he wants it, (iii) those who have 'oversight' of the nurturing of the child in the Christian faith, *i.e.* the parents and those who represent the Church (the minister in association with the Pastoral Sub-committee), believe that receiving communion will be an appropriate response of faith on the part of the child in terms of his stage of development. We recognise that applying these conditions in some cases would not be easy and care would be required. It would be a serious mistake to give the impression that the Church was mounting a campaign to get children to Holy Communion. The policy would be a discretionary one and depend upon deep sensitivity to the needs of individual children as they grow within the Christian community. Adequate preparation and continuing nurture would be required. It would be important too that there should be a rich and highly valued sacramental life in the particular Methodist Society in which the child was growing. It would be important that the child and parents concerned were made aware that all churches may not be accustomed to child communicants. Some prior enquiry may be the only safeguard against a child being refused communion when visiting another church after becoming used to receiving it.

2. The status of full membership of Society should be made available with the same sensitivity to personal growth. The suitable form for recognising this status is debatable. It could be maintained that the present service for Reception into Full Membership should be used. Others might consider that it would be better, following adequate preparation, for the person simply to be placed on the membership roll and for his new status to be expressed liturgically in the Covenant Service. On this matter a way might become clear if such a policy were pursued.

#### **5. A Third View:**

Both the views outlined above presuppose the maintenance of a considerable interval, whether shorter or longer, between a baptism administered in infancy and an admission to communion in later years. There was, however, a third view represented in the Faith and Order Committee. Recognising the fact that, historically, the separation between baptism and communion came about in more or less accidental ways, this third view sees the closest possible relation, theologically and existentially, between the two Gospel sacraments: the holy communion is the continuing feeding of the Christian life begun in baptism, and baptism is properly followed without interval by regular and continuing communion. In order to bring baptism and communion together, two alternative steps are possible. First: if it be judged right to administer baptism to infants of the tenderest age, then (it may be argued) communion also should be given throughout *infancy*, childhood and the adult life of the persons so baptized (unless such a person should come voluntarily to absent himself from communion). This is, generally speaking, the practice followed in the Orthodox Churches, which administer communion to infants who have received water baptism-with-chrisamation. Of those Methodists who are persuaded that baptism and communion should be brought together, perhaps the majority would be in favour of taking rather the second way to achieve this end: holding that communion is better not received before the presence of some degree of personally professed faith, they might prefer to let baptism also wait until that point; and they might see such baptism upon profession of faith as corresponding to the most clearly discernible practice of baptism in the New

Testament. No matter whether they prefer the first or the second of the two solutions just indicated, supporters of the view that baptism and communion should be brought together recognise that an important change would be taking place in Methodist practice if either of the two solutions were to become the recommended pattern of initiation in the Methodist Church, or even if either or both were to become permissible practices alongside the maintenance of the current practice whereby a considerable interval, whether shorter or longer, usually elapses between baptism and admission to communion. They would, therefore, welcome a thorough examination, at a fundamental level, of the whole question of the theology and practice of initiation in the Methodist Church.

### **Recommendation**

Methodism has endeavoured to retain both a 'churchly' and 'societary', outlook and practice. The difficulty of doing this is seen in the matter under discussion. We believe that the difference of view on this matter found in the Faith and Order Committee will also be found in the Conference and throughout the Methodist Church. Therefore the Committee asks Conference to accept this statement as an account of the issues involved and to commend it for study. The Committee does not wish to stress either the values or the disadvantages of flexibility and experiment to the exclusion of the other; and recognising that the present custom of Methodism is to avoid excessive rigidity in such matters it recommends the Conference to take no constitutional action in the matter.

*(Minutes 1975, pp. 49-53)*

## BLESSING CHILDREN AT HOLY COMMUNION (1978)

In recent years there has been a tendency in Methodism to make the Holy Communion more comprehensive and to encourage families, including those with young children, to attend and sit together. This trend is to be welcomed. Families whose members share a common faith, albeit at different levels of understanding, should share, as far as possible, in common worship. Some have suggested that children, whether confirmed or not, should receive communion, and this matter has been discussed in Conference (see Minutes, 1973 pp. 50-1, 1975 pp. 49-53). Others think it more appropriate that children who are not full members should be given a blessing at the communion rail (see *Methodist Service Book*, General Direction 23, p. B4).

Conference, without making further judgement about the former practice, makes the following comments about the latter:

1. It is fitting if, at the climax of the service of Holy Communion, the family remains undivided and the children accompany their parents to the communion rail rather than being left in the pew.
2. It is appropriate that, as there is a word and a sign for the parents, there should be a word and a sign for the children. Children must be treated with the same seriousness as is shown to adults.
3. The Act of blessing is ancient and scriptural. In the laying on of hands the recipient is precisely specified. A good example is the action of our Lord in blessing the children in Mk. 10:16. By means of this action, our Lord offered his gracious power to those in need and offered it in an act of personal relationship that left no room for confusion or misunderstanding.
4. The one who presides at Holy Communion speaks the words and performs the actions that belong to our Lord. If the child is also addressed by name, both word and sign particularize the child. The words can be confidently declaratory, 'Sarah, the Lord Jesus gives you his love'. 'Robert, God gives you his blessing', etc.
5. It is important that an action that takes place at the climax of the most solemn service should be explained to both adults and children when opportunity allows, especially as this particular action can be understood in many different ways, some of them quite foreign to Methodist tradition and belief.

*(Agenda 1978, pp. 56f)*

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Two further reports (1987 and 2000) on Children and Holy Communion are to be found in Volume 2, pp. 163-188).



## **Part V Ministries**

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## **(i) The Ministry of Word and Sacrament**

### **WOMEN AND THE MINISTRY (1933)**

The widespread changes in the work and status of women have created a situation which necessitates a fresh consideration on the part of the Church of women's ministries. The opening of professional and mercantile posts to women on the same terms as men, the granting of the vote, the great increase in educational facilities for girls, the opening of Universities, the decay of a multitude of social conventions as to what women may or may not do, are familiar features of the social life of our day. They mark a revolution which must have immense consequences in subsequent history, and already the change is reacting powerfully on the minds of the younger generation.

In recent times the changes in women's service and outlook have been more striking outside the Church than within it, and the questions referred to the Committee must be judged not only in relation to historical precedents, but in the context of the modern world. Methodism was a pioneer in entrusting responsibility and giving opportunities of service to women. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that the Church has not hitherto availed itself to the full of the varied and responsible service which Christian women are able and willing to render, both at home and abroad, and submits to the Conference that the work of the women of Methodism, especially of those who are called to consecrate their life to the ministry of the Church, needs fresh consideration, so that no arbitrary or merely traditional barrier may hinder the fulfilment of their vocation.

That Committee cannot find that there is any function of the ordained ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex, and that there is no longer any sufficient reason for withholding from women the full privileges and responsibilities which are proper to the work they perform.

The long tradition of the Christian ministry, however, supposes a ministry of men, and our organisation has been in accordance with that tradition. The admission of women to the ordained ministry necessarily involves adjustments, which have their difficulties, and would require the goodwill of our people. These are arguments for care and patience, but not for a refusal to go forward.

The Committee begins with the recognition that Methodism already possesses a ministry of women trained and authorised for the service of Christ, and no new legislation will be just which in any way disparages the work which its members perform. This ministry includes:

- (1) The Wesley Deaconess Order of the Methodist Church (which is now inclusive both of the former Wesley Deaconess Order and the United Methodist Order) is, as it was intended by its founders to be, a ministerial Order. The members of it are entitled Sisters. They are examined as candidates by a Connexional Committee, and receive two years' training for their ministry. They are tested by a probationary term of service, and are received in a solemn Consecration service, not really distinguishable from the Ordination service of some of the constituent branches of the new

Methodism. They have a system of retiring allowances; they meet in annual Convocation; and although their ministry, which is of recent creation, is not developed as that of the itinerant circuit ministry, their ministerial status is not lower than that of the early Methodist preachers.

- (2) The women missionaries of the Women's Department of the Overseas Missionary Society, while not a corporate body, are also definitely appointed for their work after training and examination, and perform ministerial functions, teaching, preaching and pastoral, of the highest importance. There is also a system of retiring allowances for them.

It must be acknowledged that our Church has hardly given to these workers the recognition and the scope which they ought to have. So far as the Deaconesses are concerned, they are inadequately represented on the Committee which administers their affairs; they are not provided for in the Circuit and District organisation of Methodism; their allowances have to be found after all other ordinary Circuit and Connexional demands are met, with the result that the dropping of a Deaconess is often the easiest retrenchment, and work which is amongst the most needy is the first to be abandoned or curtailed.

The Committee was informed that the Deaconess Committee, which is better acquainted with the position, would endorse such criticisms and would welcome a remedy. So far as subsequent recommendations in this report affect the work of the Deaconess Committee, or the Women's Department of the Missionary Committee, they are offered tentatively and in outline only, in order that they may have the full consideration of these Committees before being further elaborated.

#### **The Committee therefore recommends:**

That the existing ministries of women which involve a dedication of life service already approved by the Conference shall be united, and absorbed into a new Order of a Women's Ministry. The constitution of the Order shall be formulated by the Methodist Conference, on the recommendation of a committee specially appointed for the purpose, on which a sufficient number of representatives of the women's organisations to be unified shall be elected. The Committee shall also consult directly with the official representatives of the organisations involved, if and when such consultation is desirable or necessary. Such an order should have large powers of self-government, should meet in an annual Convocation, and should, in its corporate capacity, have a voice in all matters which affect the members or their work.

Coming to the special question referred to the Committee, it recommends:

- (1) That a woman who believes herself called of God to the work of the ordained ministry (as hitherto understood amongst us) must, in the first place, offer herself for service in the new Order above described. After due training and proof of her call and capacity, she may offer as a candidate for the itinerant ministry, following the existing procedure in relation to Circuit, Synod and Conference, and the Committees appointed thereby, or such modification of that procedure as the Conference may in future determine.
- (2) That since it is the custom of our Church to accept permanent responsibility for the employment and maintenance of all those whom it admits to the Ministry, and since it is not possible to say what openings there may be for the employment of women ministers in the immediate future, a special Committee on women's work shall be appointed, which shall prepare a

report on the available openings for women ministers, and on the qualifications of each woman candidate – such report to be presented to the Conference, so that the Conference may be guided as to the number of candidates to be accepted, and be assured that their continuous employment and maintenance are satisfactorily guaranteed.

- (3) That the Conference shall direct what course of training shall be taken by accepted women candidates, corresponding to the training of men students. They shall serve such a term of probation as the Conference shall direct.
- (4) That at the end of the term of probation, such as are received into full connexion shall be ordained to the Ministry of our Church by the imposition of hands, and receive authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. They would, however, still remain members of the Order of the Ministry of Women as above described.
- (5) The Committee believes that all offers for the Ministry of the Church should be for life service, and that this should be the declared intention of every candidate. As by marriage a woman accepts responsibilities which would interfere with the fulfilment of the duties of an itinerant Ministry, her marriage shall be regarded as equivalent to resignation, unless on special application the Conference shall otherwise determine.
- (6) If these recommendations are accepted by the Conference, there remain some important questions – questions of maintenance, of superannuation and of training, which will require special provision. The Committee has considered these matters and is persuaded that they present no insuperable difficulties, and as they cannot arise in practice for at least five years to come, the Committee submits that there is no reason to delay action until these details are settled.

The Committee is of the opinion that the number of women offering themselves as candidates for the Ministry will not be a large one. It also believes that the greatest care should be exercised in testing the call and qualifications of those who offer. Its deliberate judgment is that this new movement in the Ministry of the Methodist Church should be allowed to develop slowly from small beginnings, in order that each step may be fully considered by the Church at large, and that the progress of the movement may be directed by the experience gained stage by stage. It is from such a viewpoint that the Committee presents the foregoing scheme to Conference.

*(Minutes 1933, pp. 438-40)*

## WOMEN AND THE MINISTRY (1939)

### I.

In the year 1928 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference first appointed a Committee to report on the question of the admission of women to the Ministry, and from that time the subject has come before successive Conferences. The Methodist Conference of 1933 accepted a report declaring that 'there is no function of the ordained ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex.' (Minutes, 1933, p. 438). The Conference of 1934 in its Representative Session after consideration of a Committee's recommendations, declared that there was 'not sufficient support of the scheme to justify procedure into the main project at present.' (Minutes, 1934, p. 102). The Ministerial Session concurring, added the following:

'The Conference in receiving the Report, concurs in the Resolution of the Representative Session discharging the Committee. The Conference however, would not be content with a merely negative conclusion. It believes that the widespread changes in the whole position of women during our generation, both at home and abroad, are of profound significance for all Christian people. It is deeply concerned that the Methodist Church should respond worthily to the new situation thus created, and in particular, should, when the question is again before the Conference, make all such adjustments in our organisation as will give to women called of God full scope for the exercise of their Ministry.' (p. 249).

The Conference of 1937 appointed the present Committee 'to consider whether and how such adjustments in our organisation can be made as will give to women called of God full scope for the exercise of their ministry.' The Committee presented a report to the last Conference which gave 'general approval to the Report, and refers it back to the Committee for further consideration, and the working out of details.' The Committee therefore now presents its revised report as follows:

### II.

The Committee has considered the existing ministries of women, especially in the Deaconess Order and in the work of our Church Overseas, in order to see where they now give or can be amended so as to give to 'women called of God full scope for the exercise of their ministry.'

The Wesley Deaconess Order now numbers 385. Its members are ordained by the President of the Conference with the imposition of hands. Their manifold and responsible service is an indispensable part of the Church's work. The Committee believes that the work of Deaconesses might well receive further recognition by Methodism, but that this further recognition does not lie in the direction of identifying their work with that of the ordained ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Candidates for the ministry must avow a call to preach, and prove a power to preach, and the Conference attaches primary importance to this gift. The work of a Deaconess on the other hand is primarily, and often exclusively, pastoral. To this she is called and for this she is trained. There are some Deaconesses however, who have not only the call

to preach, but also who would appear to be fitted by gifts and experience for the ministerial office.

Women Missionaries number 254. Scattered wide over the world they share in the fellowship, service and administration of the world-wide Church. Most of them are members of Synod and their stations are under the appointments of Synods, in all of which there is a Committee elected for Women's Work. Unlike the Wesley Deaconesses, women missionaries, as such, do not belong to an 'Order,' nor are they ordained. Their number includes doctors, nurses, teachers and trained evangelists, of whom some are Wesley Deaconesses. There are, however, a few women missionaries who are set apart by the Church to a specifically pastoral and teaching service and to the ministry of the Word, and there are growing indications that the life of the Church overseas would be strengthened and enriched if the true character of the work they are doing were recognised by the ordination of such women to the Ministry.

Both at home and abroad, therefore, the Committee believes that there are women called of God to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, who have proved their gifts and fitness in full-time service over a period of years. By the ordination of such women the Church would acknowledge their call to the Ministry and their fitness for it. These ordinations would be few at first, as is desirable in an experimental stage. None the less they would clearly express the Church's desire to make it possible for women called of God to enter the Ministry that has hitherto been reserved for men, and would open the way for further developments in the light of experience.

The Committee is aware that this is a very restricted proposal and is not by any means a final answer to the new situation in regard to women's work which now confronts the Church. Its merit is that it proceeds upon the principle laid down by the Conference of 1933, and from which there has been no dissent, that 'there is no function of the ordained Ministry . . . for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex.' It proposes no large-scale change, with the many practical difficulties which that would involve, but it is a positive step, and would admit some women into the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, while allowing time for gathering experience and for the many adjustments and developments which that experience may suggest.

The Methodist Church is so organised that the Conference, in accepting men Candidates for the Ministry, recognises the permanent responsibility of the Church both for their work and maintenance. But at the present stage no one is able to say what openings there will be for women Ministers. The Conference needs, therefore, some additional assurance that, as in the case of men, the Church can provide for the work and maintenance of a Woman Candidate throughout the whole of her Ministry. The recommendation I. (c) is designed to meet this situation.

**The Committee therefore recommends as follows:**

1. The Conference declares its willingness to consider the Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments of women candidates provided
  - (a) That the Candidate herself believes that she is called of God to this Ministry.
  - (b) That over a period of years, she has made proof of her gifts and fitness in the full-time service of the Church.
  - (c) That her maintenance and the provision of her retiring allowances be guaranteed by the Home Missions Committee, the Overseas Mission Committee, the Wesley Deaconess Committee, or some other department

having kindred responsibilities. (The Committee giving this guarantee should recommend to the Stationing Committee the sphere of the Candidate's service, the final decision remaining with the Conference).

2. Candidates who fulfil the above conditions must
  - (a) Be nominated and approved by a Quarterly Meeting.
  - (b) Be recommended by a Synod in accordance with the procedure laid down for men candidates.
  - (c) Appear before the July Committee, which in reporting to the Conference, shall make recommendations as to further training and probation.
3. Since the social and financial situation in our Church Overseas differs from that existing in Great Britain, there is no need to apply to women 'nationals', received for service in particular parts of our Overseas work, the conditions stated in 1 (c) and in 2 above. Women 'nationals,' if accepted as ministers, should receive allowances in accordance with the financial arrangement of their respective Districts, as do men 'nationals.' Their candidature should proceed according to the rules now operating overseas, and recommendations concerning their training should be made by the Synod in the District where they reside.

*(Agenda 1939, pp. 539-42)*

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The Conference of 1939 appointed a further committee to report on the implications of 'the present scheme' and to make proposals regarding necessary adjustments in organisation (*Minutes* p. 248). The matter was held up by the war and then postponed in 1948 due to discussions with the Church of England (*Daily Record* 1948, p. 28). See also the report of the Committee on the Status of Deaconesses and the Admission of Women to the Ministry (pp. 122-134).



## **ORDINATION IN THE METHODIST CHURCH (1960)**

### **Preface**

While drawing up this Statement the Committee has constantly borne in mind the statement on 'The Nature of the Christian Church according to the Teaching of the Methodists' approved by the Conference of 1937, and it strongly hopes that its findings are wholly in accord with that very important document. The close connexion between it and the present Report is shown by the following quotations: 'In the New Testament the ministry of the Word and Sacraments is a divine gift to the Church, and was in those early days an integral part of its organic life. It was a ministry within the Church, exercising in the name and by the authority of the Lord, who is the Head of the Church, powers and functions which are inherent in the Church' (pp. 23, 24). And again: 'While the true life of the Methodist Church consists in its fellowship with the whole Church of God, it possesses those marks whereby, since the days of the Apostles, the Church has been known of men. Such are: the possession and acknowledgment of the Word of God as given in the Scripture, and as interpreted by the Holy Spirit to the Church and to the individual; the profession of faith in God as He is incarnate and revealed in Christ; the observance of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and a ministry for the pastoral office, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments' (p. 37).

The Ordination Service, of course, has much light to throw on the teaching of the Methodist Church on this subject; and the Address of the President (the Rev Dr Eric W Baker) to the Ministerial Session of the Conference of 1959 is an impressive exposition of the doctrine which this statement attempts to summarize.

The main concern of this statement is to bring out the significance of Ordination as it is to be seen in accepted Methodist teaching and in the practice of the Methodist Church, and to invite the Church to the further study of this vitally important matter, so that our spiritual understanding of the ministry, which is the gift of Christ to His Church, may be enlarged and deepened.

### **THE MINISTRY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The New Testament, whose teaching is normative on this as on all subjects, prescribes no exclusive and invariable form of the Christian ministry, though it clearly regards this ministry as integral to the Church. In fact, the pattern of the ministry which we find in it is so complex that most of the historic Church orders of Christendom can claim some support from it. It is the Church – described both as the People of God and as the Body of Christ – which is the ruling conception. Through this Church Christ Himself, who took 'the form of a servant' and 'came not to be ministered unto, but to minister', continues His ministry in the world. For the exercise of this ministry the Holy Spirit endows members of the Church with various 'charismata', free gifts springing from God's abundant grace, by which they are empowered to fulfil the ministry's manifold functions, of preaching, teaching, healing, administration and pastoral care (I Cor. xii. 28; Ephesians iv. 11, 12). Thus within the ministry of the Church there are various 'manifestations of the Spirit' for the building up of the Body of Christ. The Apostles received from the risen Christ the commission to preach the Gospel in all the world, to teach the truth as the truth is in Jesus, and to

have the oversight and care of the Churches. Some Christians were called and empowered by the Spirit to be 'prophets', inspired preachers of the Word of God; to others was given by the Spirit the authority to superintend, feed and shepherd the flock of God; others, again, were authorized to give instruction in the Christian way of life, others to evangelize far and wide, others to care for the poor and sick. And one man might well be called to fulfil more than one of these various 'ministries'.

There is evidence in the New Testament of the appointment by St Paul and others of boards of 'presbyters', who are also called 'Bishops', to exercise leadership and pastoral care in the local Churches (Acts xiv. 23; Phil.i, 1). We know that these men had the care and discipline of the local Churches in their hands; it is natural to suppose that they presided over worship and administered the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, except when a visiting Apostle or prophet was invited to do so. These 'presbyter-bishops' appointed by St Paul may well have continued to work at their original occupations and may not have received any payment for their ministerial work; yet the principle of a ministry financially supported by the Church is already recognized in the New Testament (I Cor. ix, 3-14).

#### THE MINISTRY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

By a process which it is not possible to ascertain with exactitude, the ministry of the presbyter-bishops had become by the end of the second century the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. These were now three orders of ministry: the bishop exercised oversight within a given area, the presbyters had the care of individual Churches, the deacons, who had previously been associated with the 'presbyter-bishops' and administered the distribution of alms, were now personal assistants of the bishop. The presbyters were coming to be called 'priests' (although the word is never used of an individual Christian in the New Testament), possibly because the Lord's Supper was by this time often thought of chiefly in sacrificial terms.

The three-fold ministry became part of the Church's tradition and remained the rule until the Reformation. The bishops played a great part in the expansion and defence of the Church before and after the collapse of the Roman Empire, but the Middle Ages witnessed serious corruptions in the exercise of episcopal and priestly power which led the great Reformers to rediscover and emphasise the truth that the words 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation' in I Peter ii. 9 refer to the whole body of believers, not to any group of men distinguishable from it. Thus they spoke with great emphasis of 'the priesthood of all believers'; they meant by this not only that every individual Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ and is charged with the task of bringing men and women to Jesus Christ, but also that the Church as a whole has received from Christ the task of continuing His ministry, and the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit enabling it to do so. They taught that some within the 'priesthood of all believers', which is the Church, are called and empowered to preach, to administer the sacraments, to tend the flock of God, and to exercise authority and discipline; and these carry out their functions as ambassadors of God and representatives of His People. Some of the Churches of the Reformation retained the three-fold ministry; most of them restored, in effect, the New Testament ministry of the 'presbyter-bishops'. The 'bishops', 'presidents', 'moderators' and 'superintendents' of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches for the most part claim to exercise no higher ministry than other ordained ministers. Some of the Reformation Churches retain the office of 'deacon' for the exercise of various pastoral and administrative functions

within the one ministry. Here, as in the New Testament, 'there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God who worketh all in all. But to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal' (1 Cor. xii. 4-7).

#### THE MINISTRY IN METHODISM

The Methodist Church has always sought to follow the New Testament teaching and practice in respect of the ministry, which were reaffirmed by the Reformation, though it passes no judgment on the ministry of other Churches.

'Christ's Ministers in the Church are Stewards in the household of God and Shepherds of His flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides His gifts severally as He wills.

'It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen.

'Those whom the Methodist Church recognizes as called of God and therefore receives into its Ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the Minister's personal call. The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized.

'The Preachers itinerant and lay are examined, tested and approved before they are authorized to minister in holy things. For the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the Ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments' (The Deed of Union, C.P.D., p. 265).

The Methodist Church believes that its ministry is ordered in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. There is a single ordained ministry equivalent to that of the 'presbyter-bishops' in the New Testament. The many gifts of the Spirit are distributed among members of the Church in various offices. The Methodist ministry has its own special history. Soon after 1738 John Wesley gathered a body of preachers to assist him. A few of them were clergymen of the Church of England, but most of them were laymen. He described them as 'extraordinary Messengers' and strongly defended their right to preach, though this, like his own way of treating the whole world as his parish, was a departure from the prevailing customs of the Church of England, and thus paved the way for a new type of ministry. But he did not regard them (with the exception of a small number who were clergymen of the Church of England) as having any authority to administer the sacraments. They were eventually divided into (a) Travelling Preachers in Full Connexion with the Conference which Wesley had instituted, (b) Preachers on Trial for such Full Connexion, and (c) Local Preachers.

In 1784, in order to meet the pastoral and sacramental needs of the people of North America, Wesley put into practice views which he had long held about Church Order, and ordained men with the imposition of hands as 'deacons' and 'elders', and in the same way set one man apart as 'superintendent' for America. Later he took similar steps for Scotland, but without the superintendency, and for England with the superintendency. But in 1795 the Plan of Pacification sanctioned the administration of the sacraments by the travelling preachers where this was desired locally, subject to the consent of the Conference; and it soon became the general practice for the travelling preachers to be authorized to administer them. Thus Methodism acknowledged that it had acquired the character of a Church, and that its travelling preachers performed the usual functions of Christian ministers. They were sometimes ordained with the imposition of hands, especially if they were going overseas, but usually their Reception into Full Connexion was regarded as tantamount to ordination.

When, therefore, the Wesleyan Conference of 1836 resolved that the men to be admitted into Full Connexion should be ordained with the imposition of hands, the ground commonly given for this decision was that Admission into Full Connexion was in essence ordination, and that the imposition of hands was but a circumstance of it, which as it was scriptural, it was better not to omit. At some later date, the two stages, viz., Reception into Full Connexion and ordination with the imposition of hands, were distinguished, as they are now, though not usually separated by any great interval of time.

In the other Methodist Connexions ordination was rarely accompanied by the imposition of hands; in most of them, never. In the Primitive Methodist Connexion ordination was performed at the District Meeting; in the other Connexions, mostly at the Conference. In all these Connexions the same general pattern emerged, but with minor variations. After careful selection and years of training and probation the candidate reached the final stage: the appropriate Church Court, whether Conference or District Meeting, voted that he 'be received into full connexion', or admitted to the approved list', or some equivalent phrase. The ordination followed, often on the evening of the same day, at a public service which was often regarded as also an official session of the Conference or District Meeting: the ordination included prayer and usually some such outward sign as the presentation of the Ordination Bible and the giving of the right hand of fellowship. The general conception of the itinerant ministry was common to them all.

The present Methodist ministry is heir to the traditions of all these Conferences, and it may fairly be said that Methodist Ministers are both travelling preachers in the Methodist Connexion and Ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God. They have authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, and they normally exercise pastoral care in a number of local congregations. They thus constitute a ministry which corresponds to that of the presbyter-bishops of the New Testament. Some of the 'charismata' of the Holy Spirit which in the New Testament period were widely distributed over the members of the Church are now ordinarily exercised in Methodism by the ordained ministry, but they are also bestowed by the Spirit on those who are outside the ordained ministry. The Reformation office of 'deacon', closely corresponding to the New Testament 'diaconos', is held among us by the various kinds of 'stewards', who are called to perform their stewardship to the glory of God and the building up of the Church. Chairmen of Districts and Superintendents of Circuits, though they have additional functions to those of the ordained ministry in general, have the same ministry as the rest.

## ORDINATION IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

If a man believes himself to be divinely called to the office of a Minister of Christ's Church within the Methodist Church, he is required to submit his call to be tested by the Methodist Church. Without such a call, no man can be a true Minister of the Church; it is the task of the Church to verify a man's call, and the gifts and graces needed for its fulfilment. This is done, not only by examination, but by the consent of the people of God, through the Quarterly Meeting, the ministerial session of the District Synod, the Service of Public Testimony, and the Conference. If the Church is thus able to confirm a man's call, it accepts him as a candidate for the ministry, and appoints him to a period of training in College, the greater part of which is spent in the study of the Bible, theology, the history of the Church and the principles and practice of pastoral work. After a probationary period of exercising pastoral and administrative responsibility under the supervision of a Superintendent Minister, and the further testing of his character and ability, he is received into Full Connexion with the Methodist Conference by a standing vote of the Conference, and ordained with the laying on of hands by the President of the Conference, or a representative of the President, with other Ministers assisting. The Reception into Full Connexion and the Ordination Service ordinarily take place within a few hours of each other. It should be noted, however, that in order to meet exceptional cases it sometimes happens that men serving in the Methodist Church overseas are ordained some months after being received into Full Connexion, while those in the three Welsh Districts are ordained at the Welsh Assembly some time before being received into Full Connexion.

## THE ORDINATION SERVICE

The Ordination Service, held in the presence of a congregation of the Methodist people, usually on the evening of the day on which the Candidates for ordination have been received into Full Connexion with the Conference, begins with a hymn of praise and a prayer for the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Then passages from Holy Scripture are read as a declaration of the nature, dignity and importance of the ministerial office. The President or his appointed representative reminds the candidates that they are 'chosen and elect to be evangelists of the grace of God in Christ Jesus,' and admonishes them to use all prayer and diligence in the fulfilment of this task, so that they may bring those committed to their charge unto 'true conversion of heart' and 'perfectness of love in Christ'; to this end he urges them to give themselves wholly to their office and to direct all their cares and studies towards it, praying always for the help of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of their lives and the lives of the members of their families. Then the Candidates make personal profession of their divine call, of their conviction that Holy Scripture contains all truth necessary for salvation, and of their determination to teach nothing contrary to it, to drive away all error, and to administer faithfully the doctrines, sacraments and discipline of the Gospel; they further avow their acceptance of Methodist doctrine and their willingness to submit themselves 'as sons in the Gospel' to those appointed by the Methodist Church to rule over them. They pledge themselves to be diligent in prayer, Bible study and the fashioning of their lives to be 'wholesome examples' to the flock of Christ, to further peace within the Church, to encourage its members to exercise the gifts of grace which are in them and to stir up their own gifts as the Spirit shall bestow them. Then after continued prayer the President or his representative, and the assisting Ministers, lay their hands on the Candidates one by one with the words 'Mayest thou receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a Christian Minister and Pastor, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. And be thou a faithful Dispenser

of the Word of God, and of His Holy Sacraments, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.' A Bible is given to each Candidate with the words 'Take thou authority to fulfil the office of a Minister in the Church of Christ.' Then the President or his representatives declare the Candidates 'to be ordained to the office of the Holy Ministry'. After a further exhortation those who have been ordained receive the Sacrament of the Holy Communion, and a solemn charge is given to them.

The ministry is God's gift to His Church, and the persistent prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit is a distinguishing mark of the whole service.

The nature of ordination in the Methodist Church is to be understood in accordance with the relevant clauses of the Deed of Union. In the 'Interpretation' of various terms used in the Deed, the 'Interpretation' being itself part of the Deed, we find: 'The expression "Minister" means a minister of the Methodist Church admitted to Full Connexion' (CPD p. 252). The Deed goes on to state that 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ' (CPD p. 264); and further: 'Those whom the Methodist Church recognizes as called of God and therefore receives into its Ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the Minister's personal call' (CPD p. 265). So the Ordination Service contains the words, addressed to the Ordinand at the imposition of hands: 'Take thou authority to fulfil the office of a Minister in the Church of Christ'. Thus Ministers of the Methodist Church are Ministers, not of the Methodist Church only, but of the Holy Catholic Church. The Methodist Church recognizes a man's divine call to the ministry, and he himself becomes a Minister, by a process in which Reception into Full Connexion and the Ordination Service are integral parts of the whole.

The act of making a man a Minister is performed by the Methodist Conference, by its standing vote in the Reception into Full Connexion and through its appointed representatives in the Ordination Service; it is not performed by individuals, or a group of individuals, acting in their own capacity. Similarly, the ordained Minister (as we may properly style the man who has been called of God to the ministry, received into full connexion and ordained), exercises his ministry thereafter as the representative of the Church; as the Deed states, 'in the exercise of the Church's corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized' (CPD p. 265). This 'principle of representative selection' is inherent in the Protestant Reformation, to the fundamental principles of which the Methodist Church is committed by the Deed (CPD p. 264).

By reception into Full Connexion and Ordination the office of a Minister and Pastor in the Church of God is conferred. The ordained Minister enters fully upon the status, duties and privileges of the Methodist ministry. He is called to be a Steward in the household of God and a Shepherd of His flock, and the exercise of this ministry is his sole occupation (CPD p. 265). But the distinguishing mark of a Methodist Minister is not simply that he is a full-time worker in the Church. Others, not ordained, are also full-time workers in the Church. The ordained Minister has also a principal and directing part in those spiritual activities, preaching the Word, and pastoral care, which he shares with lay members of the Church. In the office of a Minister are brought together the manifold functions of the Church's ministry, and it is his privilege to exercise them as the servant of Christ and of his fellows in the Church as a whole, as the Church under the guidance of the Spirit shall appoint him; for this he is set apart at the call of Christ, and commits himself to the Church's discipline, that he may give

himself wholly to the demanding and yet glorious 'work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ' (Eph. iv. 12).

The ordained Minister has full authority to administer the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Deaconesses, Probationers, Lay Pastors, Local Preachers and other laymen are entitled to administer this Sacrament only when especially authorized by a temporary Dispensation of the Conference; the ordained Minister is entitled by his ordination.

The Methodist Church is committed to the view that the ordained Minister does not possess any priesthood which he does not share with the whole company of Christ's faithful people. But the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' is that we share, as believers, in the priesthood of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. As our High Priest He sacrificed Himself, a faultless offering, in utter obedience to God and infinite love for man, for the cleansing of our sins and our reconciliation to God; His sacrifice was made once for all, but it is for ever efficacious, and He for ever makes intercession on our behalf. Into that priesthood of Christ we are taken up by faith, and we in our turn, and in self-identification with Him, offer ourselves in utter humility and obedience as a living sacrifice to God. We are 'priests unto God', and therefore 'take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience', as we are enjoined in the Covenant Service. So the doctrine does not mean that every Christian has the right to exercise every function and administer both sacraments. For it is not an assertion of claims, but a declaration of our total obedience. A Methodist Minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are Ministers.

Ordination is never repeated in the Methodist Church.

A Minister is Christ's ambassador and the representative of the whole people of God. Called of God to his high and responsible office, equipped by the Spirit with the gifts necessary for its fulfilment, and supported by the prayers and confidence of the Church, he is charged with a special responsibility for guarding the truth of the Gospel and communicating it to others; for this he is trained and prepared by his work in College and by his continued study of the Bible and the Faith throughout the years of his ministry. He is the confidant, often the sole confidant, of his people in many kinds of trouble, and he mediates to them the pity and the care of God. He shares with them their highest joys and their deepest sorrows. In a special sense, too, adding his own spiritual resources, as they are built up by prayer and study and meditation, to the far greater spiritual resources of the Church, he leads the prayer and worship of God's people. And, in the name of Christ, he offers to those who 'truly and earnestly repent' and 'draw near with faith' the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of His death and passion, and leads them in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and of themselves to God which is the Church's response to the sacrifice of Himself made once for all by Jesus Christ.

*(Minutes 1960, pp. 235-42)*

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The Conference adopted the report substituting 'administer' and 'administration' for 'celebrate' and 'celebration' throughout.

## ORDINATION (1974)

### Introduction

1. The Conference of 1972 referred the following matters to the Faith and Order Committee:

- (a) The Conference resolved that an investigation into the theology of ordination and in particular the relation of the ordained ministry in the sector to that of the laity be undertaken on behalf of the Church by the Faith and Order Committee, with power to consult (Conference 1972 *Representative Agenda* p. 466; *Daily Record* p. 45).
- (b) The Conference referred to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report the following resolution of Convocation (*Minutes* 1972 p. 39): The Wesley Deaconess Order meeting in Convocation, aware that the Ministry of Word and Sacraments may be open to women, requests the Methodist Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to examine the meaning of both presbyteral and diaconal ministries.

2. The Conference of 1972 in its Ministerial Session had received a suggestion from the Sheffield Synod (M) requesting the Conference to re-examine the significance of Ordination and to give guidance to the Church in this matter. The Conference concurred with the recommendation of the Memorials Committee that this suggestion be referred to the Committee (sic) on the Church's Ministries in the Modern World, with the direction that the Committee should have in mind previous pronouncements of the Conference on this subject (Conference 1972 *Ministerial Agenda* p. 81; *Daily Record* p. 7). It was partly because of this that the Representative Session of the Conference subsequently gave to the Faith and Order Committee the power to consult referred to above. The Commission on the Church's Ministries by joint consent left the matter entirely to the Faith and Order Committee (Conference 1973 *Representative Agenda* p. 477), and in any case did not seek reappointment by the Conference of 1973, but it was represented at the discussions of these matters by its convener; the Ministerial Training Committee, the Committee on the Sectors, and the Wesley Deaconess Order, now all part of the Division of Ministries, were also represented.

### The Methodist Position

3. Among previous pronouncements of the Conference on this subject we may include:

The Deed of Union.

The Ordination Service in the Book of Offices.

The Nature of the Christian Church according to the Teaching of the Methodists (Statement approved by the Conference of 1937) (cited as N).

Ordination in the Methodist Church (statement approved by the Conference of 1960): it is to be found in *Ministry, Baptism and Membership in the Methodist Church* (Methodist Publishing House, 1962, pp. 7-17 (cited as M).



*Anglican-Methodist Unity*, the Report of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission, (including Part I The Ordinal) 1968, which the Conference accepted by its vote in 1969.

There are also the various reports of the Commission on the Nature of the Church's Ministries in the Modern World. These are cited from *Patterns of Ministry in the Methodist Church* (Home Mission Department) (some of these were merely presented; others were actually approved by the Conference). (cited as C).

4. There is a large general literature on the subject, including numerous reports, such as that of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission 'Ordination in Ecumenical Perspective'. The Methodist documents listed above contain excellent material, and some of our difficulties arise because they are not sufficiently known and have not been sufficiently digested. They give, with the authority of the Conference, the official position of our Church, which is by no means as obscure as is often supposed. We attempt here to summarise them very briefly in their own words.

5. The main views which Methodism has held concerning the ministry and ordination are as follows:- All ministry in and by the Church derives from the ministry of Christ (C 2). As all Christians are priests in virtue of their access to God, so all Christians are ministers in virtue of their membership in the one body (N 22). Within the ministry of the Church there are various 'manifestations' of the Spirit 'for the building up of the Body of Christ' (M 8). There is evidence in the New Testament of the appointment by St Paul and others of boards of 'presbyters', who are also called 'bishops', to exercise leadership and pastoral care in the local Churches (M 8). The Methodist Church believes that its ministry is ordered in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. There is a single ordained ministry equivalent to that of the 'presbyter-bishops' in the New Testament (M 11). Methodist Ministers are both travelling preachers in the Methodist Connexion and Ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God (M 12). They have authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, and they normally exercise pastoral care in one or more local congregations (M 12). 'In the office of a Minister are brought together the manifold functions of the Church's ministry, and it is his privilege to exercise them as the servant of Christ and of his fellows in the Church as a whole, as the Church under the guidance of the Spirit shall appoint him'. (M 16). 'The ordained Minister has full authority to administer the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Deaconesses, Probationers, Lay Pastors, Local Preachers and other laymen are entitled to administer this Sacrament only when especially authorized by a temporary Dispensation of the Conference; the ordained Minister is entitled by his ordination'. (M 16). 'The act of making a man a Minister is performed by the Methodist Conference, by its standing vote in the Reception into Full Connexion and through its appointed representatives in the Ordination Service; it is not performed by individuals, or a group of individuals, acting in their own capacity'. (M 15).

#### **Another Statement?**

6. We now turn to the question whether or not there is anything of substance to add to these Reports. Our answer is that we find in the emphasis of our time upon the whole people of God as the agent of Christ's continuing ministry in the world a sufficient reason for saying new things about ordination, or more probably saying old things in a different way. Ordination can be seen afresh in a situation where it is the entire *laos* (people) of God who share in the ministry of Christ, where clericalism is

discredited, and where the starting-point is not to define the difference between ordained ministers and the laity but to state what they have in common.

7. To do this is not to search for some lowest common denominator; it is rather to see the ordained Minister as, like all other Christians, enjoying the high privilege of sharing in Christ's ministry, being part of 'the royal priesthood which the whole Church has received from Christ her Lord, and in which each member of his Body shares', as the 1968 Ordinal puts it. The 'ordination' for this ministry is baptism and confirmation, its continuing renewal is in the eucharist and the other means of grace, and its essential function is 'being a Christ to our neighbour'. In exercising this ministry the whole people of God, ordained and lay, is being the Body of Christ among men. It is within this context that we look again at the meaning of ordination.

8. Two brief introductory points are necessary. It has been said that with ordination, as with much else in Methodism, we do not have a considered theology which we then put into practice; rather we find theological reasons for what we are already doing because what we are doing works well. But our view is that theology and practice must learn from each other.

9. Secondly, we wish to avoid the use of labels for particular views of ordination. The use of such terms as 'functional view', 'ontological view', 'temporary view', 'suspendable view', and so forth tends to keep the discussion in well-worn channels and makes more difficult any attempt to see ordination in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God. We must, however, concede that as we discuss the meaning of ordination, there will be some who understand it in terms of what a person is, others in terms of what he does. For some the meaning centres on the man (or woman)\*, for others on his ministry. Again we hope that these may prove to be complementary, not divisive.

\*The masculine includes the feminine throughout.

### **The Call of God**

10. 'It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God . . .'

So reads the Deed of Union, and we should not wish to dissent from it. Whatever spiritual, theological, and psychological factors are involved – and these will vary from person to person – there must be a sense of inward pressure and constraint. A person who is called is one who is in the end convinced that he has no choice but to offer himself for the ordained ministry.

11. Such a call in no way abrogates the call to be Christ in the world which comes to the whole people of God. This applies equally to ministers and laymen. A man is not called *out* of the Church to be a minister. What he receives is a special calling within a general calling. Such a special calling (to the ordained ministry) must be distinguished from other special callings (to many differing occupations) which are received within the general calling of the people of God.

12. It is the belief and practice of our Church – and we are glad that it is so – that the individual sense of call must be recognized and confirmed by the corporate judgment of the Church. This is done through the procedures of candidature, ministerial training, and probation; and finally in the ordination service in which the whole Church, ordained and lay, sets its seal on the call to the ordained ministry.

### **Ordained to what?**

13. In what does this special calling consist? Unquestionably there are functions to fulfil, associated by long tradition with the ordained ministry and written into the ordination service. There are the preaching of the gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, pastoral care, the teaching office (this includes the theological task), and the leadership of the churches. But it would be inadequate to confine the special calling to a collection of functions. For one thing, they are largely shared with people who are not ordained – the local preacher, the class leader and the society steward witness to that. For another, some ordained ministers are not in a position to carry out all the functions, but their ordination is not questioned on that account.

14. To find a further category we go back to the rediscovery of the significance of the whole people of God. They are what they are because of the general calling to which we have referred. They are called, all of them, ordained and unordained, to be the Body of Christ to men. But as a perpetual reminder of this calling and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets apart men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focussed and represented, and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world.

15. We hold that for a Minister to be this and to do this requires a total commitment of the entire person. This view does not prejudice the question whether or not an ordained Minister can be part-time in the service of the Church or earn his living wholly in secular employment. Nor does it set a limit to new experimental ministries very different from the traditional pattern. But as commitment of the entire person is unqualified commitment, it does call into serious question temporary or restricted views of ordination, and it demands of the ordained Minister a discipline proper to his office.

16. Furthermore, we see in such a view of the ministry a sufficient reason why it should normally be ordained Ministers who preside at the eucharist. The eucharist, which sacramentally expresses the whole gospel, is the representative act of the whole Church, and it is fitting that the representative person should preside.

### **Discipline and Jurisdiction**

17. All Christian Ministers are under some kind of discipline. In Churches which retain the historic episcopate presbyters, at least theoretically, are connected with some particular bishop, and in modern Free Churches lists of Ministers are kept in various ways. Moreover a man cannot be ordained simply in order to have the status of a presbyter (or a bishop) without exercising it in some regular way: he must be ordained to some particular charge, parish, college, or other sector. He thus acquires 'jurisdiction' in a particular sphere.

18. All that we have said implies the permanence of ordination. Especially is this true of the total commitment expressed in the vows, and still more the activity of God the Holy Spirit in commissioning and authorizing. The same theology holds good for the whole people of God, for baptism is permanent in the same sense. The word 'indelibility' is sometimes used in this connection, but as it implies an outdated philosophy it is perhaps best avoided; Methodism has never made any official use of it. But the important idea of permanence is expressed in the general practice of the Church, which does not re-baptize or re-ordain.

19. But all churches must have some procedure for depriving a person of the exercise of his ministry if he ceases to hold the faith or shows himself morally unfit to exercise it. How is this to be reconciled with the element of permanence? The accepted answer is that such a person is deprived of the *exercise* of his orders, though in some traditions he is permitted to exercise them in grave emergencies, e.g. to minister sacramentally to a dying man. Fortunately such deprivation, popularly known as ‘unfrocking’, is exceedingly rare. It would, however, be absurd to deny the possibility, which in no way implies that ordination is to a temporary status. Unfortunately there have been a few ‘wandering bishops’, who have purported to exercise a ministry out of contact with any organized Church or at least with the Church in which they were consecrated; and this shows the danger of a doctrine of the ministry exempt from disciplinary control. Ministry must always be exercised within the Church, not apart from it or over it. Ministerial status cannot rightly be used in a vacuum. This does not preclude an ordained Minister from passing out of the discipline of one denomination into that of another without re-ordination.

20. In many churches the case is quite different when a Minister wishes to give up one appointment and not take up another. Though a voluntary abandonment of holy orders or ministerial status is possible, it is not necessary. An Anglican priest may retain his orders, though if he wishes to officiate on occasions, he needs to be licensed by a bishop; and in some other Churches a Minister needs to render some form of service he is to remain on the list of Ministers or be a member of the presbytery.

### **Full Connexion**

21. Methodism has held to the principle of discipline in a very strong form. ‘The Methodism Church recognizes a man’s divine call to the ministry, and he himself becomes a Minister, by a process in which Reception into Full Connexion and the Ordination Service are integral parts of the whole’ (Conference 1960, inaccurately printed in M 15). The reason lies in our historic origin in a number of united societies among whom worked Travelling Preachers in connexion with Mr Wesley. Subsequently the whole body came to be known as a Connexion, with something of the ethos of a religious order. But now the Connexion has developed into a Church and we act as such; yet our society and connexional origin may serve to remind us of certain truths which we neglect at our peril and which we might hope to contribute to the united Church of the future. How then does Reception into Full Connexion relate to the ecclesiastical act of Ordination? Methodist Travelling Preachers were received into Full Connexion over a long period of years before there was any idea of their being ordained. Then there was a period when Reception into Full Connexion was regarded as virtual ordination. Now, however, the ceremonies are distinct, but they are so closely associated that neither is complete without the other. The fact that the Reception is an act of the Representative Session of the Conference associates the whole Church with the making of a Minister, and it is more than a mere prelude to the Ordination; it admits the Minister to the full rights and privileges that go with his status; in origin these were concerned with the discipline of stationing, the right to financial allowances, the possibility of attending Conference, and the like. Some might argue from the period when it was tantamount to ordination that this still conveys fully the authority of a Christian Minister, and that the Ordination Service simply invokes the divine blessing on that ministry; but now that the two ceremonies are separated, it is the Ordination which conveys authority for the office and work of a Christian Minister and Pastor ‘now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands’. Moreover, in this service, as well as conferring authority we pray that the

candidate may receive the Holy Spirit for this purpose; and we believe that God answers prayer.

22. It is sometimes argued that Reception into Full Connexion might better follow Ordination. This does sometimes happen, as when men are ordained at the Welsh Assembly; and historically there have been other instances which imply that the President has authority to ordain on behalf of the Conference, even without the customary resolution authorising the ordination. (This resolution, which was at one time part of the resolution receiving into Full Connexion, has in recent years been a separate resolution in the Ministerial Session of the Conference, to whose province ordination belongs: Deed of Union, clause 17). The order of these ceremonies is not in the last resort important. No doubt there are arguments either way, but it seems best to retain the present order as the norm. If one ceremony is separated from the other in time, it would seem to be right that the person concerned should refrain from acting in the way proper to the ceremony that has not yet taken place. Thus it is clear that a person who has been ordained but not yet received into Full Connexion cannot vote in the Ministerial Session of Synod; and it would seem proper that a person who has been received into Full Connexion but not yet ordained (as may happen overseas, or through illness) should not preside at the Lord's Supper, unless he otherwise has a dispensation to do so.

23. How then do we and should we secure within Methodism that ministry is exercised within the discipline and life of the Church? We should preserve the principle that no one is to be ordained unless he or she is going to exercise ministerial functions. We should not regard ordination as like the call to the Bar of a barrister who is qualified but never intends to practise. We should preserve the principle that for grave reasons the Conference may wholly deprive a Minister of his ministerial status or at least of the exercise of his functions. If such a person were reinstated into Full Connexion, he would not again be ordained. 'Ordination is never repeated in the Methodist Church' (M 16). But unless and until reinstatement occurs, he is not an ordained Minister for any practical purpose.

24. What then is to be done in the case of those who wish not to exercise their ministry in any regular way or to exercise it in some sphere which the Conference is not willing to recognize as a suitable sector? Hitherto many Ministers have resigned over issues of this kind, and their subsequent status has sometimes been in dispute, though the present intention of the Conference is clearly enough indicated by the phrase, if the Conference so decides, 'permitted to resume his status as a Local Preacher'. Years ago there was a status called 'without pastoral charge', but this is not now permitted. It would indeed seem strange if someone whose call to the ministry included a call to preach should cease to say 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel' (1 Cor. 9:16). Local Preachers, indeed, normally preach till sickness or age prevents them. The call to preach is lifelong and this is no doubt part of the truth underlying the notion of indelibility. A preacher does not lay aside preaching as a barrister might cease practising at the Bar and go into industry. And, similarly, one would expect that one who had once received authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments would wish to preside from time to time at the Lord's Supper.

25. That does not, however, preclude the possibility that a Minister might wish to exercise a ministry on an 'auxiliary' basis while following some other occupation. The question whether he may legitimately do so turns largely on the question whether the ordained ministry is essentially a whole-time paid occupation. On this the Conference has said 'These 'presbyter-bishops' appointed by St Paul may well have continued to

work at their original occupations and may not have received any payment for their ministerial work; yet the principle of a ministry financially supported by the Church is already recognized in the New Testament. (1 Cor. 9, 3-14).’ (M 8). There are clear advantages in having the whole-time services of Ministers, and this should still be regarded as the norm. But ‘there is, in our judgment, no scriptural or theological reason which requires the ordained ministry to be full-time or to be paid or which precludes the appointment of “auxiliary” ministers’. (C 25). The reasons why we have not had such Ministers lie in the conception that being in Full Connexion involves being a Travelling Preacher, i.e. subject to the discipline of the Conference in stationing. In Wesley’s days a Preacher who was not free to travel was indisputably a Local Preacher. But the situation has changed since the Travelling Preachers became also ordained presbyters. There seems no theological reason why a person who is prevented from travelling because he is engaged in some other occupation should not be ordained as a presbyter. It may indeed be asked how this is compatible with Clause 30 of the Deed of Union, which says ‘Christ’s Ministers in the Church are Stewards in the household of God and Shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation’. The Commission on the Church’s Ministries dealt with this question as follows:

‘Standing Order 48 (3), which is concerned with ‘permissions to serve external organisations’, provides that ‘permission shall be given to engage only in such service as is compatible with the calling of a Christian Minister’. Thus so long as the non-ministerial employment of an auxiliary is ‘compatible with the calling of a Christian Minister’, it seems clear, from this precedent, that the Conference does not regard such employment as infringing the Deed of Union. The experimental Standing Order 48 (3), which for a three year period replaces the form just quoted, requires the Committee for Ministry in the Sectors to give ‘particular attention to the rightness of the appointment for a full and proper exercise of the calling of a Christian Minister’ and therefore does not affect the point being made’. (C. 25).

If this line of interpretation is justifiable, it solves this difficulty. The Commission proceeded to argue the case for and against such Auxiliary Ministries, (C 24-29), and the Conference has referred the matter to the Division of Ministries for review in 1974 (Conference 1971 *Representative Agenda* pp. 471-6; *Daily Record* p. 58). We therefore merely reaffirm that there is no theological objection. It has sometimes been suggested that a term other than ‘Full Connexion’ should be used to describe such Ministers if we are to have them. But the term ‘Full Connexion’ distinguishes those so admitted from Probationers, and it seems best to retain it for all our ordained Ministers. It would be necessary to have a class of Ministers in Full Connexion whose privileges and obligations were differently defined, and this would involve alterations of the Standing Orders and possibly of the Deed of Union. The recent resolution that ‘Married women ministers in Full Connexion shall, if they so request, be exempt from normal stationing by the Conference’ (*Minutes* 1972 p.11) affords a precedent.

26. If such a class of Auxiliary Ministers were instituted, the question would naturally arise whether a ‘full-time’ Minister might ask permission to join it. Certainly, when he offered for the ministry, he put himself under the discipline of stationing. It could, however, be argued that it would be better for a Minister to be put in such a class than to resign; the Conference would have to devise an appropriate procedure for giving permission in such cases; such men would be ‘expected to give

such help to the Circuit as they were able', to quote the phrase used about married women exempt from stationing. Similarly there should be a procedure whereby an auxiliary Minister after further training could become a Minister subject to stationing in the normal way.

### **Sector Ministries**

27. We now arrive at the question of the 'Sectors'. The word became current in Methodism through the reports of the Commission on the Church's Ministries: 'Most people nowadays are called upon to live in a number of different "worlds" which are largely independent of each other. To those worlds outside church, home and family, we give the name "sector".' (C 4). The Church's mission is not only to individuals in their homes and families, but also to the institutions and other organizations in which men spend a great part of their lives. Within these sectors there must be a Christian presence and a Christian mission. As the Father sent the Son into the world, so the Son sends all Christians, Ministers and lay people alike. Christ died for Church and world, and the Minister is sent into the world not into areas of community or culture entirely alien from God but to a place where God's reconciling love has already embraced all men in the totality of our human existence. It is obvious indeed that the Church must seek to fulfil this mission largely through lay people, who vastly outnumber Ministers, but for many years now some ordained Ministers have worked in the sectors, particularly in education. This practice arose, partly at any rate, through a shortage of lay people trained in religious education. Such Ministers are appointed and paid by secular bodies. But whereas formerly the Conference gave them 'permission to serve external organizations' as a kind of exceptional arrangement, a new system arose, partly because of the pressure brought by Ministers who could not obtain such permission, felt called to work in the sectors, and had to choose between such work and resignation; and partly because of new theological insights into the nature of mission in these 'sectors', as at this time they began to be called. Thus a sector is now regarded as a normal sphere in which a Minister may be authorized to exercise his ministry, even though the proportion who do so is comparatively small. Those who were formally given 'permission to serve an external organization' are now included among the ministers in the sectors, though the original 'permission to serve' was given by the Conference under different regulations from those which now operate in relation to the sectors. The questions that arise are whether in the light of our doctrine of ordination a sector is indeed a proper sphere for the exercise of an ordained ministry, and, if so, to quote the exact question put to us, what is 'the relation of the ordained ministry in the sector to that of the laity'.

28. The underlying theology of the employment of ordained Ministers in the sectors rests on two concepts which we have already expounded: one is based on the fact that the Minister has certain functions to fulfil, of which the administration of the sacraments is the most distinctive; the other insists that ministry is not just a collection of functions, but that ordained Ministers are representative persons. With one or other of these concepts as premise, many would argue as follows. First, the ordained Minister in the sectors fulfils as far as possible the same functions as his colleague in the neighbourhood ministry. Nevertheless 'he may be less conscious of his sacramental role, though the fullness of ministry by the Church requires that it should engage in worship as well as service, and an ordained Minister should play his part in developing this'. (Commission on the Church's Ministries, Conference 1970 *Representative Agenda* p. 649). One school of thought judges the propriety of a sector ministry almost entirely by the opportunities it affords for a sacramental ministry. A variant of this is to assimilate the concept of sector ministry to that of auxiliary

ministry; those who hold this view approve of a Minister's working in the sectors so long as on Sundays he preaches and administers the sacraments in a church; it is this function on Sundays which, in their view, justifies his position as an ordained Minister.

29. Second, some would not lay so much stress on the Minister's sacramental role or indeed on any of the particular functions of a Minister, but would rather stress his representative role. 'The role of an ordained Minister in the sector is not different from his role in the neighbourhood. He will be Christ's ambassador and the representative of the total ministries of Christ and of the whole people of God . . . The ordained Minister helps the Church in the sector to come to its own task more effectively . . . Through the authority given to him by the Church he represents the Church in a way no one else can. The Church relies on him to provide co-ordination within the whole body of Christians' (C 20). Those who hold this view see the ordained Minister as a missionary-apostle rather than as ministering to a settled congregation, and they see his specialized training as equipping him for his role. It is true that lay people are also called to represent the Church and to engage in mission in the sectors, and some of them may be trained in theology and pastoral skills; but Methodism strongly emphasizes the partnership of the ordained Ministers and the lay people. The Ministers 'hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people' (Deed of Union, clause 30), and thus where the Church is to be visible, it should be represented by Ministers and lay people together. But on this view the Minister in this setting, as in others has, and is known to have, a distinctive, focal role within the total ministry of the Church, and when this is recognized by those among whom, and those with whom, he works, the effectiveness of the Church's mission is increased. This recognition is ensured by the Church's action in testing and approving his wish to work in the sectors, and in stationing him accordingly.

30. A third argument arises from the need to experiment. Although there is a sense in which the Church rather than the Minister is chaplain to the wider community, yet there may be situations which demand that some pioneer, whether Minister or layman, should be very much 'on his own', to some extent cut off from the normal collegiate ministry of Ministers and laymen in partnership. All Christians are called to show initiative in new situations and circumstances, and the church needs to be generous and sensitive in recognizing the divine call of the pioneers.

31. Some, however, are not wholly convinced by these arguments. They usually distinguish between those whose work in the sectors requires that they be ordained ministers and 'those whose work in the sectors does not require ordination and who must determine for themselves by their attitude whether they exercise a ministry or not'. (Report of the Working Party appointed to review the first three years of work of the Committee on Ministry in the Sectors, Conference 1972 *Representative Agenda* p. 462). Whereas there is little dispute about the former category, some question the latter category. They gladly recognize that Christ sends all Christians on a mission to the world, and that special circumstances may call for pioneers; but in those cases where the ordained Minister exercises only a few of his distinctive functions, they ask what is his role, and they fear that the emphasis on his specially representative character may lead to a depreciation of the representative role of lay people.

32. The Committee was not able to resolve this difference of theological opinion, but has sought to clarify the issue by this statement. It recommends that the final resolution of the question, when the Church wishes to make it, should depend on a



serious discussion of the theological issue, and not on the virtues and faults, successes and failures of individual Sector Ministers.

33. We wish, however, to make a comment on the stationing of Sector Ministers. The Commission on the Church's Ministries has laid great stress on the idea 'that Methodism can only truly fulfil its mission to the present age if its ordained ministry, though operating in various patterns, acts under one discipline and one authority' (C 22). This means that 'he is at the disposal of the Church and accepts the ultimate authority of Conference' (C 22) and is assigned to a circuit and will wish to preach regularly. The point about preaching is undoubtedly sound; the point about being at the disposal of the Church has been interpreted by the concept of 'responsible stationing'. This recognizes that there are factors in the situation of a Sector Minister which mean that he cannot be recalled to a circuit or moved to another post in the same sector with the same facility as that with which a Circuit Minister can be moved. But this informal recognition is not embodied in our Standing Orders, and at the Conference of 1973 the Commission initiated a debate as to whether some further modification of the principle of availability for stationing is necessary (Conference 1973 *Representative Agenda* pp. 477-83). The Conference resolved: 'Subject to the outcome of the review of the Sector Ministries to be undertaken by the Division of Ministries and laid before Conference in 1975 the Conference directs that the Division shall examine further the principles embodied in this report and report to the Conference of 1975' (*Daily Record*, p. 34). We have already said (paragraph 25) that we do not consider availability for stationing to be essential to the concept of an ordained presbyter. The acceptance of this view would entail a considerable alteration in the discipline of the Ministers considered as Travelling Preachers, and the Conference would need to ponder it with care; it is not precluded by any theological consideration.

34. Before we leave the question of Sector Ministries and turn to the diaconate, we note that the question is sometimes raised whether the sector ministry is not diaconal rather than presbyteral, at least in those sectors where the administration of the sacraments is rarely required. We have tended to think of the diaconate as an 'inferior' branch of the ministry, no doubt because of its 'apprentice' aspect in some churches, but it should rather be regarded as a parallel ministry. Many who are serving in the sectors are already ordained presbyters, but it is at least arguable that when we consider selecting and training fresh people for sector ministry we should ordain them not as presbyters but as deacons.

### **Diaconate**

35. The differentia of the diaconal ministry is less easy to define than that of the presbyterate. To render service is the duty of every Minister as of every Christian. In Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches deacons traditionally have certain liturgical functions, but at least in the Church of England they do not now have any function which cannot, at least in an emergency, be performed by a layman. But in that Church they legally belong to the clergy, whereas deaconesses do not. In Methodism we ordain deaconesses, but we do not have deacons, for we have said: 'The Reformation Office of "deacon", clearly corresponding to the New Testament "diaconos", is held among us by the various kinds of "stewards" who are called to perform their stewardship to the glory of God and the building up of the Church'. (M 12-13). Our deaconesses are not as such authorized to preach, though almost all of them do so as local preachers.

36. Is there today a continuing role for the diaconal ministry? In Churches of the 'Catholic' tradition men have been made deacons a year or so before being made presbyters; and deacons have thus administratively, though not theologically, corresponded to our probationers. This can be defended on the grounds that to become first a deacon is a way of emphasizing that the role of servant characterizes the whole Christian ministry and that they do not lay aside this role when they are ordained as presbyters. But generally speaking it has recently been felt unsatisfactory that the diaconate should thus be treated as a kind of apprenticeship (if indeed such an interval before ordination as presbyters is needed at all) or at least that it should virtually be confined to this role; and there have been occasional experiments in 'permanent' deacons. The matter was discussed in a Report of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission (*Towards Reconciliation* pp. 22-4), but despite this and a considerable volume of other literature on the subject, there is as yet no clear way forward.

37. The diaconate on one view might cover those who in Christ's name render particular services in the world: Christian probation officers, social service workers, teachers, and so on. But as all Christians are called to be servants, it is impossible to set bounds to such a list. Some would meet this difficulty by confining the diaconate to those who are paid by the Church. But if this body were initially restricted to those who are paid by and at the disposal of the Church and therefore closely under its discipline, e.g. deaconesses (usually), lay missionaries etc., it would soon find some of its members wishing to move (as indeed some deaconesses have already moved) into sectors, and thus it would develop a more elastic discipline; then some teachers, for example, might think that they could just as appropriately be deacons because years before they had served briefly in a school in an overseas mission. Nor would such a deacon have anything distinctive about him, as a Minister still has the distinctive authority to preside at the Lord's Supper. It might thus be better from the start to have no idea of liability to stationing, in which case local preachers, and class leaders could be included. But it might then be asked how the services of such lay people would be enriched or helped by the conferment of semi-clerical status.

38. One possible solution would be to abandon the idea of the diaconate as a form of ordained ministry with all the idea of permanence which that involves, and to institute a 'religious order'. There have been in the Church many religious orders, some of them predominantly lay, which have lived under a stricter discipline than Christians generally. There seems no reason why the vows taken by those entering such an order need be permanent. Men and women might enter such an order and place themselves entirely at the disposal of the Church, as, say, a lay missionary might do, and then later, if they wished, be perfectly free to seek other employment or live under a less strict discipline. There might indeed be two forms of this, both involving a strict devotional discipline, but only one involving the discipline of stationing.

39. The principle that has led to the acceptance of men and women alike into the presbyteral ministry requires that if we are to have a diaconal ministry in any form, men and women in the diaconate should have identical status (whether the women are to be called deacons or deaconesses).

40. The Conference handled this matter as recently as 1971, when the Report of the Commission on the Church's Ministries included a report from a working-party from the Commission and the Wesley Deaconess Order on the Place of the Wesley Deaconess Order in the Methodist Church today. (Conference 1971 *Representative Agenda* pp. 477-82). The Conference in adopting the Report, assured the members of the Wesley Deaconess Order that they have the confidence and support of the Church,

and recorded its conviction that there is a continuing need in the Church for a diaconal ministry alongside the ordained ministry of the Word and Sacrament. It also referred several recommendations to the committee of the Wesley Deaconess Order and the General Committee of the Division of Ministries for further study. (*Daily Record*, 1971, p. 58). We wish to add the possibility that any extension of such a diaconate might perhaps involve its being considered as a religious order rather than a form of the ordained ministry. Regard must, however, be had to the fact that the present members of the Wesley Deaconess Order have been ordained to it. But the problems which we have mentioned are not easily solved, particularly when the Church has not yet made up its mind about auxiliary Ministers and about the discipline of Sector Ministries. We therefore hope that the Division of Ministries will consider these problems together, and that in the meantime the Wesley Deaconess Order will continue. We do not regard it as the task of our committee to work out detailed plans for new forms of ministry, but only to give our opinion on the theological principles involved; but we are of course at the disposal of the Conference and of the Division of Ministries for further consultation.

(*Agenda* 1974, pp. 253-67)

## DUAL ORDINATION (1974)

In the course of its development from a company of travelling preachers in connexion with Mr Wesley, ministering among a number of societies, into a church which 'claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ' (Deed of Union, clause 30), the Methodist Church has come to claim for its Ministers that they are ordained, not only within a particular denomination, but 'to fulfil the office of a Minister in the Church of Christ' (Ordination Service), and that this should be universally recognized, even though if a Minister is to act as minister in another denomination, invitation or permission to do so ('jurisdiction' as opposed to 'orders') is necessary. It follows that a Minister who wishes to minister in another denomination should not go through a ceremony which calls in question his ordination as a presbyter.

Thus some churches, freely accepting our claim, will allow a Methodist Minister to minister frequently among them while retaining his status as a Methodist Minister, or to be 'transferred' into their ministry without anything resembling an ordination service. Others feel that they cannot recognize it fully, and have found no way of allowing a Methodist Minister to minister among them, at least if presiding at the Eucharist is involved, except simply to use the service which they normally use for the ordination of a priest. Between these two extremes there are various possibilities: the Service of Reconciliation which was proposed as part of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme was one such proposal; others are conditional ordination, supplemental ordination, the use of the normal ordination service with some statement that it does not imply a denial of a previous ordination, and so on. It would be unwise for Methodism to decide too hastily where among these a line is to be drawn.

Opinion is divided as to the simple use of the ordination service of another church. Some would regard it as theologically permissible, and of these some would wish to allow it in certain cases as contributing to the unity of the church in particular local conditions, while others would regard it as permissible but very inexpedient in present circumstances. Others, however, take the view that, though it may be sincerely intentioned, it must inevitably imply an adverse judgment on the previous ordination. The Conference of 1973 (Ministerial Session) in referring the report to the Faith and Order Committee, also resolved 'In the meantime, the case of any minister who is ordained by the Church of England and does not resign from the Methodist Ministry shall be dealt with under the provisions of S.O. 39.' (i.e. the ordinary procedure for ministerial discipline). The Committee recommends that this arrangement continues.

The Committee is united in its belief that Methodist Ministers are indeed true Ministers. But where our ministry is not universally recognized, it asks whether there are not steps which we could legitimately take to secure the wider recognition of future ordinations. Methodists hold firmly that their Ministers are truly ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments, and that in principle they ought to be accepted throughout the universal church, but recognize that other churches have reservations on this point. It recommends that the commission likely to be set up as a result of the multilateral conversations be asked to consider whether there are legitimate ways in which these reservations may be removed.

*(Agenda 1974, pp. 251f)*

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The Conference referred this report to 'the Committee likely to be set up as a result of the multilateral conversations'.

## **(ii) The Deaconess Order**

### **THE DEACONESS ORDER (1960)**

'Order', as an ecclesiastical term, is used in many ways and with varying degrees of precision. The usage in Methodism relates most closely to the idea of a religious society living under rule. In the widest sense the Methodist Church itself is an 'Order.' In a narrower sense the word connects a body of workers, having their own distinctive function, place and discipline. Thus, in fact, if not in name, the ministry is an Order, as a body of men set apart by the Church to fulfil certain functions to which they are directed, and living under a specific common discipline. In practice, the use of the word has been limited to the Wesley Deaconess Order, as a body of women, authorized by the Church, set apart for specific functions and under a recognized discipline, including place and nature of appointment, and allowances. The members of the Deaconess Order are first accepted by the Wesley Deaconess Convocation and then received into full membership of the Order through ordination with the laying on of hands by the President of the Conference (or by an ex-President appointed by him), and by a standing vote of the Conference, before which they must appear. They are ordained not to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments but to the 'office of a Deaconess in the Church of God'. The character of their work is set out in the Order of Service used at their Ordination. The President addresses those who are to be ordained as follows: 'It may fall to your lot to preach the Gospel, to lead the worship of a congregation, to teach both young and old: you may be required to feed the flock of Christ, to nurse the hopeless, to offer friendship, even at cost, to many who, but for you, may never know a Christian friend. But in all this you must be true evangelists of our Lord Jesus Christ, translating your Gospel into the language of personal service, that it may be better understood, not reckoning your ministry complete till those whom you serve can say, 'Now we believe, not because of thy speaking: for we have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.'" Prayer is offered that they may receive the 'continued help of the Holy Spirit' in the 'ministry now committed to them,' and that they may receive the gifts necessary for their work. Many who offer themselves for the work are already Local Preachers and Class Leaders. Those who are not Local Preachers become so, with few exceptions, during their training. All Deaconesses lead classes as part of their normal work.

The question of ordaining Deaconesses to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments has been referred by the Conference to a Special Committee.

*(Agenda 1960, p. 312)*

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This appeared as Appendix C to Ordination in the Methodist Church 1960.

# **THE STATUS OF DEACONESSES AND THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN TO THE MINISTRY (1961)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Committee was instructed by the Conference of 1959 to examine and report on 'The Place and Work of the Wesley Deaconess Order in Methodism and the Admission of Women to the Ministry.' These subjects are clearly related to one another and are part of the greater question 'How can the Methodist Church make best use of the devoted service that women can offer to their Lord?' This is of particular importance to the Church in a day when she is hard pressed to reach the hearts and minds of men and women with the Gospel.

In our report we first examine the Ministry exercised by women in the New Testament and the subsequent history of the Church. Part 2 deals with the work of our Deaconesses. Part 3 discusses the Admission of Women to the Methodist Ministry

## **PART 1. THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN**

### **A. In the New Testament**

Jesus Christ restored woman to that status of equality with man before God which was part of God's original intention for her as the Old Testament describes it. We read there that she was created with man in the image of God to be his helper and partner and to share with him the rule over the creation (Genesis I 26-28, II 18-23). Sin, both in man and in woman, degraded her from her high position, until even among the Jews she was regarded and treated not as a person but as a thing, the property first of her father and then of her husband, and occupied a wholly subordinate place in the whole life of the community.

But Jesus spoke to women in the same way as He spoke to men (John IV 7-27), and offered them forgiveness of sins and His friendship and help just as He did to men (Luke VII 36-50, X 38-42). There is an ease and freedom of personal relationship among the men and women of Jesus' company which make a striking contrast to the prevailing conditions of Jewish life at the time. Some of the women who had been healed by Jesus accompanied Him and His disciples on some of their journeys (Luke VIII 2), and some, again, were among the witnesses of the Resurrection.

There were, however, no women among the Twelve Apostles, nor, as far as we know, among the Seventy who were sent out two by two into the towns and villages which Jesus was going to visit (Luke X 1). Yet no theological conclusion about the status of women can be drawn from this fact, since it would have been virtually impossible, in the social conditions of the time, for women to have been included in either of these groups.

The restored status of women was recognized in the Apostolic Church. It is taken for granted in many passages in the Acts and the Epistles that they have a full and responsible part in the worship and communal life of the Church. Several of them are mentioned as the leaders of churches which met in their houses (Acts XVI, 13, I Cor. I, 11). Others, again, are said to have 'laboured in the Gospel' (Romans XVI 12,

Phil. IV 2, 3). Prisca seems to have taken a leading part in instructing Apollos in the fullness of the faith (Acts XVIII 26).

When we consider the position of women in the society which surrounded the early Church, the most striking fact of all is that women fulfilled regular ministries with definite functions. The four unmarried daughters of Philip, the evangelist, were prophetesses (Acts XXI 9); and St Paul regarded it as a thing to be expected that women should prophesy in the Church at Corinth (I Cor. XI. 5). Phoebe was a 'deaconess' of the Church at Cenchreae (Romans XVI 1); and the author of I Timothy III 11, either St Paul or a disciple of St Paul writing after the time of the Apostle, is held by some to refer to women as included in the order of 'deacons'. We cannot be quite certain as to the functions of these 'deacons' and 'deaconesses', but they were associated with the 'presbyters' or 'bishops', as they were also called, in the churches of St Paul's foundation (Phil. I 1), and probably assisted them in the distribution of alms to the needy.

In I Timothy V 3-16, we hear of an order of 'widows', who were to be women of mature age and to engage in the ministry of intercession.

There are, however, two passages in the New Testament which do not seem to tally with the picture presented by the New Testament as a whole. The first is 1 Cor. XIV 33b-35: 'As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church' (RSV). Some of the oldest MSS place these words in a different position in the text, after verse 40.

In the same letter St Paul has already assumed that women prophesy and pray in public worship, discussed whether they should do so with their heads unveiled, and ruled that they should not. Here he apparently forbids women to speak altogether in the course of worship.

Some scholars have sought to solve the difficulty by saying that the variation in the MSS shows a whole passage to be a later interpolation; but this is too easy a solution. Nor can we easily suppose that St Paul has changed his mind since he wrote the earlier passage, and has now decided that the best way to deal with the dress of women who prophesied, and with the disorder that might result from their doing so, is to forbid them to prophesy altogether. The most probable interpretation is that certain women in the Church of Corinth were in the habit of interrupting the prophets while they were speaking, to ask about, or to express views about, the meaning of what they were saying, and that this was causing disorder in worship. St Paul forbids women, therefore, to speak while the service is in progress, and orders them to enquire about the meaning of what they have heard when they arrive home. On this view there is nothing in this passage inharmonious with the Apostle's earlier injunctions.

The other passage is I Timothy II 12: 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent' (RSV). If the author of the Epistle is St Paul, we are bound to conclude that his views had changed in his later years. If, as is more likely, the author is a disciple of St Paul writing after the Apostle's death, then we have evidence that the first post-apostolic age wished to curtail the freedom of expression that Christian women, in their new-found liberation from social bondage, were claiming.

It is further to be noticed that, so far as we know, there were no women among the presbyter-bishops whom St Paul appointed in many churches. We are not, it is true,

definitely informed in the New Testament that this was the case, but it seems clear that if there had been any women presbyter-bishops, the fact would have emerged at some point. It is generally, and probably rightly, supposed that the presbyter-bishops not only superintended the life of the churches, but also celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on all occasions when no Apostle or visiting prophet was present. The non-inclusion of women among the presbyter-bishops indicates, therefore, that women did not take part in the superintendence of the churches or in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in New Testament times.

Doubt has been cast upon this conclusion by those who interpret the word usually translated 'older women' in I Timothy V 2 as 'female presbyters' and who suppose that there was such an order in the early Church, or that women were admitted to the ranks of the presbyter-bishops. But such an interpretation does not fit the context, least of all in an Epistle which elsewhere so definitely forbids women to exercise any authority over men or to be teachers (II 12).

We have next to ask what beliefs are presupposed by the position which the early Church assigned to women. Three are discernible. The first is clearly stated by St Paul in Galatians III 28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (RSV). That is to say, the difference of sex between men and women is transcended (not, of course, abolished) in the Christian Church, in the sphere in which Christ is Lord; man and woman are reconciled in the unity which is the gift of Christ.

The second belief is that the 'charismata' of the Holy Spirit, the free gifts of grace by which alone anyone can fulfil the ministry of prophecy, or healing, or any ministry at all within the Church (I Cor. XI, 4-11), are given to women as well as to men; for otherwise no woman could rightly prophesy. But when we enunciate this principle we do well to remember that we are not expressly told in Scripture that women are the recipients of *all* the 'charismata' of the Spirit.

The third belief is the subjection of women to men. This has an Old Testament basis in one form of the doctrine of creation (Genesis II, 21, 22; III 16). It is explicitly stated more than once in the New Testament (for instance, in I Cor. XI 3. Ephes. V 22-24, I Timothy II 13, 14), and is implied in many other passages.

It is probably on the basis of this third belief that women were excluded from the order of presbyter-bishops and from the administration of the Lord's Supper. It is sometimes suggested that this exclusion was due to the differences of natural and social function between the sexes, but there is no hint of this as a reason in the New Testament. It is held by others that the reason was that, since it is a priest who administers the Lord's Supper, and a priest represents Christ Himself, and only a man can represent Christ, women are incapable of administering the Sacrament. But the notion of the minister who administers the Lord's Supper as a priest representing Christ is wholly alien to the New Testament, which never refers to an individual as a priest at all. The doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' means that we are all taken up by faith into the priesthood of Christ, and are identified with Him in His complete self-offering as we offer ourselves completely to God. But this applies to men and women alike, and certainly there is nothing to debar a woman from the priesthood of all believers. We are left with the view that it was the belief in the subjection of women – to be seen as a fact at every level of ancient life, ecclesiastical and secular – that prevented women from exercising the office of presbyter-bishop in the New Testament.



The ministers of the Church today correspond to the New Testament presbyter-bishops. The Church in the twentieth century must therefore ask itself this question: do we hold the practice and doctrine of the Apostolic Church, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit to be for ever definitive in the matter of admitting women to the ordained ministry; or do we hold that in this matter it did not fully see the implications of the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ, and took over instead its convictions and practices from the universal beliefs of the society in the midst of which it was living?

The answer seems to be that while the authority of the New Testament is final for the Church in all ages, it is an authority which concerns the great matters of the faith rather than one which covers the detailed applications of the faith to the conditions of any particular age, since these conditions necessarily differ so widely. Here the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit to respond to every situation as it arises. Of the three beliefs which governed the attitude of the New Testament writers to the position of women in the Church the first two are concerned with 'the great matters of the faith', and remain for ever valid. The third belief has no such abiding validity, since it is so closely bound up with the conditions of the age in which it was held. We are no longer required, in other words, to regard women as subject to men, and cannot exclude women from the ordained ministry on the ground of such subjection.

## **B. In the history of the Church**

The history of the ministry of women after the New Testament times is hard to disentangle, but it is safe to say that no question of ordaining them as presbyters ever arose until long after the Reformation. Moreover, as the emphasis on the priesthood of the Christian ministry grew it became less and less likely that women would be considered in relation to it, for this growth was accompanied by the development of the notion that the priest represents Christ. Nor should we forget that in the popular mind, and in the minds of Christians also, priestesses were associated with religions which the Church wished most strongly to repudiate.

This does not, of course, mean that there were no ministries which women could exercise. In particular there was the order of deaconesses, which, as we have seen, went back to the New Testament. There is a probable allusion to this order in the letter of Pliny to Trajan about the Christian Church in Bithynia (112 AD), but nothing is said about it as an existing institution by Christian writers until the beginning of the fourth century. The way in which Clement of Alexandria and Origen refer to the New Testament deaconesses seems to imply that the order had lapsed in their time (late second and early third centuries). Fourth century writers speak, however, as if the order were well established in their own time, and we may take it that it was revived in the course of the third century. From this time until the eleventh century the evidence for its continued existence is fairly clear. It began its new life in the Eastern churches. It spread from the East to Gaul, and later to Rome. By the eleventh century, however, it was beginning to die out again, and had ceased entirely in the later Middle Ages, both in the East and in the West. In the West, at least, the function which deaconesses had performed were largely taken over by abbesses and nuns.

During the period in which the order of deaconesses flourished, they were ordained by bishops with the laying on of hands. Their functions included: (a) acting as intermediary between the bishop and women who wished to consult him; (b) assisting at the baptism of women (but not actually baptizing them); (c) taking and administering the consecrated elements of bread and wine to the sick; (d) teaching the faith to women and children; (e) keeping the doors by which women entered the

church. Many writers and some Councils during the period point out carefully what women, presumably including deaconesses, are not allowed to do – for instance, to baptize, or preach, to pray or sing aloud in church, to approach the altar, or to bless, the implication sometimes being that they had presumed to do what they were not allowed to do. There was some variation in practice of the age at which women could be admitted to the order, but it was in no case lower than forty. Deaconesses were always either virgins or widows.

When in the West the monastic orders proved more attractive to women than the order of deaconesses, the abbesses of nunneries received far greater powers than any woman had previously held in the Church. Within their own nunneries they conducted all the services of the Church except the Eucharist. They held virtually supreme control over the lives of the nuns under their authority, and, in the case of double monasteries such as those which were common in England in Saxon times, over those of the male inmates as well. The principle of the subjection of women certainly did not operate in their case.

The Reformation was in part a revolt against the monastic life of both women and men, and also to some extent against the illicit influence of women behind the scenes in high ecclesiastical places. The whole position of women in the Church had, therefore, to be re-thought by Protestants. The first and most widespread result of this re-thinking was a very great emphasis on the place of family life, and therefore on the spiritual influence of mothers on their children. This emphasis tended to obscure the part which unmarried women, at least, can play in the life of the Church outside their own homes, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the order of Deaconesses was established in any Church of the Reformation. The first such order was begun by Pastor Flidner in Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, and the idea has spread among many of the Protestant Churches of the Continent, including the Methodist Churches, mainly with the purpose of caring for the sick and the aged. In 1862 the first Anglican Deaconess was ordained as such by the Bishop of London and Anglican Deaconesses, having received theological and pastoral training, may, with episcopal permission, read Morning and Evening Prayer, preach at non-liturgical services, and administer the chalice at Holy Communion (a right not often exercised, and shared with men Lay Readers).

### **C. In the Churches today**

In the present century the proposal to admit women to the ordained Ministry has been made in almost every Church other than the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Church of England, the other Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Church of Scotland have taken no steps in the direction of admitting them, though the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland voted in 1960 for the admission of women to the ordained lay eldership. (This is not yet ratified).

Several of the Lutheran Churches, including those of Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway and (since 1960) Sweden, admit women to the full ordained ministry. In all the Lutheran Churches of Germany there is an order of 'Vikarinnen'. They are trained in the same way as men ordinands, and in some Churches they are 'ordained', in others 'consecrated'. They have different functions in the different Churches. In some their functions closely resemble those of ordained Ministers, to the point of including the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in women's hospitals, and in some they may receive a licence to administer it in the parishes, as frequently happened during and just after the Second World War.

There are Vikarinnen also in the 'United' (ie. Lutheran and Reformed in union) Churches in Germany. Here they are normally 'ordained', and have full rights to administer the Sacraments and fulfil the whole of the Ministerial Office.

The Congregational Churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Baptist Churches of Great Britain, and the Northern Baptist Churches of the United States admit women to the ordained Ministry on equal terms with men. The Presbyterian Church of England, having asserted some years ago that 'there is no barrier in principle to the admission of women to the Ministry,' now has one ordained woman minister, working in a congregation. Two Churches in which the Methodist Church is united with other Churches, the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ in Japan, accept women in the same way as men. In the Methodist Church of the United States women were admitted as 'supply pastors' and 'ordained local preachers' more than thirty years ago, but without a vote at Conference, guaranteed appointments or retirement benefits: in 1956 they were admitted to 'full clergy rights' and are now on equal terms with men. This ruling also covers those European Methodist Churches which are under the jurisdiction of the Methodist Church of America. The Methodist Church of New Zealand has ordained three women to the Ministry.

## PART 2. THE WESLEY DEACONESS ORDER

### A. The History of the Order

#### *i. Before Methodist Union*

Each of the former branches of Methodism made use of the services of Deaconesses.

The Wesleyan Order was founded by Dr T. B. Stephenson in 1890 with three guiding principles: there must be vocation but no vow: there must be discipline without servility: there must be association without excluding freedom. He envisaged it as 'a soul-converting agency . . . the strong arm of the Church'. After Dr Stephenson was appointed to the Ilkley Circuit all the training was concentrated there, the present college being purchased in 1902. The one-year course was extended to two years in 1928. When the order was recognised as a Department of the Church in 1907 there were 175 Deaconesses, including 14 overseas and 19 in college.

The Free Methodist Church had an Order organised on lines similar to the Wesleyan Order, founded in 1891 by the Rev T. J. Cope with its headquarters at Bowron House, Wandsworth Common.

There was no organised Order in the Primitive Methodist Church; the Rev J. Flannigan, founder of St Georges Hall in the Old Kent Road, began to train Sisters, and later most appointments came under the general care of the Home Mission Department.

#### *ii Since Methodist Union*

The three Orders merged in 1935, when 25 came from the P. M. Church, 57 from the U. M. and 290 from the W. M. Ilkley became the training centre and administrative headquarters.

The new Book of Offices in 1936 included a service for 'The Ordination of Deaconesses'. 'Ordination' replaced 'Consecration' as previously observed in the

Wesleyan Order, and thus followed the wording used in the Church of England and the United Methodist Church.

In 1942 Conference adopted various resolutions concerning the Wesley Deaconess Order, among them: 'Ordained Deaconesses are not to be regarded, any more than Ministers, as employees. The only right relationship is an honourable collegueship, in which no gifts of leadership and insight need be denied their exercise, and a Deaconess will have scope and freedom to do the work for which she has been trained and ordained'. Various regulations were adopted, among them: candidates must intend life service: ordinands are to be personally presented at Conference and be admitted into full membership of the Order by a resolution of Conference: continuity of service should be assured, stations be printed in the Minutes, and Ordained Deaconesses in the Active Work be members of the Representative Session of Synod.

In 1943 Conference said 'In view of the increasing recognition of women's work in all civic, professional and industrial spheres, the Conference is deeply concerned lest the Church should show itself timid and unadventurous in entrusting women with responsibility and opportunities of leadership'.

In 1947 the Convocation of the Order approved (200 for, 5 against, 4 neutral) the resolution of the Conference committee that women be admitted to the Ministry, with the same status as men, save that marriage should normally involve resignation. By a similar majority, the Convocation disapproved of the alternative suggestion of the Conference committee that there should be a parallel Ministry of the Word and Sacraments designed only for women.

**B. The Work and Status of the Order Today**

When the Deaconess Order began in Methodism, there was no National Health Insurance, there were no benefits for old age or unemployment, and there was widespread poverty. These factors conditioned the work of the early Deaconesses, all of whom were given some medical training, and went to appointments where social work was sorely needed. With the passage of time and the coming of the Welfare State with full employment, much of this philanthropic work has been rendered unnecessary. From the first, however, spiritual ministrations were the dominant motive and content of the work. This is still true, although the pattern has changed. In spite of increased prosperity the problems of loneliness, family dissension and moral failure remain unsolved, and the pastoral ministry of the Deaconesses is still as urgently needed as ever.

In addition there has been an increasing demand for Deaconesses to preach and all candidates in recent years have become Local Preachers. Many new opportunities for service have arisen: some of the changes are reflected in these comparative figures:

	<b>1939</b>	<b>1961</b>
City Missions	145	100
New Areas	6	31
Rural Areas	3	25
All others	<u>76</u>	<u>82</u>
Total Home Appointments	<u>230</u>	<u>238</u>

At present about 60 have 'pastoral charge of societies', and 38 have a dispensation to give the Sacrament. Others serve in Industry, Moral Welfare, and Youth Work: the Caravan campaigns have continued since 1934, and Chaplain's Assistants have been

serving since 1940 when the first woman appointed to a Chaplaincy in the Armed Forces was a Wesley Deaconess.

These changes have come about, not through formal resolutions or policy decisions, but from the developing needs of the Church and the recognition of the ability and devotion of our Deaconesses. Financial consideration and man-power shortage have also played their part in bringing about the present situation in which the Church is increasingly using Deaconesses to fill what would otherwise be ministerial appointments in the Circuits.

The Church as a whole should therefore be concerned to ensure that the members of the Order be given their proper status in the life and organisation of the Church. We believe that the Deaconesses themselves are concerned about status, not from any desire for self-aggrandisement, but from a desire to do their work more efficiently and to serve God more adequately. We are fully aware that status depends less upon Conference resolutions than upon the good will and collegueship of ministers, and the respect of the Church, won by their integrity, devotion and ability. It is a question not so much of the status of an office, as of the recognition by the whole Church of the quality and nature of the work of a Deaconess. It is in this context that the following observations are made:

1. *Relationship to the Ministerial Staff.* The changes in the type of Deaconess appointment already referred to have added to the confusion that exists in the minds of many people about the status of a Deaconess and her position in the life and organisation of her Circuit. The Conference of 1942 declared that she should share 'honourable collegueship' with the ministers: in many Circuits she is fully recognised as a member of the ministerial staff, but there are others where her name appears only in the list of Local Preachers or Class Leaders. 'Honourable collegueship' should mean that a Deaconess is a member of the Circuit Staff meeting, taking her full share in the discussion of Circuit policy, and is responsible, like the Ministers, directly to the Superintendent (rather than to an official in a local church) for the work she undertakes. On the Circuit Plan her name should appear following the list of ministers.
2. *The method of invitation and appointment.* This has a direct bearing on the status of a Deaconess: at present an appointment can be begun or ended simply by the vote of the Quarterly Meeting with no reference to a higher court. With ministerial appointments any increase or reduction of Circuit Staffing has to have the sanction of Synod and Conference, and adequate reasons for the change have to be put forward. Another committee has been appointed to report on this: we only record our belief that this somewhat casual method of opening and closing Deaconess appointments diminishes their status, and lessens their security. The stationing of Deaconesses is in the hands of the Warden: this puts a very heavy responsibility on one man, but he has an unrivalled knowledge of the members of the Order, and any committee appointed to station Deaconesses would have to lean very heavily on his advice.
3. *The payment of Deaconesses.* Another committee has been appointed to report on this and we make no detailed recommendations about it. It is our judgement that the present scale is too low. Circuits should not be encouraged in the belief that cheap ministerial labour is available by securing a Deaconess. There is also ground for concern at the poor living accommodation that is sometimes provided.

4. *Their sphere of service.* It was the hope of the Conference of 1942 that in the work given to Deaconesses 'no gifts of leadership and insight need to be denied their exercise, and that a Deaconess will have scope and freedom to do the work for which she has been trained and ordained'. Many have found such scope in the appointments to New Areas or Country Circuits where they have had pastoral charge of one or more churches; such opportunities for preaching and leadership have brought a sense both of satisfaction and of the fulfilment of their call to serve. Others have found ample scope in the work of our Central Missions, where pastoral visitation and the leading of classes have provided opportunities for evangelism as well as for ministering to Church members. At the same time opportunities are increasing for specialised work in industry or moral welfare or amongst young people. The call to such work may come from a Department of our Church or from an outside agency, but the Church should be satisfied that such appointments provide scope for evangelism and pastoral care before permitting Deaconesses to undertake them. The Order was established primarily for the winning of souls for Christ and this should remain its paramount purpose. We judge that, normally, it can best be fulfilled if Deaconesses are given every opportunity to work alongside Ministers in the Circuits, Missions and Departments of Methodism.
5. *The right to administer the Sacrament.* Thirty-eight Deaconesses are at present authorised to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: these are stationed in appointments where they have pastoral charge of one or more Churches. Those in such appointments welcome this authorization, and there are some who think that all Deaconesses should be given it. The committee does not recommend this, for it would be tantamount to ordaining Deaconesses to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and so forming a parallel ministry to that of the men. However unsatisfactory the present position may be, no radical change should be made until the Church has reached a decision about admitting women to the Ministry. Meanwhile there should be continuity of policy about the dispensations that are granted: as long as the conditions of the appointment remain the same a dispensation given to one should be given to her successor.
6. *Training.* At present Deaconesses have a two-year course of training at Ilkley: lectures are given on the Bible, Systematic Theology, Church History, Worship and Preaching, Psychology and Teaching Method. Voice-production and Music are taught by visiting teachers. On one afternoon and evening each week every student serves as a Deaconess in a Mission or Church in the neighbourhood, and in the summer vacation at the end of her first year she does a month's work under an experienced Deaconess.

With the greater responsibilities laid upon some Deaconesses, an additional year of training would be beneficial. For some this might be devoted to further study of the Christian faith, while others might receive specialised training in Moral Welfare, Youth Work, etc., at another training centre or college. We welcome the fact that the General Committee of the Wesley Deaconess Order is already considering such a year of specialised training. In commending this we have in mind that Conference has already accepted the policy of a fourth year for students in our Theological Colleges, and that the Government has recently extended the period of training for teachers from two years to three. If a Deaconess is to give of her best to the Church she must be given sufficient training to enable her to develop her gifts.

## PART 3. THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN TO THE MINISTRY

### A. Women Ministers in Methodism.

'The New History of Methodism' says of John Wesley 'No other man of his century did so much to encourage the ministry of woman in the service of Christ and people', but it was with some reluctance that he accepted them as preachers. Convinced at length that 'God owns women in the conversion of sinners' he added 'And who am I that I should withstand God?' Mary Bosanquet, afterwards the wife of Fletcher, was the leader of a distinguished group of women who preached. Sarah Crosby, one of her assistants, travelled nearly a thousand miles in one year with Leeds as her centre. Miss Mallett held Wesley's authority from the Conference of 1787 'as a preacher in our connexion, so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrine and attends to our discipline'. There were others, but the Conference of 1803 pronounced preaching by women to be 'both unnecessary and generally undesired'. Nevertheless there were numerous women preachers until a further expression of disapproval by the Conference of 1835 led to a rapid decline in their numbers.

In the early days of Primitive Methodism, women itinerants were widely used, being appointed in the same way as the men. No fewer than nine were accepted in the year 1834, but as the supply of men increased fewer women were accepted. Experience showed that few continued to serve long, although the last of them, Elizabeth Bultitude, had travelled for thirty years before her retirement in 1862.

The only branch of the United Methodist Church that had Women Ministers was the Bible Christian Church. From their earliest days women were numbered among their itinerants and there were 27 in 1825. Few continued long in the ministry: the men were advised to marry them, and many did. The leakage, however, was mainly due to their not being able to stand the strain, and there are frequent records of women becoming supernumeraries for a year. For thirty years after 1861 none were accepted, but after 1890 a few were received and at the time of the 1907 Union there was still one in England and a number on the Mission Field.

### B. Consideration of the subject since Union.

When preparations were being made for Methodist Union a joint committee was appointed to discuss the Admission of Women to the Ministry. In its report to the first full Conference of the united Church in 1933 it said 'We cannot find that there is any function of the ordained Ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex'. The report went on to recommend the unification of the Deaconess Order and the Women Missionaries, and proposed that women be admitted to the Ministry on the same terms as men. Ten synods rejected the scheme: the Women Missionaries and the Deaconess order did not wish to be amalgamated, and the 1934 Conference rejected the whole scheme.

A new committee, appointed in 1937, recommended that women be accepted for the Ministry provided a department of the Church would accept responsibility for their employment. The 1938 Conference approved in principle and sent it back to the committee for further details to be worked out. After the 1939 Conference had reaffirmed the principle further progress was prevented by the war, but in 1945 Conference passed a resolution which began 'The Conference declares its readiness to receive, for Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, women who believe themselves called of God to this work.' Two-thirds of the synods voted favourably on the scheme, but ten rejected it outright. No further report was made till

1948 when the proposals were substantially unchanged, but Conference then reversed its earlier decisions and said 'The Conference declines to declare its willingness to receive for Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments women who believe themselves called of God to this work'.

No further action was taken until the appointment of this committee in 1959.

### **C. Biblical and Theological Considerations**

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament and in subsequent Church History has been set out in Part 1 of this report. Our examination of this has confirmed the finding of the committee that reported to Conference in 1933, saying 'we cannot find there is any function of the ordained Ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex'. The statement on 'Ordination in the Methodist Church', approved in 1960, contains nothing that would exclude a woman from ordination on the ground of her sex alone.

### **D. Practical Considerations**

#### *i. The Work of the Ministry.*

A minister is called upon to preach the Gospel, lead his people in worship and fellowship, visit, appeal to and win those who are outside the Church, prepare people for membership, succour the bewildered and bereaved, give counsel in marriage and family life, train leaders and preachers, administer the Sacraments, conduct business meetings, take his place in the community, and, if he is a family man, play his part in the home. He is expected to be a real leader of his people and a person to whom anyone may turn in times of distress, anxiety, difficulty or success.

In those called to the Ministry we therefore look for scholarship, leadership, strength (physical, emotional and spiritual), sympathetic understanding and administrative ability. We cannot expect one person to excel in all these qualities, but the Minister who is to command respect and be effective among his people must have a certain measure of each of them in his personality.

Our problem is to consider whether women can meet these tremendous demands on an equal footing with men. Their scholarship and intellectual ability is beyond question; women have proved themselves in the service of the Church to be conscientious, attentive to detail and responsive to the things of the spirit. Their sympathetic understanding and interest in people equip them for pastoral duties, but it is debatable to what extent men would bring their personal problems to a woman minister. It is sometimes held that a Deaconess in pastoral charge of a Society builds up a Church that is predominantly female, but the same is often true of Churches under the care of a man.

Women are liable to face problems in an emotional and personal way and thus be exposed to nervous strain in difficult situations. Furthermore, the unmarried woman would have voluntarily to face the loneliness of having no partner with whom her life could be shared. Whilst this is also true of men who remain bachelors, what is the exception among the men would be the norm among women ministers.

#### *ii. The Call and Training.*

If it were thought that the difficulties were decisive we should conclude that a woman who claimed to be called to the ministry was under a delusion, that God did



not intend women to be ministers, and that the traditional exclusion of women from the ministry was a true insight into the mind and purpose of God.

In support of this, it is sometimes argued that even in Churches where they are accepted, comparatively few women feel the call. It may be that a smaller proportion of women than men have the necessary qualifications for the work. But in every profession that has been traditionally male the number of women entrants is at first small, and remains a minority. In any case, the question of numbers cannot be regarded as crucial in matters of the Spirit.

It has been said that few women desire to be Ministers, but entry into the Ministry is by the call of God, confirmed by the Church. Where the Church declines to admit women it is not to be expected that women will think of the Ministry as God's way for them.

If women should be accepted for the Methodist Ministry it would be undesirable to separate their training from that of the men, for our Ministry is *one* Ministry. They should receive the same training as the men, in the same colleges.

### *iii. Stationing*

If women are admitted they should come in on terms of equality with men, stationed in Circuits and not accepted simply for specialist work under a Department. It is open to question how far Circuit Stewards would consider inviting a woman to fill an appointment hitherto held by a man. It is equally difficult to determine how many Deaconesses would remain in pastoral charge of societies in preference to a Minister, if one were available at the same cost to the Circuit. The general tendency is for a Deaconess to be replaced by a Minister when the financial situation permits.

There is little evidence of a desire on the part of the Methodist people for Women Ministers, and the Stationing Committee might have difficulty in finding a suitable appointment for a woman who had not received an invitation.

A Woman Minister must be free to hold any office – Superintendent of a Circuit, Chairman of a District, President of the Conference, but as these offices depend on the action of a Quarterly Meeting, Synod or Conference, such matters might well be left to find their own solution in due course.

### *iv. Marriage*

As in the Deaconess Order, no vow of celibacy could be demanded, and whilst many teachers, doctors and other professional women are able to continue their careers after marriage, a Woman Minister in Methodism would not normally be able to do so. She could not care for a Church and at the same time fulfil her family responsibilities, nor should any woman be encouraged to neglect her home to serve the Church. A further obstacle to service after marriage is our itinerant system.

If a married woman were not able to continue her ministry there would be two possible lines of action for the Church: either to accept her resignation, or to give her the status formerly known as 'without pastoral charge'. If the latter course were adopted she would no longer be stationed, but would remain a Minister, giving such service as she could, subject to ministerial discipline, and answerable to the Ministerial session of her Synod. There are circumstances easily envisaged, such as early widowhood, in which it might be possible for her to resume her ministry.

Whichever course is adopted a fundamental difficulty emerges, revealing a real difference between the Ordination of a man and of a woman, and one which cannot lightly be disregarded. When a man accepts a call to the Ministry, he is ordained for lifelong service; his vows are only to be set aside if he loses his faith or his sense of call. These are grievous possibilities that no ordinand envisages, and marriage will not hinder or halt his Ministry. With a woman it is different. If she should desire to marry, her new duties would normally take precedence over her former ones. The duties of the Ministry may take second place to the call to become a wife and mother.

If women are to be admitted to the Ministry this point must be faced and understood by the Church. If marriage is a 'natural' event in a woman's life should it annul her call and ordination any more than illness or infirmity does that of a man? If it is a 'divinely ordered' event to which God calls her, does the second call deny the first, or only limit its scope? Because of the functional differences between husband and wife the ordination of a woman must carry implications that do not hold in the ordination of a man.

*v. Ecumenical relationships.*

The bearing of the admission of women to the Ministry on our relations with other churches was considered by the committee. It was agreed that the ecumenical aspect of any proposed major change in Church Order was a factor that must be taken into account before a final decision is reached. This issue arises particularly when Churches are actually engaged in 'conversations' in order to end such divisions as impair their unity in Christ, and when the possibility of change was not envisaged by either Church when it was agreed to meet in conference.

## **Conclusion**

We are not able to bring a Conference recommendation on the Admission of Women to the Ministry that would command the support of all the members of the committee, and we have good reason to believe that the division among us accurately reflects the corresponding division among the Methodist people.

We have become increasingly aware of practical problems, such as those outlined in Section D of Part 3 of this report. These would have to be faced, and for some of them there is no facile solution. We do not consider that it would be in the best interests of the Church, or of those women who may feel a call to serve God as Deaconesses or Ministers, if Conference were asked to make an immediate decision about this. We recommend that there should first be an opportunity for the subject to be considered as fully as possible at Circuit and District level, and we commend this report to the Church for study and discussion.

*(Agenda 1961, pp. 13-28)*

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The Conference deleted the last 21 words of the penultimate paragraph and inserted a new sentence between the third and fourth lines of the last paragraph: 'Nevertheless, having stated the practical problems, it is recognised that the issue facing the Church is whether it is God who is calling women to the Methodist ministry. A consideration of practical difficulties is part of our task in seeking God's will, but what He wills is always possible.'

Major reports on diaconal ministry were adopted by the Conferences of 1993, 1995 and 1997 (see Volume 2, pp. 291-346).

### **(iii) Local Preachers**

#### **THE PLACE AND FUNCTIONS OF A LOCAL PREACHER (1964)**

1. When a Local Preacher is publicly recognised as such he openly avows his belief that he has been 'inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to preach the truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, and to make known the glorious Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ'. The proclamation of God's Word is his primary function, and requires wholehearted devotion to study and prayer for its effective fulfilment.

2. He is not concerned with preaching only, but also with the preparation and conduct of worship. There has been a revival of worship in many parts of the Church, and the Local Preacher has a large part to play in fostering and expressing this. He will need to give attention to the insights concerning worship which have been granted anew to the Church, as well as to fill the established modes of Methodist worship with the richest possible meaning.

3. A Local Preacher is committed to being available in all normal circumstances for appointments in his own Circuit, to attendance at the Local Preachers' Meeting and to acceptance of its discipline. If he fails at any of these points he impoverishes his preaching, and damages the fellowship of Local Preachers throughout the Connexion.

4. A Local Preacher needs to have his roots in the life of the local Church, and to receive there the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, even though it is necessary for him to be absent from time to time, and in some cases very frequently, from worship in the Society to which he belongs.

These matters all belong to the work of a Local Preacher as it is laid down in the Standing Orders of the Church. Two others also need his careful attention:

5. Many Local Preachers are Class Leaders too, and in that capacity have a definite pastoral task. But even when they are not, the opportunity may occur for them to help the Minister and the Class Leaders in caring for people, especially in small Societies where pastoral care is not close at hand. In any case, a pastoral attitude of mind is an essential mark of the preacher.

6. The task and influence of a Local Preacher extend far beyond the bounds of Sunday worship in Church. Because of his special knowledge and experience, his fellow-Christians look to him for a lead in offering a Christian witness at their place of work and in other spheres of social activity. He can commend the Gospel and the Church as effectively there as in the pulpit.

*(Agenda 1964, pp. 16f)*

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A further report on Local Preachers is to found in Volume 2, pp. 347-349).

## **(iv) Confidentiality**

### **CONFIDENTIALITY AND PASTORAL CARE (1980)**

#### **1. The Present Situation**

(a) Personal privacy is at risk in modern society. It is not only threatened by the increasing use of data-processing technologies, but also undermined by our own uncertainty about what constitutes private information. Some speak openly about areas of experience that others will not mention, and there is no accepted norm of what is private and confidential. In such circumstances it is all the more important that the Church should have, and be seen to have, clearly defined standards for the handling of confidential information.

(b) The relationship between ministers and people has changed in recent years. The easier use of Christian names is only one expression of an informality that would have seemed unfitting to an earlier generation. People are less likely than they were to acknowledge that the ordained ministry has a distinctive authority and unique character, and more likely to regard it as one among many 'helping professions'. Aware that ministers themselves sometimes fall victim to the contemporary breakdown in traditional frameworks (especially of marriage and the family), they are quicker to assume fallibility in their minister. At the same time, the problems brought to the minister are probably greater than ever in variety and complexity, and may pose in acute form questions of confidentiality.

(c) The effect of such changes on the understanding of the pastoral office is far from certain. It may be argued that the greater formality of the past, constantly reminding people of the minister's specific and distinctive pastoral role, made confusion unlikely: and that people nowadays, knowing their minister in all manner of social relationships and in a more intimately personal way, less easily distinguish and separate the pastoral office from ordinary friendship. They may then be less certain than their fathers were that confidences entrusted to a minister will be safely kept. Opinions of the validity of this argument will differ: but the very uncertainty is sufficient to persuade us of the need of a renewed understanding of the pastoral office and the bond of confidentiality.

(d) The questions raised do not concern the ordained ministry alone. Lay people now have the role of pastoral visitors. Class Leaders have always had a pastoral responsibility towards their class members. Sunday school teachers and Youth leaders are often entrusted with confidences because of their relationship with the young people whom they teach and lead. The greater sense of partnership with the ordained minister has brought a greater awareness of the pastoral role of the whole church, so we must ask similar questions about lay people keeping confidences.

(e) Many church groups find that their sense of fellowship becomes so strong that people share things that they would not want spoken of outside the group. The term 'in band' was historically used of such sharing. Again similar questions about confidentiality are raised.

(f) Throughout this report the word ‘confidant’ is used of one who is trusted with confidences, whether ordained or lay, whether alone or in a group.

## **2. Confidentiality in Pastoral Work**

The sharing of confidences within bonds of trust and friendship is an everyday occurrence. Terms are rarely laid down strictly; for people are guided by good sense and mutual understanding. The same good sense is used, and for the most part used well, by those who minister within the Church. People act with care, and difficulties of confidentiality arise only rarely. Nevertheless, it is desirable that all concerned should understand and accept appropriate standards, and for this reason we offer some suitable guidelines below.

(a) The confidences that a minister, deaconess, or lay person is likely to receive in pastoral conversation will vary greatly. Included among them will be disclosures about: (i) difficulties in relationships at home, at work and in the Church; (ii) personal problems not necessarily involving others; (iii) personal decisions needing to be made about matters ranging from private affairs to community activity; and (iv) problems of health.

(b) Ministers and others can help in such matters only if they are regarded as people to whom confidences may be safely entrusted. Even ministers are not invariably so regarded; partly, we fear, because some have abused the trust placed in them. One minister with a reputation for gossip undermines confidence in others. A preacher who used pastoral confidences for illustration makes hearers fear that they too may appear in a future sermon. It needs to be firmly and widely understood that confidences given in the normal course of pastoral conversation will be unfailingly kept.

(c) No confidant should depart from this basic rule without the explicit permission of the one making the disclosure who at the same time must specify with whom and for what purpose the confidence may be shared. Such permission should be sought and used by the confidant only to gain help for the other party, and with the clear understanding that anyone whom the confidant is authorised to consult is equally pledged to maintain confidentiality. This is normal professional practice in medicine, law, and social work; it should not be difficult for it to be accepted among us, and for people to recognise the discretion that properly belongs to the pastoral office.

(d) On rare occasions, a confidant may believe that what he has learned in pastoral conversation seriously infringes the rights or endangers the welfare, of someone else. Such a situation may arise, for example, when someone discloses tendencies to paedophilia, child-battering, or homicide. The confidant is then faced with a difficult moral problem, demanding careful consideration and a balanced judgement. We are unable to assert that the pledge of confidentiality remains absolute in such difficult circumstances. However, a confidant who feels obliged in conscience to divulge confidential information should first discuss the matter with the one who has divulged it, endeavouring to reach agreement on the course of action to be followed. Only in the most extreme cases should a breach of confidentiality be contemplated. Even then the one who has divulged the information should be informed, adequate reasons should be given, and his or her permission should be sought before any breach of confidentiality is contemplated. We consider that the Church should give close attention to training people to cope with such situations.

(e) The Conference Report, 'Pastoral Care of the Ministry' (1977), refers to the help a minister may receive in submitting his or her work to some form of supervision. We think it necessary to state that this excellent practice ought not to involve the discussion, however oblique, of pastoral confidences, except with the express permission of the one who made them. Even a discussion in terms of a general moral problem is undesirable. Similarly, although we recognise that the support of a spouse is invaluable to a minister, we must say emphatically that this support does not extend to the sharing of confidential information without permission.

(f) A particularly solemn obligation attaches to the situation in which a person comes to a minister not for pastoral consultation but desiring to make his confession to God in the minister's presence, in order that the minister may help him receive God's forgiveness and find release from the burden of sin. In such a situation the confidentiality required is absolute and unconditional. Nothing that the minister hears from the penitent may be communicated to any other person whatsoever. Only if minister and penitent both understand this to be so is such a ministry of forgiveness possible. It is recognised that the special role described here and the role of ordinary pastoral counselling cannot be easily distinguished. If there is doubt the minister must always err on the side of strictness with respect to confidentiality. It is not clear what privilege the law would accord to the minister in the circumstances described in this paragraph. The tradition of absolute and unconditional confidentiality has prevailed in the Church in spite of this uncertainty.

(g) In some situations a person seeking forgiveness may make his confession in the presence of a lay person. In such circumstances the considerations outlined in the previous paragraphs apply equally to the lay person.

(h) When confidential information is shared within a group, whether formal or informal, no reference to the information or use of it must be made outside the group.

### **3. Confidentiality within the Ministry**

(a) A minister has the same right as anyone else to have confidences respected. The exceptionally close fellowship of the Methodist ministry does not entitle ministers to know all about one another's business or to regard one another's private affairs as common property. Gossip about colleagues within the ministry should be carefully avoided. Indeed, if the 'circulatory pattern' of pastoral care suggested by 'Pastoral Care of the Ministry' is to be effective, strict confidentiality is vital. A minister must know that his or her chosen pastoral counsellor is wholly reliable and can be trusted never to betray a confidence. This quality of reliability and trust must so develop that it brings a positive encouragement to ministers and others who receive confidences to seek pastoral guidance or spiritual direction so that they do not attempt to carry burdens wholly on their own.

(b) It is particularly important that the position of the Chairman of the District should be clearly understood, both by ministers and by Chairmen themselves. The latter are required to combine in their office both an administrative and disciplinary role and a pastoral role, and therefore need to practise the art of moral judgement with particular care and sensitivity. For example, a Chairman whose advice is sought about Stationing may believe a minister to be unsuitable for a particular appointment, and may base his belief on information disclosed to him by that minister. To withhold the information may mean that an undesirable appointment is made: to divulge it would be a breach of pastoral confidence. It is clear to us that pastoral responsibility should prevail, and that confidential information should not be disclosed. The Chairman

should share his problem with the minister concerned, seeking a mutually acceptable solution; but only if the minister permits should he disclose the information originally given him in confidence. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Superintendent Ministers.

#### **4. Training and Development**

(a) It is clearly of the utmost importance that instructions in these matters should be given to students training for the ministry in our colleges. Specific exposition should be included in all courses of pastoral theology, to ensure that students, before they go into circuits, understand the principles involved. We expect that tutors will give careful attention to such exposition. Youth leaders, leaders of Women's Meetings, pastoral visitors and class leaders – indeed all persons who have a leadership role in the Church need specific exposition in their training.

(b) Important as it is to understand the principles involved in handling confidential information, it is even more important that ministers, deaconesses, and lay leaders cultivate the mature discretion which makes them people who inspire confidence in others, who know and have come to terms with the spiritual dangers of carrying confidences, and who avoid making secret in an artificial way things that ought to be open. The development of such qualities depends not only upon training, but also upon the climate of mutual trust and understanding in which the Church lives, and to which every member contributes. The quality of pastoral care that we provide will be ultimately determined by the whole community. A readiness to trust and to be trusted is part of every Christian's service.

#### **5. Conclusion**

We ask the ministers of the Methodist Church to accept and apply the standards outlined in this report; and those who exercise a pastoral ministry as deaconess, steward, class leader, or member to adopt the same standards in their pastoral conversations. We urge the Methodist people as a whole, while retaining the benefits of informal relationships with their ministers, to respect and guard the pastoral office on which the quality of our care for people so much depends.

*(Minutes 1980, pp. 35-7)*

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## **Part VI Church Unity**

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## (i) Union Schemes

### REPLY TO THE LAMBETH 'OUTLINE OF A REUNION SCHEME' (1939)

*The Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England* is a document which was drafted in this form by the Committee of the Joint Conference of Anglicans and Free Churchmen meeting at Lambeth, and was published in February 1938. The Joint Conference 'generally commended' it to the careful consideration of the Churches.

The *Outline* thus commended has received the careful consideration of the Committee on Faith and Order, which has had the advantage of consultation with the Methodist members of the Joint Conference, and now recommends the Methodist Conference to adopt the following report:

(1) The Methodist Conference has already set forth its belief, in *The Nature of the Christian Church, according to the Teaching of the Methodists*, that in the New Testament Church there was an inward unity of the Spirit which was outwardly expressed in common worship, a common message, the acceptance both of a common mission, and of all those varied ministries for the discharge of that mission with which God endowed His Church on earth. The Conference has deplored as disastrous the breaches of fellowship which have destroyed the outward unity of the Church, and has declared that the denominations or 'Churches' of today form but a partial and imperfect embodiment of the New Testament ideal. 'They are already one in Christ Jesus. . . . But it is their duty to make common cause in the search for the perfect expression of that unity and holiness which in Christ are already theirs.'

The Conference, therefore, cannot do other than receive with gratitude and respect this *Outline of a Reunion Scheme*, which seeks an end to which the Conference is already pledged.

(2) The Methodist Conference considers that the *Outline* should be studied in the light of its opening section, 'the Purpose of the Scheme,' and earnestly commends these paragraphs to the consideration of the Methodist people.

'This scheme is drafted in the belief that it is the will of God that in this world the spiritual unity of His Church should be manifested in a visible society, holding the one faith, having its recognised ministry, using God-given means of grace and inspiring all its members to the world-wide service of the Kingdom of God.'

'It rests upon the conviction that the unity of the Church is involved in the Christian Doctrine of God, and is demanded for the manifestation and achievement of his purpose. As there is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so there must be one Body, one Fellowship of the people of God on earth, seen of all men; for it is the purpose of God not only to reconcile all men through Christ to Himself, but also to unite them to one another in the Body of Christ.'

‘The divisions among Christian people everywhere disable them from serving God according to the will of Christ and obstruct His purpose to win and rule over men.’

‘This disunion debars us from giving our torn and distracted world effective witness to the truth that the Gospel of Christ is the basis of enduring fellowship among men and nations. Similarly it confuses and weakens the presentation and imperils the acceptance of our Christian message, especially in the mission field. The continuance of this disunion involves a waste which is sinful, inasmuch as it hinders the work of God.’

These words have been powerfully reinforced by the World Missionary Conference recently held at Madras. The representatives of the younger Churches declared that:

‘Visible and organic unity must be our goal. This, however, will require an honest study of those things in which the Churches have differences, a widespread teaching of the common church membership in things that made for union, and venturesome sacrifice on the part of all.’<sup>1</sup>

(3) The Methodist Conference gratefully acknowledges the extraordinary skill and care, as well as the deep-seated charity and the passionate desire for the visible unity of the Church of God, which are evident in the *Outline of a Reunion Scheme*. It recognises that in this document a necessary distinction is drawn between:

- (a) Any scheme for the *interim* period, which would extend from the time when the Churches decide to unite to the final achievement of the united Church, and
- (b) This particular Scheme, which suggests a constitution for a completely united Church.

With regard to (a), the *interim* period, the *Outline* says little.

‘It is fully recognised’ that arrangements for this period ‘are of primary importance, but they belong to the stage of actual negotiation which has not yet been reached.’

But the Conference notes that:

‘All persons who . . . have been admitted as communicants by any of the services of admission which were in use in any of the uniting Churches before union shall be recognised as communicants throughout the united Church of England.’

The Conference further observes that while it is proposed that:

‘some presbyters from each of the non-episcopal Churches shall be chosen for consecration as bishops . . . all the other ministers of the uniting Churches who have been ordained as ministers of the Word and of the Sacraments would be acknowledged as such, and would have the status of presbyters in the united Church, provided that they assent to the basis of union and accept the constitution of the Church.’

The Conference notes that no re-ordination would be required, and recognises the care taken to secure that there should be no disowning of past ministries of Word and

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Mission of the Church*, Tamparam, 1938, p. 155.

Sacrament received otherwise than by episcopal ordination. The Conference welcomes the emphatic statement (p.15) that such ministries, together with those received by episcopal ordination, have been used and blessed by the Spirit of God.

With regard to (b), the Scheme for a completely united Church, the Conference notices three leading principles: (1) The *Outline* is a genuine attempt to show how it may be possible to combine in one body those who differ in their forms of worship without any demand that any form of worship which has been in use in any of the uniting Churches shall be forbidden in the united Church. (2) Another guiding principle is that all the constituent groups and members of the united Church shall preserve such communion and fellowship with other Churches as they have enjoyed before the act of Union. (3) The *Outline* is an attempt to demonstrate how the characteristic features of Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational Church orders may be combined in one organisation.

These principles make it a valuable basis of discussion for those who are endeavouring to envisage a closer union of the separated Churches of England.

(4) The Methodist Conference recognises that criticism of details would be inappropriate at this stage. But two general comments may be made.

(a) The Scheme, skilful as it is, contemplates a Church which in its organisation would be too completely unified. The constitution lays undue stress on uniformity of government. While allowing for variety in modes of worship and providing adequate safeguards against the alteration of forms of worship to which a congregation is accustomed, it does not sufficiently allow for the free exercise of those differing forms of government and organisation which have been granted to the various Churches in their separated existence. The denominational organisations in their long history have proved their effectiveness within the one Church of God. The Methodist Church has built up a certain order and discipline in its attempt to discharge its mission of evangelism and of 'spreading Scriptural holiness' throughout the world. Methodists are still profoundly conscious of an unexhausted mission; and it is difficult at present for them to contemplate a step that is apparently postulated by this scheme, the disappearance of the Methodist Conference, with all the disciplined and organised life which has centred in that body. Thus, for example, in the Methodist system the selection, training, ordination, and discipline of ministers are conspicuously acts of the whole Church through its controlling assembly, the Conference. In the *Outline* these functions are transferred to the Diocesan Synod.

It may not prove impossible to find some other expression of that ideal of 'unity with variety' which avowedly inspires this *Outline*. Perhaps each of the uniting communions might at first be recognised as semi-autonomous within the united Church, each with its own discipline and forms of government, but each submitting to and honouring the authority of the whole body (expressed in some way yet to be determined), as controlling the aims and developing life of every part.

(b) *The Outline of a Reunion Scheme* recommends the acceptance of episcopal ordination as the way by which union may be secured.

'in view of the fact that the Episcopate was accepted from early times and for many centuries, and by the greater part of Christendom is still accepted, as the means whereby the authority of the whole Church is given.'

At the same time it is made clear in the *Outline* that the ultimate authority in the united Church would be conciliar, and that the Episcopate would be a constitutional office.

‘The ultimate authority of the united Church resides in the harmony of bishops, presbyters, and laity.’ ‘Presbyters should be associated with the bishop in the ceremony of ordination and the laity should have a share in the process by which a candidate is approved for ordination.’

Moreover, the Scheme expressly states that such acceptance:

‘would not imply the disowning of past ministries of Word and Sacrament otherwise received, which have together with those received by episcopal ordination, been used and blessed by the Spirit of God.’

But it is at this point that difficulties arise, which, at least in part, affect doctrine as well as order. In certain parts of the world, notably in the United States of America, Methodism has made use of episcopacy as a valuable form of government. But the Methodist Church does not claim that either episcopacy or any form of organisation even in the Apostolic Church should be determinative for the Church for all time. It would not be able to accept Episcopacy and Episcopal ordination if such acceptance involved the admission that either of these is indispensable to the Church. Such a theory seems to the Conference to be without warrant in the New Testament, where order, important as it is, is never equated with faith, and to be contradicted by manifest facts in the history of the last four hundred years. In questions of order, as in the interpretation of doctrine, the united Church of the future should be free to trust in the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Again, the Methodist Church is unable to accept the theory of Apostolic succession, interpreted as the succession of bishops in the principal sees of Christendom handing down and preserving the Apostles’ doctrine, and regarded, as in certain Churches it is regarded, as constituting the true and only guarantee of sacramental grace and right doctrine. The Conference notes that the *Outline* contains the explicit declaration (p. 15) that:

‘the acceptance of Episcopal ordination for the future . . . neither affirms nor excludes the view that Apostolic Succession determines the validity of the Ministry and Sacraments.’

The doctrine of Apostolic Succession, while permissible for individuals, would not be a dogma of the united Church. The Conference interprets this provision for the mutual tolerance of conflicting views in the light of the further provision, already noted above as a guiding principle of the *Outline*, that

‘the united Church of England desires in no way to impair the fellowship and communion which the constituent bodies from which it has been formed have previously enjoyed in England and throughout the world.’

Since the doctrine of Apostolic Succession would not be a dogma of the united Church, it should not in practice impair the fellowship and communion which the Free Churches already enjoy with other Churches in England and throughout the world.

(5) In view of the principles governing the *Outline*, the Methodist Conference would urge once again that nothing would do so much to manifest and to deepen the sense of unity in the Spirit, in the period before union can be consummated, and actually to hasten the consummation of union, as fellowship between the members of

the several Churches at the Table of their Lord. The Conference regards the failure to overcome our divisions in this way as a grave hindrance in our quest for closer union, and a scandal with deplorable results in the life and witness of the whole Church of God.

(6) The Methodist Conference, at this early stage of discussion, asks that, in any subsequent proposals, stronger emphasis shall be laid on the primary task of the Church, that of the evangelisation of the world, and also on the ministry of the laity, both men and women, in fulfilling that task. The Conference also urges that, in view of the unanimity shown both at the Lausanne World Conference in the statement on the *Church's Message to the World – the Gospel*, and at the Edinburgh World Conference, in the *Affirmation of Union in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ*, greater prominence should be given in any further discussions to the unity already given by God in the Gospel by which the Church lives.

(7) The Methodist Conference remits this Report to the Chairman of the Joint Conference, His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, to its Conveners, His Grace the Archbishop of York, and the Reverend Dr. A. E. Garvie, and also to the Federal Council of the Free Churches of England, in the hope that the Conversations will continue, and with the earnest prayer that God will grant to His Church that peace and unity which are agreeable to His will.

*(Minutes 1939, pp. 428-32)*

## LOCAL SCHEMES OF UNION (1966)

The Committee was asked to scrutinize a scheme, now carried into effect, for the union of a Baptist, a Congregational and a Methodist Church in Cotham, Bristol. Schemes of union between Churches of different denominations are so welcome, and so important in their implications for the future, that the Committee asks for permission to look at each of them, as it is formulated, from the point of view of Faith and Order, and to give advice when this is asked for or required.

*(Agenda 1966, p. 43)*

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This permission was granted and the Faith and Order Committee has carried out the task of scrutinizing constitutions for Local Ecumenical Projects (now Partnerships) ever since.



## **FULL COMMUNION WITH OTHER CHURCHES (1968)**

1. The idea of communion with other Churches is well established in our usage. S.O. 55 refers to the power of Conference to transfer ministers to other Conferences and to 'other Churches with which we are in communion'. At the outset of negotiations between the Anglicans and ourselves the Conference required as a preliminary condition that 'the Methodist Church would be free to preserve the relations of intercommunion and fellowship with other non-episcopal Churches which it now enjoys.'

We assume that we are in complete communion with all those Churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, and who are willing to be in communion with us, and it is our custom to welcome to the Lord's Table communicant members of other Churches. But we have so far never closely defined the meaning of 'full communion', nor is there any list of Churches with which we have formally established relations of full communion. We have the fullest possible reciprocal relations with all other Methodist Churches; and our membership of the Free Church Federal Council implies relations of intercommunion with other members of that Council.

2. In the present state of relations between the Churches, the subject of intercommunion naturally attracts great attention, especially when relations between episcopal and non-episcopal Churches are envisaged. There is discussion about the connotation of the various terms, such as intercommunion, open communion, full communion etc., and various denominational and ecumenical consultations have taken place. It is understood that the report of the Archbishops' Commission on Intercommunion is shortly to be published.

3. The Faith and Order Committee recommends the Conference to authorize it to prepare and present in due course a full statement of the meaning we attach to the nature and extent of communion between Churches, in the total context of Church relations and in the light of the pronouncements of other Churches; and meanwhile to reaffirm our intention to maintain all the present relations of intercommunion which we enjoy.

4. In view of the above statement, the definition of relationship with any particular Church must be delayed until we have clarified the meaning which we attach to the concept of communion between Churches.

*(Agenda 1968, pp. 61f)*

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An amended version of what was Standing Order 55 in 1968 is to be found in Standing Order 725 in 2000.

## FULL COMMUNION (1970)

- (i) Our usage of the term 'Full Communion' is deliberately comprehensive. In general we mean by it the fullest possible recognition of and co-operation with other Churches, including mutual recognition of the validity of orders and willingness to receive and transfer members from and to other churches. We draw attention to the definitions used in the Report *Intercommunion Today* and suggest that these definitions should be borne in mind, especially when Anglican attitudes are being considered.
- (ii) Each enquiry about our relationship with another Church is dealt with in the light of all the circumstances. Where ministerial status within Methodism is desired without further ordination, we require assurance that the church to which the minister belongs adheres to the apostolic faith, and that he has been ordained by the laying on of hands with prayer.
- (iii) We think we can best contribute to ecumenical understanding on this subject by emphasising that all communicant members of Christian Churches are welcome at our eucharist. We desire to join in the eucharist of any Christian body that is willing to receive us, as occasion permits. We do not make exclusive claims for our system of government or order, and do not wish to persuade others to conform with us in these matters. Above all we want to avoid bigotry, which according to John Wesley is 'too strong an attachment to, or fondness for, our own party, opinion, church or religion'. We seek with all Christians the relationship expressed by Wesley in his sermon on *The Catholic Spirit* 'Whatsoever love, whatsoever offices of love, whatsoever spiritual or temporal assistance I claim from him whose heart is right, as my heart is with his, the same I am ready, by the grace of God, according to my measure, to give him. I have not made this claim on behalf of myself only, but of all those whose heart is right towards God and man, that we may all love one another as Christ has loved us'.

(*Agenda 1970, pp. 258f*)

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The Conference in adopting this report replaced the term 'eucharist' with 'service of Holy Communion'.

## **(ii) Episcopacy**

### **METHODISM AND EPISCOPACY (1978)**

The purpose of this section of the report is to set out some of the implications of a possible future decision of the Conference to accept some form of episcopacy in British Methodism. The paper is not concerned with the arguments for or against such decision.

It is taken for granted that the Conference would never make the decision unless two conditions were fulfilled:

- (i) that the action would clearly advance ecumenical relations generally and particularly those in which Methodism was directly involved.
- (ii) that within the limits implied in (i) Methodism would be free to develop a form of episcopacy that was consistent with her doctrines and usage.

#### **Questions to be discussed**

1. Does Methodism wish to incorporate bishops into its own structure (Method A) and thus be able to conduct its own episcopal ordinations, or does it wish other covenanting churches to take part in future ordinations, in which case there need be no Methodist bishops (Method B)? The second alternative would not suffice unless the covenanting churches included an episcopal church.
2. Does Methodism regard episcopacy as a gift which other churches can confer on her and which makes up some lack in Methodist church life, or does Methodism regard episcopacy as a feature of Methodism already which simply needs to be overtly expressed and ordered in a way that episcopal churches recognize?
3. Does Methodism wish to distinguish between various features of episcopacy giving some more weight than others? The following call for consideration:
  - (i) the bishop may exist to secure the ministry of the church by conducting ordinations that have a wide, if not universal, acceptance.
  - (ii) the bishop may be regarded as a figure to whom all in a locality owe spiritual allegiance so that he is a sign and focus of unity.
  - (iii) the bishop may be a general pastor, especially a pastor of the ordained ministry.
  - (iv) the bishop may be a symbol of authority to secure the preaching and teaching of the church.
  - (v) the bishop may be largely an administrator.
4. How can the notion of personal episcopacy be made consistent with the Methodist notion of general oversight by Conference? Will the responsibilities of Conference need to be modified?

5. Can episcopacy be fitted into the present Methodist structure by making existing functionaries into bishops, or will a new structure be necessary?
6. How many bishops should Methodism have at any one time and how large should be the area of jurisdiction? There appear to be at least five possibilities:
  - (i) a single bishop or group of bishops for the whole of Methodism.
  - (ii) a bishop for each present Methodist district (32).
  - (iii) a bishop for each Roman (19) or Anglican diocese (43).
  - (iv) a bishop for groups of circuits forming a natural sub-district.
  - (v) a bishop for each circuit.
7. How would the adoption of episcopacy affect the constitutional position of the Presidency?
8. Supposing it satisfied the first condition in the preamble, would the practice of appointing bishops for limited terms suit Methodism better than a permanent episcopate?
9. Supposing temporary bishops proved unacceptable, would the existence of permanent bishops conflict with the itinerancy and with annual stationing?

*(Agenda 1978, pp. 55f)*

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In Questions to be discussed, 1, the phrases 'Method A' and 'Method B' refer to the proposals of the Churches' Unity Commission for introducing episcopacy into non-episcopal churches.

## **EPISCOPACY IN THE METHODIST CHURCH (1981)**

*The following three texts need to be taken together. The first is an account from the President's Council of its actions; the second is the final draft of the working party's report; the third contains the comments of the Faith and Order Committee upon that report. In the event the Conference was not asked to adopt either the report or the comments. Rather it commended the report for study in the Church without expressing and judgement on its conclusions, and 'took note of' the comments from the Faith and Order Committee.*

### **(i) FROM THE PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL**

The Conference of 1980 directed the working party on Episcopacy in the Methodist Church to present its final report to the Conference of 1981, and in the meantime to present the draft as a study document with the approval of the President's Council as early as possible in the next Connexional year.

However, the President's Council was informed that the Faith and Order Committee had examined the Episcopacy Report and made some extremely critical comments upon it. The Council felt that it could not express its own judgement on the Episcopacy Report until the final verdict of the Faith and Order Committee upon it was known, and also that it would only cause confusion to publish the Report together with the not very well organised critical comments upon it.

As its February meeting, the Council had before it the various judgements on the Episcopacy Report adopted by the Faith and Order Committee at its residential meeting at the turn of the year. The Council passed the following resolution:

'Having noted the second resolution of the Faith and Order Committee, the President's Council records its own view that no scheme is likely to gain acceptance in Methodism which does not make use of the already developed and significant role of the Chairmen'. (The resolution referred to reads: 'The Committee expressed its judgement that a further development of the present superintendency represented the most acceptable method of receiving the historic episcopate into the life of Methodism'.)

The Council believes that the Episcopacy Report would be a valuable resource document in the further discussion that would follow the provisional acceptance by the Conference of the Proposals relating to Covenanting.

*(Agenda 1981, p. 10)*

### **(ii) FROM THE WORKING PARTY**

The Conference believes that the coming great church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order. One step towards this would be for the Methodist Church to include an episcopal form of ministry in its life. This would be a sign of faith in the future and a way of helping churches with and without bishops in the search for unity. If the responses of other churches to the Ten Propositions would

cause delay in the progress towards unity, the Conference directs the President's Council to consider, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, whether the Methodist Church should not take this step. (Bradford Conference, 1978).

The working party produced its report at the special request of the President's Council within nine months of its first meeting, despite a change in its convener. That draft of the report is substantially the same as the final report. It was presented to the Council in November 1979 and made available to the Faith and Order Committee at the same time. Since then the Covenanting Proposals have been published (June 1980) and the General Synod of the Church of England has made a positive response. This report will be of value to the Methodist Church as it responds to the Covenanting Proposals.

#### **AN AGREED SUMMARY**

At the Bradford Conference in 1978 it seemed that the response of the Church of England to the Ten Propositions might cause delay in the progress towards unity. In that context the resolution on the coming great church was an endeavour to find another way forward. It raised the possibility that the Methodist Church should receive an episcopal form of ministry. Taking such a step was seen in the light of the belief that the church in the future will be congregational, presbyteral and episcopal in its life and order. It was held that taking such a step would be a sign of faith in the future and a way of helping churches with and without bishops in the search for unity.

The majority of the Working Party thinks that the Methodist Church should take such a step, a minority (in two dissentient statements) disagrees. The minority draws attention to the advantages of the covenanting scheme of the Churches' Council for Covenanting (which is specifically endorsed as the right step to take in one of the dissentient statements). The majority regards its proposals as offering a way forward should a negative response to the covenanting scheme mean a delay in the progress towards unity. It believes that such an initiative would break the logjam in the movement towards unity, enrich the life and ministry of the Methodist Church, and enable it to make a contribution to the church of the future by developing its own form of bishop.

In its first main section the report examines what is meant by the historic episcopate (in other words, an episcopate that is in a succession of ordination from the earliest times) and gives reason for the church to receive it. It also presents some ways in which the historic episcopate is understood, while indicating that the Methodist Church would not have to have an identical understanding of it.

A second main section considers the relationship between the historic episcopate and Methodist teaching and practice. It argues that there is nothing contrary to scripture or Methodist practice in receiving the historic episcopate. It points out that the episcopate (oversight) already exercised in the Methodist Church is corporate as well as individual, lay as well as ministerial, and proposes that such marks should characterise the episcopate of a Methodist Church with bishops. The ministry of a Methodist bishop is seen as including familiar elements in the Christian tradition (a pastor and preacher, a focus of unity and continuity, a guardian of doctrine, an ordainer) and as having a characteristically Methodist expression (for example, partnership in ministry and leadership in mission). It is argued that the receiving of bishops would help the growth towards mission and unity, not least in those areas where the churches are already working closely together.

The third section present the proposals. Three main suggestions are made for those to become bishop: the President, the Chairmen, the Superintendents. The report sees the office of the President as pre-eminently episcopal, but gives reasons for not making the President alone a bishop. It holds that the usual expression of episcopacy should be elsewhere. For this the Working Party prefers the development of the office of Superintendent (with larger circuits), judging that the superintendency is the most distinctively Methodist expression of oversight. It therefore recommends that Superintendents of enlarged circuits should be those made bishops. (Those signing the dissentient statements also believe that, if the Methodist Church were to have bishops, it should be by developing the office of the Superintendent.) However, the report affirms that a satisfactory alternative could be found in the office of the Chairman (either as they are at present with their present districts or in smaller districts with the Chairman in pastoral charge of a congregation). Some of the important implications of these proposals are noted and suggestions are made about the churches which might share their episcopal ministry with the Methodist Church.

After a final section which considers three possible difficulties and before the appendix and the two dissentient statements, the report concludes by saying that there are many gifts which God is encouraging Methodists to receive from others at this time and that among them is the historic episcopate.

#### **A. Introduction**

#### **B. Definition**

1. What is meant by bishops or an episcopal form of ministry?
2. Why the historic episcopate?
3. How do other Christians understand the historic episcopate?
4. Must we have the same understanding of the historic episcopate?

#### **C. Relationship with Methodist Practice**

1. Is receiving the historic episcopate in keeping with scripture and our Methodist practice?
2. Does receiving the historic episcopate mean we are ceasing to be Methodist and becoming Anglican or Roman Catholic in our church's life?
3. Does not the Methodist Church already have episcopacy?
4. What would a bishop be like in the Methodist Connexion?
5. Is not the existence of parallel episcopates a denial of the assertion that a bishop is the focus of unity?
6. Is not this another case of unity from the top?

#### **D. The Proposals**

1. Factors to be considered.
2. The President
3. The Superintendents.
4. The Chairman
5. Common Elements
6. Who should become bishops?
7. Where would the historical episcopate come from?

#### **E. Possible Difficulties**

1. Is there not a risk of division in Methodism if this step is taken?

2. Will this not give us two classes of minister, those episcopally and those not episcopally ordained?
3. Will this proposal not create difficulties for the Free Churches and for many evangelical Christians?

#### **F. Conclusion**

#### **G. Additional Notes**

1. Chairman
2. Confirmation
3. Diocese
4. President
5. Superintendents
6. Statements on Episcopacy
7. The Swindon Proposals
8. United Methodist Church

#### **H. Dissident Statements**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Bradford Conference in June 1978 was held at a moment when it seemed the Church of England's response to the Ten Propositions might cause delay in the progress towards unity. In that context the resolution on the coming great church was an endeavour to find another way forward.

It speaks of the church of the future as being more diverse in its life and order than the divided churches are at present, describing that church as congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal. That affirms three emphases that have often been separate in churches in the past. They have tended to stress or overstress the role and authority of the bishops, or of the ministry, or of the congregation. In recent years, however, people have become more and more convinced that each of these can be a valuable element in the life of the church and the ordering of its ministry. This has been expressed in many of the schemes of church union in different parts of the world.

Congregationalists offer an example of how the emphasis and practice of a church can develop. Historically Congregationalists have stressed the role (and independence) of the congregation, but in their union in England with the Presbyterian Church they have given a fuller place in their life to the ministry. In other words their emphasis has become presbyteral as well as congregational. In South India, moreover, the Congregationalists (already part of a united church) entered into a union which also included bishops. Thus in South India we see a church that has sought to give a place to congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal elements in its life and order. This is an instance of how churches – as they come together – receive from and contribute to each other. Moreover they express their unity in many ways, including the form of their ministry.

The resolution at the Bradford Conference asks the Methodist Church to consider taking a step towards this, by including an episcopal form of ministry in its life. It suggests this not as a condition imposed on the church by other churches or other Christians, but as a sign that we are confident – despite all the setbacks to unity – that the church will be one. What is new about the Bradford resolution is its proposal that



one church should consider taking a step, even if no other church is willing to take a comparable step at the same time. If we acted on this resolution, we should be asking certain churches to share with us what they treasure in the historic episcopate. (We believe that we in our turn could offer a new model of what a bishop can be.) At the same time, however, we should want to say to all churches that receiving the historic episcopate would not diminish our esteem for them, our relations with them, or our desire to be one with them. Rather, indeed, does it express the way we believe God is leading us at this moment in the coming together of all Christian people. This report examines what would be involved in taking such a step and presents certain recommendations.

## **B. DEFINITION**

### **1. What is meant by bishops or the phrase ‘an episcopal form of ministry’?**

A bishop (episcopos) is one who exercises oversight (episcopate). There are at least two kinds of bishops: those in and those not in succession of office and ordination from the early church.

The bishops of the United Methodist Church (the largest part of the worldwide Methodist Church), the Reformed bishops in Hungary, and the Lutheran bishops in Germany, all have the name bishop and exercise many or all of the functions traditionally exercised by bishops. They do not however stand in a succession of episcopal office and ordination from early times. By contrast the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as well as the Anglican Churches and some other Lutheran Churches (Sweden and Finland) have bishops in such a succession. This second kind of episcopal ministry – differently understood in the different churches – is often described as the historic episcopate. It is that to which we refer in this report and which it is proposed the Methodist Church should receive.

### **2. Why the historic episcopate?**

There are many reasons given for having bishops who are in the historic episcopate. First, there is the simple fact that the majority of our fellow Christians already have them. Moreover they regard the historic episcopate as a gift which they should bring to the united church of Christ. They also believe that it would enrich the life of other churches were they to receive it.

While we ask, ‘Why bishops?’, the majority of our fellow Christians ask, ‘Why not bishops?’ In a discussion about bishops they would want to know what compelling reason there is for not having bishops. To them we would be bound to say that we do not regard it as a matter of principle that Christ’s church should not have bishops. What would raise for us a matter of principle would be the insistence that we accept a statement or act which affirmed that our church or ministry is not of Christ because they lack the historic episcopate. This we could not accept. It is however not a matter of principle with us that other Christians or churches should give up what they have had and valued from the earliest times, unless it is in fundamental conflict with Christian faith and practice.

Second, wherever unions have taken place between churches with the historic episcopate and those without it, the union has kept the historic episcopate as part of its total ministry.

Third, the British Methodist Church has approved schemes of union for its daughter churches to enter into a union with other churches, where this has been one of the elements.

Fourth, the Conference accepted the inclusion of the historic episcopate as one of the elements in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme.

Fifth, we think that the historic episcopate can make a valuable contribution to the life and mission of the church of the future.

### **3. How do other Christians understand the historic episcopate?**

There are various ways in which they understand it. It may be simplest to take the way it is understood in the Church of England as that church expressed it in its conversations with the Methodist Church. (It is dealt with on pages 16 to 27 of *Conversations between The Church of England and The Methodist Church: An Interim Statement*, SPCK and Epworth, 1958.)

‘As an institution it was, and is, characterised by succession in two forms: the succession in office and the succession of consecration. And it had generally recognised functions; the general superintendence of the church and more especially of the clergy; the maintenance of unity in the one eucharist; the ordination of men to the ministry; the safeguarding of the faith; and the administration of the church.’

‘What we uphold is the episcopate, maintained in successive generations by continuity of succession and consecration, as it has been throughout the history of the Church from the earliest times and discharging those functions which from the earliest times it has discharged.’ (page 23)

In the same statement, however, the limitations of the historic episcopate are recognised:

‘. . . the unity of legitimate succession is after all of little value if taken apart from the continuity of Scripture, the rule of faith, and the Sacraments. It is in these things, and in the continuing stream of Christian prayer and action inspired and empowered by them, that the substance of the Church’s life resides. Legitimate succession cannot of itself guarantee the integrity of these things, but if taken in conjunction with them it enriches their witness and strengthens their power.’ (page 19)

Various elements belong together, although not all have been equally emphasised. The bishop is pastor, preacher, teacher, evangelist, reconciler, ordainer and initiator. By many he is seen as exercising the prime ministry which he shares with the other ministers in the diocese somewhat in the same way that a Methodist superintendent exercises the chief or prime ministry in a circuit, a ministry which he both shares with other and delegates to them. By others the bishop is seen as exercising a wider and fuller ministry than other ministers (for example, wider as covering a wider area and fuller as including ordination), but his ministry is not seen by them as the prime ministry. The prime ministry they see as exercised by the whole body of ministers.

As part of the modern discussion of bishops, it is illuminating to read the summary statement about the historic episcopate in a document produced in 1978 in the United

Reformed Church entitled *Personal Episcopacy – a URC View*. It argues the case for having pastoral oversight focussed in a person, not only in a local congregation focussed in a minister, but also in a region of many congregations focussed in a bishop.

‘What is held to be essential to it is a combination of elements already noted in the description of personal oversight at the local level, now extended to the regional and also to the historical dimension. Thus a bishop is a pastor of the flock, a witness to the faith, a reconciler, a builder and maintainer of unity. And a bishop is all these things in manifest continuity with the life of the church down the ages and in manifest fellowship with the life of the church throughout the world.’  
(page 6)

#### **4. Must we have the same understanding of the historic episcopate?**

No. There is nothing unusual in Christians having different understandings of something they accept. A united Church will have in its life the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, but they will be understood in different ways. Moreover one could hold the two sacraments to be an indispensable element in the life of the united church, without its being considered necessary for everyone to have the same understanding of them. If different understandings of the sacraments are possible in the Methodist Church today and the united church of the future, then they would clearly also be possible with the historic episcopate.

We can agree with Anglicans and others that by the end of the second century an episcopal form of ministry was almost universal in the church and that it was seen as possessing a commission ultimately derived from the one given by Christ to the apostles. We can recognise its crucial part in the early church in resisting false teaching, in holding Christians together, and in furthering the mission of the church. We do not however see this as strictly comparable with the formation of the canon of scripture or the creeds as many Christians do. Because claims have been made for it which we do not accept (such as that it is essential to the church), we find it natural first of all to make negative statements. Thus we are clear that it is not essential to the church, so that without it the church would not be truly Christ’s church, and we are clear that it is not essential to the ministry, so that without it the ministry would not be truly Christ’s ministry. We can however also see that it can be valuable in the life of the church. It focusses the pastoral office in a person. It expresses the church’s and the ministry’s continuity through the centuries and is a focus of unity within a diocese and between dioceses. As it deepens the sense of unity in the church it can strengthen the church’s capacity for mission.

### **C. Relationship with Methodist Practice**

#### **1. Is receiving the historic episcopate in keeping with scripture and our Methodist tradition?**

This question could mean different things. If it means does scripture or our Methodist tradition require the church to have bishops in the historic episcopate, the answer is emphatically no. If it means is having the historic episcopate contrary to scripture and our Methodist tradition, the answer is equally no; but then the answer needs clarification.

We do not think that an episcopal ministry can be conclusively proved or disproved from scripture, although there are those called bishops in the New Testament. What is clear is that an episcopal ministry developed very early in the life of the church and became almost universal by the end of the second century. It was seen as early as the second century as in continuity with the ministry of the apostles. The diverse forms of ministry that can be seen in the first century of the church gradually disappeared or were transformed, and a threefold form of bishop, presbyter, and deacon emerged.

It cannot be shown that there is an unbroken succession of ordination from the apostles. It should be noted moreover that the earliest references to succession concern a succession of bishops holding office in a particular bishopric rather than a succession of ordination. In the struggle to resist false teaching, the claim was made that people could have confidence in the truth of the doctrine taught in those churches which could show they had a succession reaching back to an apostle or to one who had been in touch with an apostle. Undoubtedly stress was later laid on the succession of ordination from the apostles, some seeing this succession as a guarantee that the bishops are a channel of God's grace in ordination and that the church was apostolic because it had in such bishops an apostolic ministry. Such a way of thinking is in our judgment not in keeping with the way of grace of God as understood in the New Testament and the way we have experienced God's grace in the Methodist Church without our having an apostolic ministry in that sense of the word. We repudiate the view that a succession of episcopal ordination is a guarantee either of God's grace or of the church's apostolicity as the Methodist members did in the Anglican-Methodist conversations.

The fact that this ministry is not required by the New Testament (neither are class leaders or the Methodist Hymn Book) and the fact that it has been abused (so has the Conference or the ordained ministry or the sacrament of baptism) are not reasons for rejecting it. The fact that the Christian church has practised it from early times, the fact that the majority of Christians have such a ministry today, and the fact that it has been included in union schemes between episcopal and non-episcopal churches, are all reasons in favour of accepting rather than rejecting it. The important issue touches not the fact of the historic episcopate but the way it is exercised and the way it is received. It is our hope that we shall develop a distinctively Methodist way of exercising it and the Bradford proposal would be that we accept it not as a condition imposed on us by others (to qualify us in some way for union or communion with them) but as a sign of our faith in the coming great church which we believe will include it in its life. Such a step will help towards the unity of the church and (notably in areas of ecumenical co-operation) it will help the mission of the church. A step that helps unity and mission, while not denying God's grace in any way, is in keeping with scripture and our Methodist tradition.

## **2. Does receiving the historic episcopate mean that we are ceasing to be Methodist and becoming Anglican or Roman Catholic in our church's life?**

No. In our past our church has resolved to accept the historic episcopate – both in the schemes of union in South India and North India and in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme in Britain. Moreover one of the advantages in the step proposed this time is that it enables us to incorporate the historic episcopate in our life and to develop it within our own tradition. This should lead to an enriching of what the episcopal ministry can be in the whole church. The developing of such a ministry in our tradition could help Methodists moreover to see that a person can be a bishop without being a prelate, a lord (a member that is of the House of Lords), or a prince of the church.

### **3. Does not the Methodist Church already have episcopacy?**

Although the Methodist Church does not have the historic episcopate, it does have various forms of episcopate (oversight). It is an oversight of people and property, discipline and doctrine. This oversight is exercised both corporately and individually. It is exercised corporately, for example, by Conference, Synods, Circuit Meetings, Pastoral Committees and individually by the President, Chairman, Superintendents, Ministers, Class Leaders.

It is important to note that oversight is corporate as well as individual, lay as well as ministerial. This is something characteristic of our tradition and something that most Methodists would want to maintain. It would be natural therefore for Methodist bishops to be related in their oversight, as Methodist ministers are at present, both to other ministers and to lay people. According to whether he corresponded more closely to the President, the Chairman, or the Superintendent, a Methodist bishop would exercise oversight in association with the Conference, the Synod, or the Circuit Meeting. This relationship would preserve both the corporate and the lay elements in oversight.

### **4. What would a bishop be like in the Methodist Connexion?**

If we describe the way the term bishop is used (by us and by others), people will probably say ‘You mean something like a Methodist superintendent of chairman, or a United Reformed moderator, or a . . .’ They will draw a comparison with what is familiar to them in their tradition. There is a danger then of exaggerating the similarity with or the dissimilarity from what we or others already have.

Probably the nearest analogy is with the relation of a minister to a congregation. As he is the one who presides in ministry in that area, so a bishop is one who presides in ministry in a wider area. His ministry is comparable with that of the local minister, as they are both sharing the ministry of Christ, who is the first bishop as he is also the first minister. Both exercise Christ’s ministry, although a bishop may do so more fully (where, for example, he is the one who ordains) or more widely (where his area of responsibility is more extensive).

He is primarily a minister (or servant) of Christ. His ministry is a ministry of the Word, and expresses itself as he leads in preaching and teaching, in celebrating baptism and the Lord’s supper, in witnessing and caring, in reconciling and enabling. (As *episcopos* – the New Testament word for bishop – implies, he has oversight.) He is concerned with ministry both to the world and to the church, as was (and is) the ministry of Christ. In that context, however, it may be proper to stress that he will be in particular a pastor to ministers, and his pastoral relationship to his fellow ministers will fittingly express itself in ordaining and stationing as well as in pastoral care. As a minister is seen in a special sense to be a representative person in the congregation and in its neighbourhood, so a bishop is seen in a special sense to be a representative person in a wider group of churches and in the area where they are.

The characteristics we have noted might suggest a bishop, but not necessarily a bishop in the historic succession. That characteristic expresses the continuity of the bishop (and of the church) with the earliest times. The element of succession is already expressed in our church in the fact that ministers are ordained by those already ministers. This element of succession would fittingly belong to the ministry of bishops if we were to have episcopal ordination in the church, just as at present with presbyteral ordination we have a presbyteral succession.

Our view of a bishop includes some of the characteristics or tasks traditionally associated with bishops (a focus of unity and continuity, a guardian of doctrine, an ordainer). Some of these however would be differently expressed in our tradition.

Our church has always been fundamentally concerned with the mission of the church, and so leadership in mission would be a prime duty of the bishop. His leadership, moreover, in keeping with our tradition would be in fellowship with the ordained and lay members of the church. Our stress on the brotherhood of the ministry would mean that other ministers would be seen as the bishop's colleagues or partners in ministry, not essentially as his subordinates. His leadership would not be a sole or monarchical leadership, imposed by a veto or financial control. The place of the synod and Conference would mean that he would not take decisions in isolation from others, indeed in some cases (as in the guardianship of doctrine or the ordination and stationing of ministers and the length of his ministry in his diocese) the final decision would not be his but that of the Conference of which directly or indirectly he would be a part. His representative leadership means that he would represent the concerns and decisions of his diocese to the Conference and the wider church, just as he would represent their concerns and decisions to the diocese. Similarly he would represent and speak on behalf of his diocese to other churches.

This sketch illustrates in a measure how the office of a bishop would have continuity with the tradition of other churches and continuity with our own tradition, and suggests how its exercise in the church of the future could be influenced by our church's way of exercising that ministry. For an episcopal ministry which is missionary and pastoral, exercised in genuine partnership with the whole church, is a far cry from the pomp and power we associate with Lord Bishops. It finds its pattern and its power in the ministry of the One who came not to be served but to serve.

##### **5. Is not the existence of parallel episcopates a denial of the assertion that a bishop is the focus of unity?**

While the church is divided, as it has been for nine centuries at least, there are inevitably parallel episcopates. It cannot be expected that the ministry will be one before the church is one, but we believe that our receiving bishops would be a step towards a united church, a united ministry, and a united mission. Thus the episcopates would be converging rather than parallel.

We live in a period of convergence when increasingly we all learn and receive from each other. We are growing together in such a way that the time may come – almost imperceptibly – when it will appear that we are too close to each other to remain apart. Our receiving of an episcopal ministry would be simply one of those steps that all churches are taking as they seek to follow their vision of what God is doing with the divided church of today.

Methodist bishops would need to have the episcopal ministry in ways recognisable to other churches and recognised in different measure by them. It could be that Methodist bishops and bishops of other churches would share in the ordination of ministers (presbyters and even bishops) and in this way the bishops would be agents of unity in the church. Undoubtedly the decision to have Methodist bishops would help those areas which are looking for an ecumenical bishop. Such an area could have a Methodist as a bishop, if he were the right person, in the same way as at present they could have an Anglican.

## **6. Is not this another case of unity from the top?**

No. The pressure for unity is coming from congregations as well as from synods or Conference. There are over three hundred ecumenical projects in England. They are responses to the missionary situation of the church. Some are grouped in a single town or area (of which one of the best known cases is Swindon – see the additional note on the Swindon proposals), others serve neighbourhoods. Where there is such close working together, people are calling for action to resolve problems created variously by dual or multiple membership, the deployment of ministers, the need to relate to the different denominational structures, working within locally devised constitutions, and the representation of the Church by Christians of the various churches. Many of the tensions created by these problems would be overcome by the appointment of the Methodist bishops.

## **D. PROPOSALS**

### **1. Factors to be considered**

In considering who should exercise the ministry of bishop in the Methodist Church, we have found factors pointing in different directions.

In our church powers resides (at least constitutionally) in the Conference and in the circuit or congregation, the district and the synod being relatively powerless. Should bishops express that structure (with the President and superintendents as bishops), or should they counteract it (with chairman as bishops, perhaps with an added emphasis on the role of the district and the power of the synod)?

Our church has been through a period of re-structuring. It is ready for another act of re-structuring, or should the introduction of bishops involve as little change to the structure as possible?

Should the role of our bishops stand in obvious continuity with the role of bishops in other churches (in the size of the area in which they minister, and in the functions which they exercise), or should the continuity be rather with the way we have done things in the past?

Should we examine what an ideal bishop is and fit that into our system or should we start from what already exists in our system?

Clearly people will give a different weight to different factors. Some will prefer as little change as possible; others will be prepared for considerable change. Some will want the balance of our structure to remain the same; others will want this move to alter that balance. The working party offers its judgment in section 6. It presents the main suggestions that have come before it (the President, the Superintendents, the Chairman) with some comments on each.

### **2. The President**

As the bishop is a focus of oversight and unity in the church, it would be natural for the President to be a bishop. Moreover he engages in the kind of ministry traditionally associated with bishops (for example, in ordaining and in presiding over the Conference to which oversight of doctrine is committed). However to have only the President as bishop would be to remove the bishop from the close contact with the local church and the local minister which is generally seen as one of the most valuable parts of his ministry. Moreover the presence of perhaps ten or a dozen Past Presidents

engaged in a ministry that is not necessarily one which focusses oversight and unity would severely distort the role of a bishop in the church. The majority of the church's bishops would be engaged in a ministry that was not characteristically episcopal and they would almost certainly not be distributed evenly around the country. If the President is to be a bishop, which we judge to be right, then it is important that the more usual expression of episcopacy be elsewhere.

We would not recommend that the Past Presidents be made bishops, but it might be fitting for the Ex-President to be made a bishop at the same Conference as the President, so that he may share in the ordinations if they are held at the Conference, and act in his stead should the need arise during his presidential year.

### **3. The Superintendents**

The word superintendent represents what lies behind the word episcopos (overseer) which is traditionally translated bishop. In Methodism the superintendent has played a vital part in the oversight of the church. Although not by right a member of the Conference, he has been particularly responsible for carrying out the decisions of the Conference. His oversight of doctrine and discipline and worship in the circuit, his care of his fellow ministers, his relation to probationer ministers, his presidency of meetings, all give him an obviously episcopal role.

There are at least three possible ways in which superintendents (or some of them) could become bishops.

(a) All superintendents could be made bishops. This might make the superintendent correspond in some ways to bishops in early times when the bishop was very much a local bishop. However the church was small in numbers then, and as it grew in size the area covered by the bishop grew. With every circuit superintendent a bishop we should probably need to make chairmen, if we still had them, into something like archbishops. We should face the strange situation of having some circuits with bishops but not other ministers (or presbyters) or only one other. Moreover few of the bishops would exercise one of the bishop's traditional roles, that of ordaining, and it would be hard to relate our bishops to the bishops of other churches.

(b) Some superintendents could be made bishops, probably together with the chairman as a presiding bishop, or perhaps with no chairman and the presidency moving round. This would give a kind of team episcopacy. In the one case the bishops could work together with one as president. Both forms deprive the office of bishop of one of its main characteristics, the focussing in one person of the oversight in a given area. The bishop is less obviously the focus of unity if there are two bishops in the same area. This system would complicate our present pattern of oversight, without corresponding advantages.

(c) Circuits could be amalgamated, so that the present districts would in effect be divided into a number of circuits, perhaps somewhere between three and six in the mainland districts. (In its earlier days Methodism had much larger circuits than we have at present.) The new circuits or dioceses would probably have between 10 and 25 or 30 ministers, the smaller number being in the scattered rural areas. Although this move would cause an upheaval in many places, it would have advantages at a time when circuits of two or three ministers have to forego a minister and find themselves severely understaffed or driven to an emergency amalgamation.



Such a move could take many forms and we sketch here one possible form. The dioceses would, as far as possible, follow the natural centres of population, communication, or work. The bishop would probably have pastoral care of one congregation in a rural diocese or would share the pastoral care of a larger church in a town or city diocese. He would therefore have fewer demands from his section of the diocese than our present superintendents and this would free him for his wider responsibilities. He would have the advantage of being close to the ministers and churches where he is a bishop, knowing them and being known by them. He would bear responsibility for stationing and preside at ordinations.

There would be major changes if this scheme were followed, though all of them are in keeping with the way we have been developing as a church. First, dioceses would be much larger than present circuits, although there are an increasing number of circuits with ten or a dozen ministers (usually where all the circuits of a town have come together). Some of the things that happened in the amalgamating circuits would continue to happen in these areas (for example, the diocesan plan would no doubt be made in areas corresponding to the old circuits, in some cases in smaller areas and in others in larger ones, so that unnecessary travel would be avoided). There would be no need for a constitutional structure for the old circuit units, but where they wished to do things together they could do so. In an increasingly ecumenical age, however, many congregations would want to give time to establishing local links with other churches and they would be freed for that by these changes. Clearly different things would be desirable and possible in town and country dioceses. Second, the district and the circuit would in effect be merged, so that the church would save one layer of meetings and administration. This could lead to a considerable saving in time and administration. Third, the dioceses would work together for some purposes in the way that circuits and districts do at present. For example, the bishops of a group of new dioceses could appoint one of their number to Conference and to the connexional stationing committee (if that body continued) or they could serve in turn (much as chairmen do at present on the President's Council). No formal regional structure is necessary, but it seems likely that the bishops of a number of neighbouring dioceses would find it helpful to meet together from time to time to discuss matters including stationing. If there were at least ten ministers to a diocese, it would be possible for each diocese to send at least one minister and one lay person to Conference. The minister need not be the bishop. Fourth, the role of the Conference in the stationing of bishops would need to be more obviously expressed than it is at present with circuit superintendents. The way chairmen are appointed at present offers one possible method.

This proposal would involve more change than the other proposals, but for some it is both closer to the ideal form of bishop and closer to important elements in our tradition. The bishop would manifestly be a minister like other ministers, but with wider responsibilities. He would have oversight of the whole life of the church (people and property, doctrine and discipline). He would be a pastor of the ministers and of the people. He would preside, whether at diocesan meetings or diocesan ordination services. He would be identified with a place where he could know and be known. Yet in much of this he would simply be a circuit superintendent to whom some further responsibilities had been added. Moreover as a superintendent he would have more power to initiate and stimulate than a chairman would, if he became a bishop.

#### 4. The Chairman

In the way our life is ordered at present chairmen correspond more closely than do the President or superintendents to bishops in other churches. They have a district that is comparable in size with Anglican or Roman Catholic dioceses. They are freed from other duties to have pastoral care of the ministers and to have the general oversight of the district. They are appointed to exercise leadership. Although there are certain constitutional limitations on their oversight of the district (for example, they enter circuits with the permission of the superintendents), these have not in practice usually diminished the oversight that chairmen exercise. Indeed the role of the chairmen has – not surprisingly – developed in natural ways rather than simply in the ways set out in the church's standing orders.

(a) The simplest constitutional change would be for chairmen to become bishops. The only major change that would then be proper and necessary, would be for them to be involved in the ordination of probationers in their districts.

There is a substantial case for making all chairmen bishops. It would involve almost no changes in administration or constitution. It would avoid the clash of loyalty between the claims of the local church and the diocese, and obviate the problem of deciding in which church or circuit the bishop should minister. It would prevent an increase in the number of those attending Conference or being on the Stationing Committee and the danger of introducing another level of oversight between the diocese and the Conference. It would keep the size of a Methodist diocese broadly similar to that of other churches.

(b) Alternatively the chairman could become the presiding bishop and others could be appointed to serve with him, with particular responsibilities. These could be responsibilities for a geographical area or for a sector of the church's work or ministry. There would probably be advantages for the bishop in working as one of a team, but there would undoubtedly be disadvantages as well. Some of these are already experienced by those churches which have suffragan or area bishops. (Of course even without other bishops in the area the bishop would be part of a team ministry with the other ministers and with lay people.) For example, the diocesan bishop's role as the focus of unity would be obscured or diminished, and suffragan or area bishops would easily become simply assistants to the bishop. Moreover, it is not obvious that the oversight of youth work or education or industry in a district or region requires a bishop. A stronger case might be made for a distinct area of national life (like the armed forces), but even then there is the disadvantage of isolating that area from the life of the community as a whole, rather than integrating it. Moreover such oversight does not really require a bishop any more than does the oversight of one of the divisions of the church.

(c) A further possibility is for districts to be divided into two or three with a bishop in pastoral charge for each of the new sub-districts or dioceses. These would be natural sections corresponding where possible with the centres of work, population, or communication. In some cases there might be an advantage in small changes in district boundaries. Such a division of districts corresponds with the view frequently expressed that many of the present districts are too large and bring together places that have little in common. To keep districts at their present size and have bishops without pastoral care of a congregation is possible but would deprive them of what has proved of value in the ministry of our superintendents. If the bishop had pastoral charge of a congregation he would be closer to his fellow ministers – and with such a pattern there need be no greater expense in having bishops than in having chairmen.

There could be advantages for the bishops and the church, if the bishops were to have pastoral care of a congregation or congregations. In particular it would keep bishops in direct contact with the normal circuit work of the church and it would prevent their office from seeming to be administrative rather than pastoral. However there would or could be important implications for the districts in such a change.

First, a sub-district or diocese would hardly need the full range of committees that a district has at present. Either the dioceses would be grouped into districts for such committee work, or a much simpler diocesan structure could emerge. If the second of these happened, there would probably be no need of more than at most two diocesan synods in the year compared with the three (or four if one includes the meeting for candidates) held at present. Some of the committee work, if it were judged necessary, could be done on the day of the synod. Other committees could be merged and could consist of one minister and one lay person from each circuit. For some parts of their work (for example, regional youth organisers) a number of dioceses could be grouped together, as happens at present with districts. Of course, the organisation of the diocese could, if preferred, remain the same as that of a district at present, whether it were smaller than a district or the same size.

Second, the relation of the diocese to the Conference would be similar to that of the present districts. The bishop would be a member of the Conference, but if it were judged that too many of the ministerial representatives were bishops (say twice as many as the present number of district chairmen) then the bishops could have the right to speak but only the same number as are at present chairmen could be voting members. The matter would be determined by rotation or by election.

## **5. Common Elements**

In each of these three proposals (what may be described broadly as having as bishops the superintendents or amalgamated circuits, the present chairmen, or chairmen of smaller districts engaged in pastoral care of a congregation) certain possible courses of action remain open. With each, for example, we would recommend that the President be made a bishop, if he is not one already; that ordination of ministers should be by the bishop in the diocese; that ordination of bishops – following a long Christian practice – should be by three bishops (appointed by Conference), including where possible the President, the service being held normally in the diocese; that the appointment of bishops be under the authority of the Conference; that bishops be bishops for life (as in general with bishops in the church, including the United Methodist Church) although the length of time the bishop presides over a diocese would – as with chairmen at present – depend ultimately on the decision of the Conference.

## **6. Who should become bishops?**

The majority of the working party think that the Methodist Church should receive an episcopal ministry. They believe that the superintendent is the right person to become bishop – but in the context expressed in 3(c). However if the changes involved in such a step were greater than the church would wish at present, then the proposal made in 4(a) and 4(c) for chairman to be bishops would be an acceptable alternative. This would make the area of the Methodist bishops' responsibility similar to that of other churches, which could make work with other churches easier. (Those signing the minority reports also believe that if the Methodist Church were to have an episcopal ministry it is superintendents who should become bishops in the form expressed in 3(c). All members of the working party think that this is closer to the

primitive Christian pattern as well as to our Methodist tradition. Moreover in some areas other churches have been moving in a similar direction.)

### **7. Where would the historic episcopate come from?**

Ideally we would invite all those churches with the historic episcopate to share in the ordination of our first bishop or bishops. It is however unlikely that the Eastern Orthodox Churches or the Roman Catholic Church would feel free to do so without, for example, much closer agreement on doctrine than at present exists. There are other churches with the historic episcopate, like the Church of Sweden (Lutheran), the Churches of the Anglican Communion, and the Old Catholic Church, as well as the churches which have entered into union, such as those in North and South India.

It would be good if those churches, or some of them, officially agreed to share with us the episcopal ministry which they have. It would be a sign of the universality and diversity of the church if churches at home and overseas were represented, as well as churches of different traditions.

There could be simply the ordination of the President as bishop (and perhaps the Ex-President but more fittingly the President alone at the inaugural service) and then he either with those Methodists who are (or have been) bishops in the Churches of North and South India or with two other bishops (and, if so, then most fittingly one Anglican and one Reformed or Lutheran) could ordain the others. (After the first ordinations the ordination could be by the President and others already ordained bishop.) The ordination of the President would take place at the Conference. The other ordinations would more appropriately take place in churches in each of the new dioceses. In this way the whole Methodist people could share in this great celebration.

We hope other churches would be willing to share with us the episcopal ministry which they have. This statement together with the statements approved by the Conference in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme are a sufficient indication to them of how we understand the episcopate and how we would seek to incorporate this form of ministry into the total life of our church.

## **E. Possible Difficulties**

### **1. Is there not a risk of division in Methodism if this step is taken?**

We recognise an element of risk in what we propose. But that is not in itself a reason for not acting. Risk is part of life and part of the Christian life. The question is whether this particular risk should be taken and that means asking whether this step taken now will further God's purpose with his church.

It must be frankly faced that there is in our church a hostility on the part of some to bishops. There are understandable historical reasons for this, although for some this almost instinctive hostility has been tempered by the example of bishops who have shown pastoral or prophetic quality.

It could well be that some would leave the Methodist Church if it took this step. It is likely that they would be a small part of the number who might leave were there at any time a union scheme. It is impossible to judge how many would actually leave if the church took the step proposed. We do not think there would be a large number, but we should know the response of the church at large only as the Conference or the synods considered the proposals and the issues involved in them.

Others in our church see no positive value in bishops that we could not have without introducing the historic episcopate, except what they regard as dubious continuity with the past. They regard receiving episcopacy as a condition imposed by others on us and think we should ask them to give up bishops in the cause of unity. Others believe that bishops are the price we may have to pay for unity, but that it would be a needless disruption of our life as a church for any goal short of union with another church. Others believe that this is a moment when our receiving bishops could break the log jam in the movement towards unity and that we could also benefit in our life as a church from taking this step. It is our judgment that that is so and that this step could promote the unity and mission of the church in Britain.

There are times when someone has to take the initiative. This is especially true in the healing of broken relationships. We believe that this is such a moment in the growing together of Christians and the Christian churches. The Methodist Church is perhaps uniquely fitted to take a step that would be a sign of our faith in the future of the church and a help to others. We use the word sign in two senses: as an indication of what we think the church of the future will be like and as an act or symbolic gesture which will help towards a future that never seems to come nearer.

We are reminded of Jeremiah. He had prophesied the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the defeat of his people, and had been imprisoned for it. Then when the Babylonian armies were laying siege to the city and the prospect for the people seemed bleak, Jeremiah showed his confidence in God's future for his people. He bought a field at Anathoth and in the name of God declared, 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land'. There have been many setbacks in the way to unity, so that many doubt whether the church ever will be one. We believe it will be, and that we can take a step towards it.

We would be taking this step not as a means to improving our relations with one church rather than another, but as a recognition of what in part we believe the church of the future will be and of our willingness to move towards that. In taking this step we would have the resolute intention of keeping our relations with all other Christian churches at least as open as they are at present and we hope that our readiness to act in this instance will be a stimulus to them to receive what others have to give.

This step springs from our belief that God means his church to be united and that its structural unity will assist its mission in the world.

## **2. Will this not give us two classes of minister, those episcopally and those not episcopally ordained?**

One reason for the service of reconciliation in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme was that it would make all ministers acceptable in both churches. It was feared that without such a service Methodist ministers who were ordained before that time would have been unacceptable in many Anglican churches. This seemed unsatisfactory in a scheme that was meant to bring the two churches closer together in preparation for a future union.

The present proposal is not concerned with a scheme of intercommunion or union with the Church of England, nor is it concerned to make Methodist ministers acceptable in the eyes of the Church of England (or of some of its ministers and members). It is concerned to accept here and now what we believe will be part of the life of the church in the future and to discover in our own tradition what bishops can

be. It is our hope that what we discover will itself be a contribution to the church of the future, so that we can offer our own distinctive model and style of bishop. There will therefore be no problem of the kind referred to in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme if we have some ministers episcopally ordained and some not.

### **3. Will this proposal not create difficulties for the Free Churches and for many evangelical Christians?**

We do not think it need.

Our relations with the other Free Churches will remain as they are at present. We shall continue to recognise them as churches and their ministers as ministers of the church of Christ. We shall continue to work with them and seek to become part of a united church that includes them. We do not think our having bishops need create more difficulty than (or as much difficulty as) the differences that exist between us at present: believers baptism or infant baptism, the absence of the two sacraments or the insistence on the two sacraments, the congregational system or the connexional system.

Moreover evangelical Christians who were unhappy about the Anglican-Methodist Scheme need not be unhappy with the present proposals. (We use the word evangelical here in one of its accepted senses, a sense which is clear from the context.) There is no service of reconciliation which could be interpreted as a covert ordination of Methodist ministers. There is no accepting of episcopacy because others require it of us if we are to have intercommunion. There is moreover, as before, the clear insistence that we do not regard the church or the ministry, let alone salvation itself, as in any way dependent on the presence or absence of the historic episcopate in the life of the church.

It is worth observing that so distinguished an evangelical theologian as Dr. James Packer in signing a minority report in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme could speak positively of the historic episcopate, while repudiating any idea that it should be a condition of intercommunion. 'That an episcopal ministry has value, other things being equal, as a sign of the unity, continuity, and authority of Christ's Church, is undoubtedly true, but to suspend full fellowship at the Lord's Table on a non-scriptural requirement, this or any other, is sectarian and wrong' (page 182). It is interesting that the notable Primitive Methodist Professor A. S. Peake who spoke against the historic episcopate in his Presidential Address at the Annual Assembly of the National Free Church Federal Council in 1928 also spoke in the same speech of the church's right to change its form of government. 'No form of organisation has any intrinsic Divine right. The living Church has the competence to create its own organisation and to modify it by retrenchment here and expansion there, as new occasions arise and new needs have to be met.' Half a century later we see such a new occasion and need.

## **F. CONCLUSIONS**

The thirty five years since the war have been marked by a series of attempts to move towards unity. There were the Archbishop of Canterbury's Cambridge sermon in 1946, the Anglican-Presbyterian Conversations in 1949, the Anglican-Methodist Conversations in 1955, the resolve that the churches should covenant together by Easter 1980 made at the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference in 1964, the Anglican-Methodist Scheme in 1968, the uniting of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in England in the United Reformed Church in 1972, and the Ten

Propositions in 1976. All these attempts in Britain and a variety of union schemes overseas manifest the concern of the British churches for the unity of the church.

Every new step the church takes is open to misunderstanding. Sometimes there is a genuine fear that we are deserting our way of doing things for someone else's, or even being taken over by someone else. We believe this fear is ungrounded in this instance. We are doing something which we have encouraged other Methodists (in South India, for example) to do, and which they have not regretted but valued. We are doing it not at the behest of others but on our own initiative and in our own time and way. Sometimes there is a fear of deserting certain churches for others. It is our resolute intention not to do this. We shall continue all our old relationships with them, including the search for unity with them. Sometimes there is the fear that we are obsessed with one thing at the cost of others. We do not intend to be. We think there are many things which God is showing us or encouraging us to receive from others at this time. Communities as diverse as the charismatic movement and Taize, house churches and Black Churches have gifts to bring to the church at large which we need to receive if we are to be faithful to God in the present and the future. We regard the historic episcopate as one gift among many that we as a church should receive from others.

The word bishop evokes hostility in the hearts of some. There are good historical reasons for this, as the episcopal ministry has often been grossly abused in the past. In recent years however we have seen in new churches and in old how bishops can be pastors and prophets. Something of the spirit in which bishops increasingly see their ministry is expressed in the Roman Catholic ordination service, where the charge to the new bishop and the people includes these words: 'The title of bishops is one not of honour but of function, and therefore a bishop should strive to serve rather than to rule.'

We believe that the way our church has lived the Christian life, practised the Christian ministry and engaged in Christian mission would mould the office of bishop, so that we could make a contribution to the united church in this area as others desire us to (*Interim Report*, page 18, and *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, page 38). As part of the universal church we have much to give. With William Arthur at the Second World Methodist Conference in Washington in 1891 we say, 'The whole we are not: and that we not only admit but affirm, and equally do we affirm that we are of the whole.'

Alan G. Cox  
Nigel L. Gilson  
Gordon F. Simmons  
Peter Stephens  
Paul R. Williams

## **G. ADDITIONAL NOTES**

### **1. Chairman**

The following statement is made in Standing Order 424 about responsibilities of Chairmen:

1. The prime duty of a Chairman is to further the work of God in his District; to this end he will use all the gifts and graces he has received, being especially diligent to be a pastor to the ministers and probationers and to lead the ministry and laity of the District in the work of preaching and worship, evangelism, pastoral care, teaching and administration.
2. The Chairman, in conjunction with the members of the Synod in its respective Sessions, shall be responsible to the Conference for the observance within the District of Methodist order and discipline.
3. It is the duty of the Chairman to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and probationers in his District.

### **2. Confirmation**

Confirmation has traditionally been associated with bishops. We think there are good arguments for and against the bishop's confirming or receiving into full membership. In our judgement it would easily lead to a lack of balance in his ministry if the bishop presided at all confirmations in his diocese. However we recognise that an increasing number of circuits involve the chairman in services of confirmation or reception into full membership, and this may well reflect what seems most appropriate to our ministers and members. It might therefore be best if we followed the proposal in *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme* (pp. 80-81, sections 250-256): '. . . the minister conducting the service could be named in some such ways as 'the bishop or some presbyter acting in his stead', according to the practice adopted in the Church of South India.' In our judgment there is no necessary reason for departing from our present practice.

### **3. Diocese**

In this report it has been less confusing to use the word diocese for the area within which a bishop works rather than a variety of terms (area, episcopal area, district). We have used the term diocese for the area in which a bishop works in preference to others, simply because this is the traditional term. We are not advocating any change in Methodist usage. The term district or circuit could serve the Methodist Church just as well as the term diocese.

### **4. The President**

The following statements are made about the responsibilities of the President in Standing Orders 11, 200, 786 (4).

**111 President's Powers.** (1) The President shall have power to assist at any Synod, if requested to do so by the Chairman or by a majority of the Superintendents in the District.

(2) He shall have the right, if requested to do so by any person or persons concerned, to visit any Circuit and to enquire into its affairs and,



in union with the Synod, redress any grievance. In any case which may arise affecting the administration of any Circuit, before application is made to the President the Chairman shall be consulted.

**200 Chairmanship.** The President of the Conference is, ex officio, chairman of all connexional committees.

**786 (4) Resignation.** The President, acting in consultation with the advisory committee, has authority to accept the resignation of a minister in full connexion and every such action on the part of the President shall be deemed for all purposes to be the action of the Conference. The President shall report his action to the Conference next following.

## 5. Superintendent

The following statements about the responsibilities of superintendents are made in Standing Orders 501(1), 520(1), and 521(1).

**501. Chairmanship of Meetings.** (1) The Superintendent or, failing him, one of his colleagues shall have the right to preside at every official meeting connected with the Circuit, or with any committee, institution or organisation having official connection with the Circuit or with any of its Local Churches.

**521. Responsibilities.** (1) The Superintendent and other minister or ministers appointed to the several Circuits is and are appointed by the Conference to preach and perform all acts of religious worship and Methodist discipline in each of the Methodist chapels and other preaching-places approved by the Conference already erected or to be erected in each Circuit respectively, within the space of twelve calendar months, at such time or times and in such manner as they find proper; subject, nevertheless, to the Superintendent minister and to the existing laws and regulations of the Conference.

**521. The Plan.** (1) It is the responsibility of the Superintendent in consultation with his colleagues to make the circuit plan of preaching appointments.

## 6. Statements on Episcopacy

Anglican statements on episcopacy are to be found in the *Interim Report*, pages 16-27 and 46-49, *Conversations: a Report (1963)*, pages 24-27, *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, pages 27-28, and Methodist Statements in the *Interim Report*, pages 35-37, *Conversations: a Report (1963)*, pages 24-27, *Towards Reconciliation*, page 16, and *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Schemes*, pages 27-28 and 36-42. The service for the ordination of bishops is published in *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Ordinal* (SPCK and Epworth 1968), pages 4-13 and 28-33.

It is worth quoting one paragraph about Methodist Bishops from *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, pages 38-39, section 120.

‘But it should be said at once that Methodist bishops need not and must not be confined to the performance of a round of administrative duties. The Methodist people would be grievously disappointed if their bishops did not also undertake tasks of imaginative and creative leadership in

thought and action. Experiments and enterprises in mission and in the training of Christians, some already begun under present leadership, are looking for the yet stronger lead that a truly pastoral episcopate, working together with its Anglican counterpart, will be able to give. Methodist bishops will vindicate their office by evangelistic and pastoral leadership. Above all, a Methodist bishop will be valued as a father-in-God to the ministers in his care. This pastoral office, essential to the well-being both of the ministers themselves and of the congregations entrusted to them, is already carried out in good measure by the Chairmen of Districts; it is very desirable that bishops in the Methodist Church should be left sufficiently free from routine administration to be able to maintain and develop what has been thus begun, as well as to strike out new lines of approach to evangelism and the service of the community.

## **7. The Swindon Proposals**

Twelve years ago the churches in Swindon faced the challenge presented by the rapid growth that was proposed for their town (to a size of 200,000). They realised that they had the resources to meet the challenge if they worked together. They have been doing this increasingly and have reached the point where they believe that united work should be expressed by having the oversight of the church and ministry in that area focussed in one person. They have talked about this together and have proposed that the person should be a bishop (in the historic episcopate), but that he should be an ecumenical bishop, drawn from one of the churches and acceptable to them all. They hope if their proposal is accepted to offer a new model of what a bishop can be.

The report of the Swindon proposals *A Bishop for All Churches in Swindon* was signed by representative ministers and members of all the churches involved, though one of the three Baptists did not sign and one Baptist did not sign a point that had nothing to do directly with episcopacy. Some of those signing regarded bishops as essential to the church, others as not essential, but as one of several acceptable ways of governing and leading the church. All of them see the bishop as the chief pastor, concerned for the care of the churches and the ministers, and as the leader in mission. They propose that the bishop should exercise authority in a corporate way, through the Missionary Council which is representative of all the participating churches.

## **8. United Methodist Church**

The United Methodist Church has a threefold ministry of bishops, elders, and deacons. Its bishops ordain and preside at the Annual Conference and have oversight of the ministers and churches in their episcopal areas. They meet regularly as a council of bishops and are seen as having care of the mission of the church throughout the world. In the USA they have very large episcopal areas, so that the bishop has perhaps ten district superintendents (ministers without pastoral charge of a church) acting somewhat like our district chairmen. In the Central Conferences (in Europe, for example) the bishop also has a number of district superintendents, but he has a much smaller number of ministers and members under his care (perhaps 30,000 members compared with 300,000 members in some parts of the USA), although the episcopal area covers either a whole country or several countries. Bishops are bishops for life in the Conferences in the USA, though retiring at a certain age, whereas in the various Central Conferences they can be, and in some cases are, elected for a renewable period of years.

As we have sought a closer pastoral relationship between the bishop and the minister than is possible in the USA where a bishop may have the oversight of 1,000 ministers, and as the episcopal areas in Europe are much larger than is desirable in Britain, we have not drawn on the model of bishops in the United Methodist Church. It is however important to recognise that the largest part of World Methodism has bishops. They exercise in different ways the diverse functions of bishops in the historic episcopate, and they are seen as an expression of the unity of the church throughout the world and in a measure through the centuries.

## **H. DISSENTIENT STATEMENTS**

We regret that we are unable to sign this Report. We share with the other members of the working-party a concern for closer unity and better pastoral care among Christians. But we are uneasy that the Report's signatories are divided as to the number, the location, and hence the practical significance of the proposed bishops in the life of the Methodist Church. And we doubt the wisdom of seeking to decide the merits of their proposal as long as the Churches' Council for Covenanting offers hope of significant steps towards closer unity between several churches. Our main concern, however, is with the central proposal of the Report: we do not think the case that the Methodist Church should take the historic episcopate into its life has been made out.

1. The Report is quite misleading when it says that we should accept the historic episcopate 'not as a condition imposed on us by others (to qualify us in some way for union or communion with them)'. For it is precisely the expectation that churches which have the historic episcopate will insist on its acceptance as a condition of unity that leads to the proposal being made. There may be no compelling reasons for our not having bishops; but there are compelling reasons for resisting another church's insistence that we have bishops as a condition of unity.

2. Advocates of the historic episcopate normally stress the role of the bishop as guardian of orthodoxy and as focus of unity in the church; and the Report implicitly accepts much of what they say. But it appears to us that these claims are inadequately grounded historically. Moreover, they are inadequate for the ends proposed in the Report. For the Report admits that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are unlikely to take part in the ordinations of bishops which it proposes, and rightly implies that unity with those churches is unlikely to be achieved in the near future. With this admission the Report surrenders the relevance of its claims that episcopacy is the normal form of corporate Christian existence, and a symbol of the church's unity. For most of the churches with whom there is a realistic prospect of unity in the near future do not have the historic episcopate. In this situation the historic episcopate is as much a bone of contention as a focus of unity.

3. We differ from the majority of the working party in our view of the effective range of Christian responsibility in planning of this kind. The Report appears to us to convert a legitimate aspiration to Christian unity into an unwarranted ideology as to the direction of historical progress, and recommends a course of action which is a 'sign' of its conviction. Neither in church nor state, where the range of responsibility is limited to the range of calculable action, can institutions be managed in this way. The Report itself, wishing to use the Swindon case as an example of local pressure for episcopacy, nevertheless advocates a form of diocesan episcopacy not adaptable to the Swindon scheme. Signs and symbols are a doubtful guide to policy.

4. To accept the view that the historic episcopate has symbolic value deprives one of the freedom to question whether it is an appropriate institution for the present and the future. While accepting the episcopacy developed in the second century as a response to urgent problems in the church, we see no reason to believe that it is necessarily God's gift to the church for all times. In general, the church suffers from being too preoccupied with its past, and too little with the demands of the present and the future.

For such reasons, we cannot believe that acceptance of the historic episcopate into the Methodist Church would serve any useful purpose. We say this not because we are opposed to bishops under all circumstances, nor because we believe that Methodism has nothing to learn or to receive from other Christians. Far from it. But we are not persuaded that our imperfections or the imperfections of Christ's people as a whole, would be healed by our adoption of the Report's proposal.

S. H. Travis  
W. R. Ward

I can only support the proposal to have bishops of the historic episcopate in our ministry if it is part of a union or covenant scheme in which there is recognition of our ministers. Union or covenant provides a situation of mutual acceptance; bishops without that would give an unacceptable value to episcopacy and reflect on the integrity of our present oversight and ministry. It would appear to be done for the wrong reasons and people would be sceptical about which episcopal hands should be laid on ministerial heads when churches with historic episcopacy do not yet recognise each other. Within a scheme, we should be receiving the episcopate from our covenanting partners.

I commend the picture of a Methodist bishop in this report for the consideration and possible acceptance some day by the Methodist people.

Mary Lenton

*(Agenda 1981, pp. 21-42)*

### **(iii) FROM THE FAITH & ORDER COMMITTEE**

1. A working party on this matter was set up by the President's Council following a notice of motion accepted by the Bradford Conference in 1978. The notice of motion required that the Faith and Order Committee be consulted. The final report of the working party appears elsewhere in the Agenda (see pp. 21).

2. The committee first considered the matter in January 1980, but decided to delay its judgement in order that there should be no conflict between the proposals of the working party and those of the Churches' Council for Covenanting. Members of the committee were nevertheless able to study the sixth draft of the report individually. As a result of these individual comments, many of which were critical, the Executive of Faith and Order sent a memorandum to the President's Council that was considered in November 1980. The President's Council asked the Faith and Order Committee to present to Conference its own considered theological comment on the report, and consequently a discussion took place and certain resolutions were passed at the full meeting of Faith and Order in December 1980. The committee then resolved, **'That a sub-committee be established to enable further discussion of the fundamental**

**theological and administrative questions raised by the report so that a satisfactory comment on it could be presented via the Executive to Conference.'**

3. What follows is a series of resolutions by the Faith and Order Committee together with supporting material compiled by the sub-committee, partly from contributions to the debate in the Faith and Order Committee and partly from the judgements expressed in the sub-committee itself. The whole document was thereafter submitted to members of the Faith and Order Committee individually. In order to make clear the distinction between resolutions of Faith and Order and supporting material compiled by the sub-committee the resolutions have been set in bold type.

4. The first question raised was whether the proposal to include an episcopal form of ministry in our Methodist life and system was in accordance with our doctrines. In this context 'an episcopal form of ministry' is taken to have reference to the historic episcopate. The arguments on this matter were fully rehearsed between 1963 and 1969 at the time of the Conversations with the Church of England. The acceptance by Conference of a scheme that involved episcopacy can only be regarded as a clear statement of the mind of Conference on the matter. According to paragraph 31(b) of the Deed of Union, Conference is the final authority regarding the interpretation of doctrine. It is hard, therefore, to maintain that accepting an episcopal form of ministry would be a contradiction of our doctrines. This matter is fully treated in Section C of the report.

5. The committee resolved that, '**To accept the historic episcopate into the life of Methodism would be in no sense a violation of Methodist doctrines**', by 25 votes to 2 with one neutral.

6. If it is clear that accepting the historic episcopate is not a contradiction of our doctrines, it is even more clear that accepting it is not required by our doctrines. Methodism cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church *as Methodism is now*. It will change its structure only when there is good reason. One good reason might be that God is drawing together his wounded and broken Church into one visible body that is episcopally ordered. When the Conference is convinced on this point – and the acceptance of the Notice of Motion may be held by some to imply that it is convinced already – the arguments for proceeding towards the acceptance of episcopacy will be very strong.

7. The next question is, therefore, whether that moment has arrived. Some answer with an unqualified yes. Others say yes only if the move will lead directly and immediately to union with another church or other churches. The committee was offered the opportunity to affirm that the acceptance of the historic episcopate at this moment would be timely and pastorally wise, but declined to do so in those terms. (The actual voting on resolutions took place in December 1980, before the Church of England's response to the Churches' Council for Covenanting proposals were known).

8. In favour of the view that Methodism should espouse the historic episcopate even if the proposals for covenanting failed, it was argued that, in the present state of ecumenical affairs, there was a danger that the spirit of faith would be lost in a maze of intricate ecclesiological negotiations. What was needed was a bold prophetic act affirming that the Church of God was one and that it should appear one. Methodism with its lack of bishops, but with its experience of corporate leadership and its notion of episcopate being vested in the Conference, was in an ideal position to perform this prophetic act; for it could, at one and the same time, claim to bring something significant to the ecumenical process and confess that it was open to discovery that in

the personal exercise of episcopacy there was an expression of God's care for his Church that so far lay outside Methodist experience. This position is taken by the majority within the working party and it is expressed in paragraph B(2) of the report and in the first two paragraphs of the Agreed Summary.

9. Against this, three arguments are put forward by some. *In the first place* progress towards union should be a series of mutual acts and reconciliations, not by unilateral action. The essence of a union scheme is the integration of two Christian bodies that are one in the Spirit but that differ in matters of practice and polity if not actually in matters of faith. To experience such reconciliation and integration is to experience the healing and restoring work of the Holy Spirit. In that context the surrender of some Methodist traditions and the acceptance from others of new styles of Christian life and expression are justified, indeed desirable. But apart from that context, they are artificial and they have little meaning. *Secondly*, the issue of episcopacy should not be exalted to be the supreme factor in ecumenical relations. Were we to accept the historic episcopate there would still need to be a long process of integration before we could unite with another communion. There is no reason why the question of episcopacy should not take its place in that process. *Thirdly*, if all movement in the ecumenical field breaks down because of the difficulty of reconciling episcopal and non-episcopal communions, the proper reaction for Methodism would be to pause to ask what the Spirit was saying to the Churches through the breakdown. It is by no means clear that, in that situation, Methodism would judge that it should seek the historic episcopate unilaterally at once. To some extent the arguments of this paragraph are consonant with the position taken in the second dissentient statement at the end of the report.

10. The resolution that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would be advisable, **'whether a concrete scheme for union with another Church or other Churches was in prospect or not'**, was lost by 9 votes to 15 with 2 neutral.

11. In the event, however, the General Synod of the Church of England gave provisional approval to the proposals of the Churches' Council for Covenanting. This means that the debate in Conference this year will take place with a concrete scheme for a covenant with other churches in, at least distant, prospect. The proper inference from the voting in the Faith and Order Committee is that episcopacy should be discussed now with specific reference to the CCC proposals and that whatever judgements are now reached should not necessarily stand if the CCC proposals were eventually to fail. Nevertheless the report contains much material that is helpful and relevant to the new situation, particularly in the discussion of who should become bishops in Methodism if there are indeed to be bishops.

12. The committee then considered the situation in which, for one reason or another, Methodism had decided to include the historic episcopate in its life. The question then arises: who should become bishops? The report deals with this matter in Section D especially in paragraph (6). A majority of the committee followed the working party in the belief that a superintendent who supervised the preaching and pastoral work over a large area and presided over a group of ministerial and lay colleagues admirably represented traditional Methodism, and such an office was easily reconciled with an episcopal structure. The correct way forward would be to amalgamate circuits into new units, larger than the present circuits but smaller than districts, and so develop our system that the superintendent (and superintendency is an office rooted in Methodism) might be in a position to exercise the episcopal function of oversight and to be recognised as a symbol of unity and continuity over a substantial area. The case for

this development of the office of superintendent is set out in paragraphs D (3) and (6) of the report and the penultimate paragraph of the Agreed Summary.

13. A minority in the Faith and Order Committee argued that, if Methodism was to have bishops, the development of the office of chairman rather than of superintendent would provide the best way ahead. This possibility was recognised in the report in paragraphs D (4) and (6) and in the Agreed Statement. The sub-committee summarises the arguments as follows:

Methodism has already developed its own form of oversight leading to the present office of chairman.

Chairmen already exercise many of the functions that belong to episcopal oversight. e.g. stationing and responsibilities regarding discipline.

Any re-organisation that implied a previous deficiency in our structure or that caused widespread disruption to the system ought to be avoided.

The multiplication of bishops in Methodism so that Methodism had more than other churches would not help ecumenical relations nor encourage our people to take episcopacy seriously.

14. Nevertheless more than two thirds of the Faith and Order Committee supported the view of the working party. The resolution that, **‘a further development of the present superintendency represented the most acceptable method of receiving the historic episcopate’**, was carried by 17 votes to 8 with one neutral.

15. It must be recognised that the historic episcopate does not exist in Christendom in a single universally recognised form. The historic episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church differs from that of the Church of England and both differ from that of the Church of South India, and so on. It would be sad if a bold and prophetic act on the part of the Methodist Church led only to a slight rearrangement of the partitions, that is to say, if the historic episcopate espoused by Methodism received only limited recognition. It would be equally sad if the move created new partitions between Methodism and the other non-episcopal churches. For this reason the committee registered the opinion that, **‘the widest possible consultation with other churches should take place at once’** if Conference decided to proceed.

16. The committee considered the question of how Methodism ought to express its mind on this matter. Many issues, even doctrinal issues, are settled by a simple majority in Conference, and this is a good thing because, if larger majorities were always needed, it would become difficult for Conference to express itself at all. Nevertheless, in a matter of this kind, where the Church is committing itself to a great act of faith and is resolving a problem that has existed since John Wesley laid hands on Thomas Coke on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1784, a large consensus is plainly necessary. The matter would, of course, be provisional legislation, but the committee expressed the judgement that, **‘Conference should begin the process of consulting districts and circuits on this matter only if 75% of those voting in Conference expressed themselves in favour.’**

17. In conclusion the committee points out that, despite the wide-ranging nature of the report, there are inevitably many matters that require still further consideration. The significance of the role of bishop in uniting and expressing in a person the pastoral concerns of the whole ministry of the Church, and the manner in which the historic episcopate symbolises and furthers the unity of the Church, through time and across the world, are among them. And there is the further question of the relation of corporate to personal episcopacy. In all Christian communions the will of God is

thought to be expressed partly in the actions, both legislative and pastoral, of certain properly constituted groups (in our case the committees and councils of the Church and especially the Conference), and partly in the words and actions of individuals who are given responsibility in appropriate areas. (There are, of course, other ways in which the will of God is expressed, but we are here concerned only with the constitutional aspect of the matter.) Two questions must be asked. How far do the present proposals involve a change in balance between the two modes, the council and the person? And how will Methodism profit both internally and externally from whatever change in balance there might be? In practice the questions that need further considerations are:

- (a) the relation between the episcopal functions of the Conference and those of future bishops, especially in the matter of ordination.
- (b) the relation of the President as the representative and agent of Conference to the episcopate.
- (c) the contribution which Methodist experience of corporate episcopacy can make to the episcopacy of the future.
- (d) the question of how the disciplines of stationing will bear upon those ministers who become bishops.
- (e) the position of those ministers who will serve in an episcopal church without being episcopally ordained.
- (f) the problem of how a Methodist bishop could be enabled to combine his proper administrative cares with the fulfilment of his pastoral and missionary role.

*(Agenda 1981, pp. 55-8)*



## EPISCOPACY AND METHODIST DOCTRINAL STANDARDS (1982)

1. In 1980-81 the Faith and Order Committee was asked to consider whether the acceptance of the historic episcopate would violate our doctrinal standards. The Committee reached the conclusion that these standards would not be violated and reported this to the Conference of 1981. From this it followed that no question of amending the Deed of Union under the Methodist Church Act 1976 para. 5(2), would arise if the present proposals for covenanting were pursued to a successful conclusion.
2. The committee has now been asked to explain its judgement by reference to the Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union, and further, by reference to Methodist usage, and it gladly complies.
3. First we consider the Deed of Union in which Methodism commits itself to Scripture, the Apostolic Faith, the historic creeds, and the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation. No case can be made that episcopacy violates the Apostolic Faith or the historic creeds. The creeds were composed and the Faith was preserved for centuries within a church that was episcopally ordered. Neither can it be argued that the repudiation of episcopacy was one of the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation. Trenchant as were the reformers' criticism of mediaeval Catholicism, they rarely attacked episcopacy as such. Their primary theological targets were the Roman doctrines of Merit, Scripture and Tradition, and the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice. Luther's doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers was not directed against bishops but against one particular view of the doctrine of the Church, which drew a false distinction between the ministry of bishops and priests and the ministry of the rest of the people of God.
4. Methodism is identified with the Evangelical Faith, but that faith is not essentially anti-episcopal. John Wesley completed his life's work within an episcopal body, and approved of the ordering of the Church of England. He sought episcopal ordination for the ministers and superintendents who were to carry on the work in America, but it was refused. His clashes with the prevailing church order were on practical, not theological, grounds. Many who have inherited the Evangelical Faith of the Wesleys are still to be found within the Church of England; some of them are themselves bishops.
5. Similarly, Scripture provides no argument that the acceptance of episcopacy violates evangelical doctrine. Scripture does not require episcopacy, nor does it preclude it. The government of the New Testament churches was a very *ad hoc* affair. Different patterns pertained.
6. When the Deed of Union becomes specific, it speaks not about bishops but about the whole ordained ministry. Ministers 'hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people'. Further, 'no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class'. And again, 'For the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the Ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination.' At the same time, the Deed requires that ministers, 'shall be ordained by the imposition of hands'.

7. These paragraphs are emphatic in their rejection of any peculiarly priestly character in the ordained ministry. The introduction of any such notion would violate our doctrines. The question is whether the acceptance of episcopacy constitutes a step in that direction.
8. Despite the negative statements in the Deed of Union, the idea of priesthood has a long and honourable history in Scripture and in the Christian faith. Fidelity, commitment, and indeed effectiveness, are marks of the true priesthood in the Old Testament, which explains why Our Lord is described as our great high priest in the Epistle to the Hebrews. All readily agree that Our Lord's priesthood is shared in some measure with the whole company of believers in the Church. Nevertheless, the Deed excludes certain expressions of priesthood as descriptions of the status and function of the Methodist Ministry.
9. What are these objectionable features of priesthood? Plainly not the being 'set apart by ordination', since our doctrine requires this; nor the traditional intercessory or pastoral functions of the priest, since we prize and practise these things. The objectionable features must be the notions that a priest has a unique status before God, that he is an essential mediator, offering to God the sacrifice of the Mass.
10. The question of unique status is easily resolved. If Methodist ministers are set apart by ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments, and yet hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people, it is clear that it is possible to ordain certain people without conveying to them status unacceptable to Methodism. If it is possible to do this with ministers, then it is possible to ordain some within the ministerial body as bishops, without offending against our doctrines. On these grounds, it is illogical to suggest that, whereas the ordination of ministers conveys no priestly character, the ordination of bishops would do so.
11. It may be argued that the ordination of bishops would be different because bishops of other communions would be involved as a matter of necessity. But bishops of other Communion have been involved in ordinations in the CSI and the CNI for a long time and there has never been any doubt among us that the practice was wholesome and positive as an act of fellowship between churches, nor that the Methodist ministers so ordained were entirely acceptable. The presence of a bishop from another communion in these cases has not required us to take any view of ordination contrary to that which we have always taken, and the same would hold good if the covenanting proposals were implemented.
12. The argument about unique status, can therefore, only be maintained by those who reject every kind of ordained ministry. The Deed of Union requires ordination, and the acceptance of episcopacy is a further step within the terms laid down by the Deed.
13. Methodism accepts the doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers, which affirms that, through the work of Christ, every believer has direct access to God. Consequently no functionary, whether priest or bishop, is necessary for mediation between God and men. There are no grounds for saying, however, that a Methodist episcopal order, understood in terms of the Deed of Union, would pretend to authority in mediation when an ordained ministry so understood does not.
14. The doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers, properly understood, also has reference to the intercessory and missionary work of the church. All believers,

both individually and as a group, are charged with the task of entering into the ministry of Christ and bringing others to God through him. The acceptance of episcopacy may be justified by the argument that it will make the task easier and it may be attacked on the grounds that it will not. But it cannot be maintained that the acceptance of episcopacy would be a denial of this intercessory and missionary responsibility.

15. Similarly, as an episcopal Church, Methodism would be no nearer to a doctrine of propitiatory sacrifice in the Mass than it is today. The MSB was published in 1975. It is expected to last for thirty years or more. No change in our doctrine of Holy Communion is envisaged and none of those who have contended for the acceptance of episcopacy have suggested any such change. There is no reason why they should.
16. Perhaps it is feared that the acceptance of the *historic episcopate*, as distinct from other forms of episcopacy, implies certain doctrines contrary to our standards. Such fear is not justified. In the first place, acceptance of the historic episcopate is not to be equated with belief in the apostolic succession. The historic episcopate witnesses to the continuity of the church on the ground and through the centuries. Establishing and counting (or questioning and disputing) what were the actual links between the apostles and the present day is no necessary part of it. Episcopacy in this sense is a witness to the visible presence of the Church through space and time. In the second place, we are not asked to believe that bishops are essential to validate the Church, but we are asked to accept the historic episcopate as necessary for the promotion of unity, that is to say, in deference to the conscience of others, and as a sign, additional to those which we already have, of the continuity of the People of God from early times.
17. No doubt it was for reasons such as these that the Conference accepted the episcopal constitution of the CSI and the CNI and was prepared, in 1969, to take episcopacy into its system. Nothing has altered since then to affect the theological factors involved.
18. Another fear may be that episcopal ordination in Methodism will cut us off from the ministries of non-episcopal churches. But in accepting episcopacy we are not passing judgment on non-episcopal ministries. On the contrary, our own ministry, non-episcopal as it is, will be recognised and accepted by the other covenanting churches, as it stands. The introduction of episcopacy is a prophetic act that looks forward to the distant future. In the meantime there is nothing to prevent us from having the same relations with non-episcopal churches as we enjoy at the moment.
19. Turning to Methodist usage, we recognise that our Standing Orders are not theologically sterile. Rather they represent the doctrines of the Methodist Church in practical and structural ways. Nevertheless, usage is much more open to development and change than doctrine, as the annual amendments to CPD demonstrate. Nor is it only in small matters that our usage develops. The last few decades have seen the emergence of separated chairmen, the acceptance of women ministers, and the complete re-structuring programme, all of which represent important developments with strong theological overtones. There is no reason, therefore, to suppose that a change of the kind proposed would be a serious dislocation or unacceptable development of our usage.

20. The two areas in which the acceptance of episcopacy would be most likely to affect our usage are the act of ordination and the question of how authority is distributed through the Church.
21. Strictly speaking, as there is but one order in the Methodist ministry, Methodist ordinations are presbyteral, that is to say, ministers are ordained by other ministers. The laity have a part in voting at various stages and in the acclamation and prayers in the ordination service, but the primary actions are taken by ministers. Nevertheless the idea that any minister or group of ministers can, in fact, ordain is not consistent with our usage, at least since Methodist union. SO 718(6) states that preachers on trial, 'shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by his deputy, assisted by other ministers.' If Methodism adopts an episcopal order and, as is generally supposed, the President becomes a bishop, if he is not one already, then our usage in regard to ordinations will not be fundamentally changed. The President-bishop, ministers including those nominated by the ordinands, and the laity could all take part as at present. There would be a new ordinal and the various services would not all take place in the vicinity of Conference. Instead, the regions in which the ordinands were to work would provide the setting, and candidates from other covenanting churches would also be ordained. So future colleagues would be ordained together in the presence of the people to whom they would minister. This represents change, but change in terms of normal development rather than dislocation. It is possible that the Conference may wish to make other changes, but no other is actually necessary as a consequence of accepting episcopacy.
22. It is agreed by all that no order of bishops can function if the bishop is not granted some authority within the church structure and some opportunity to lead. Our present Standing Orders distribute authority and responsibility very widely through the Church, but they nevertheless assign particular tasks to particular persons and particular groups. Not everybody can do everything. It is by no means unusual for Conference to give extra responsibility to particular committees or office-bearers and no doubt the balance between the various groups and functionaries changes slightly from year to year. All this happens at present. To re-arrange responsibilities, therefore, so that bishops (whether they have emerged from among the chairmen, the superintendents, or some other group) are given some form of authority, is in no sense a dislocation of our usage. The very complexity of CPD bears witness to the fact that we are re-arranging responsibilities all the time. The two safeguards that have to be considered in this regard are, first, that the Methodist Church would be free to give to its bishops whatever authority it thought proper and equally free to limit their authority in any way it thought proper, and secondly, that bishops, like everybody else, would be subject to the Conference.
23. To sum up, there is no reason to suppose that an order of bishops would exhibit priestly features at odds with the Deed of Union or require any serious dislocation of our usage. On the contrary, there is good reason to suppose that Methodist bishops, whose role, according to the Covenanting Proposals, we are to conceive and develop in line with our own traditions and convictions, would display, and help others to display, the missionary zeal and the pastoral care to which Methodism is already deeply committed.

*(Agenda 1982, pp. 24-7)*

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Major reports on episcopacy and episcopacy were presented to the Conferences of 1998 and 2000 (see Volume 2, pp. 370-411).

### (iii) World Council of Churches

#### **RESPONSE TO THE EDINBURGH 'AFFIRMATION OF UNION', AND PROPOSED WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (1938)**

The Conference heartily welcomes the unanimous *Affirmation of union in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ* with which the sessions at Edinburgh were concluded. The Conference would make its own the solemn declaration: 'We are one in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. We are one in allegiance to Him as Head of the Church and as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are one in acknowledging that this allegiance takes precedence of any other allegiance that may make claims upon us.' The Conference believes that though the various Churches differ in the outward forms of our life in Christ, and do not wholly agree in their interpretation of His Will for His Church, a renewed and enhanced devotion to Christ as the Redeemer of men will draw us unto that closer unity which we seek.

(ii) The Conference joins in the thankfulness expressed at Edinburgh for the unanimity of the conclusions in the exposition of the doctrine of the Grace of God. The Conference takes especial note of the conclusion that, for the salvation of mankind, 'God bestows His Grace in the Church on its members through His Word and Sacraments, and in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit,' and that though there is a certain difference of emphasis placed upon the Word and the Sacraments, 'such a difference need not be a barrier to union.' The Conference regards the unanimous statement of the Edinburgh Conference that 'there is in connection with the subject of Grace no ground for maintaining division between the Churches,' as a notable advance towards the goal of the unity of the Churches.

(iii) While welcoming the agreements registered in the Report on 'The Church of Christ and the Word of God,' the Conference is convinced that the subject of the Nature of the Church needs more thorough and sustained study than has yet been given to it in the Faith and Order Movement. The differences revealed in the Report on such far-reaching questions as the relation of Holy Scripture to tradition, the basis of Church membership, the relation of the Church to the Kingdom of God, and the mutual recognition of the divided communions of Christendom as belonging to the one Church of God on earth, need further discussion and clarification.

The Conference believes that the differences between the various communions with regard to the Ministry can only be resolved by agreement on this prior question of the Nature of the Church, and once more commends to our own people the statement on *The Nature of the Christian Church according to the Teaching of the Methodists*, adopted by the Bradford Conference of 1937.

(iv) While recognising that there are subjects relating to the nature of the Sacraments that need further discussion, the Conference welcomes the agreements reached about them at Edinburgh, and especially the declaration that 'the Sacraments practised by any Christian Church which believes itself to be observing what Christ appointed for His Church are means of grace to those who partake of them with faith.'

(v) The Conference takes note of the serious divisions manifested, both in the Edinburgh Conference and in its Report, on the question of 'Validity.' The ambiguities inherent in the use of the term arise from different conceptions of the nature of the Church, including the question of the nature of the ministerial office. A greater measure of agreement on these central and determining conceptions must precede agreement on validity.

(vi) In view of the repeated and recent testimonies to the unifying influence of common worship, the Conference re-affirms its conviction that nothing would do so much to realise the unity of the Spirit as fellowship at the Lord's Table between the members of different branches of the Church Universal. The Conference believes that the failure to overcome our division at this point is not only a grave hindrance to progress in our quest for unity but a scandal with immeasurable results in the life of the whole Church of God. It urges that the attention of the Faith and Order Movement be concentrated on possible ways of putting an end to this scandal.

The Conference notes that, both at Oxford and at Edinburgh, a Church has invited all those who have full status in their own Churches to receive the Holy Communion according to the rite of the inviting Church. The Conference welcomes this practice, and urges that it be maintained and extended, especially at gatherings of Christian people united in a common enterprise.

(vii) The Conference gives especial welcome to the following unanimous recommendation of the Edinburgh Conference:

The World Conference of Faith and Order 'urges on all the Churches the desirability of organising and participating in efforts of evangelism in co-operation with Christians of other communions, both as means of bearing effective witness before the multitudes who are detached from Christianity, and as a means of expressing and strengthening that unity in the Gospel which binds together in spiritual fellowship those who owe allegiance to different Churches.'

The Conference recommends our people to take every possible opportunity of putting this resolution into practice.

1. The Conference adopts the following resolutions (*Agenda*, p. 430 and p. 476):

- (i) The carrying out of the proposal that the two Ecumenical Movements ('Life and Work' and 'Faith and Order') should be more closely related, in a body representative of the Churches, and caring for the interests of each Movement, is greatly to be desired, as the Conference believes that the differing problems of each will probably best be solved when we are in presence of the whole situation.
- (ii) The work of these two Movements, and especially of the Faith and Order Movement, is of such importance, and has met with such encouragement, that in the opinion of the Conference the work of the Faith and Order Continuation Committee should be carried on in the freedom hitherto enjoyed, under the conditions suggested in the Edinburgh Conference Report.
- (iii) The Conference sustains the proposal for strengthening the Ecumenical Movement by the formation, if it commends itself to the Christian

Churches concerned in this and other countries, of a World Council of Christian Churches, to bring into closer relation the two great ecumenical movements: 'Faith and Order' and 'Life and Work.'

- (iv) The Conference shares the opinion of the Faith and Order Committee that while the two movements are thus brought together in the proposed World Council of Christian Churches, they should not be merged but that each should continue to have such freedom to carry on its work, as will serve its own distinctive ends. The Conference earnestly hopes that at an early opportunity other ecumenical movements, particularly the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, will be brought into close and organic relations with the proposed Councils.

*(Minutes 1938, pp. 70-3)*

## **THE THIRD WORLD CONFERENCE ON FAITH AND ORDER, LUND (1952)**

*The Lund Conference was held in 1952. The report was approved by Conference in 1953.*

### **I. SUMMARY OF REPORT**

Chapter I points to the degree of mutual understanding now reached, and urges that the only way forward is to *act* in obedience to the unity already achieved.

Chapter II, on 'Christ and His Church', asserts the inseparable union between Christ and His Church, and the inseparable connexion between the nature and the mission of the Church. It treats of the Church as a pilgrim people in a strange land, waiting for the consummation of its redemption, but already sharing through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the power of the resurrection. It calls on all the Churches to submit themselves to the judgement of Christ; and lays upon the Faith and Order Movement the task of studying the doctrine of the Church in close relation to the doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Chapter III, on 'Continuity and Unity', reaffirming the unity of the Church, states that the Pauline image of the Church as the Body of Christ is a living reality, not a mere metaphor. It points out the different conceptions of continuity within the Body held by the various communions, notes certain small advances in the direction of reconciliation and calls for the setting up of an ecumenical Commission to study the history which all the Churches have in common. It discusses the notion of schism, with especial reference to the current doctrine of internal schism, which not all members of the Conference could accept. It draws attention to the social and cultural factors which sometimes cause and often accentuate our divisions, and gives many examples of profitable co-operation which are possible and necessary now. It recommends the further study of the conception of a covenant relation between the Churches as a means to the end of organic union.

Chapter IV, on 'Ways of Worship', treats largely of the divisions within the Church between those who practise liturgical worship and those whose worship is spontaneous, and between those who give primacy to the Sacrament and those who give it to the preaching of the Word; in each case it asserts that the two apparent opposites are in fact complementary, and welcomes an unexpected approach towards agreement on the sacrificial aspect of the Holy Communion. It goes on to show the great importance of non-theological factors in the matter of divergences in worship, and makes many recommendations for study and practical experiment with the end of greater mutual understanding and agreement.

Chapter V, on 'Intercommunion', propounds a definitive terminology for the discussion of this and cognate issues. It records the deep difference between those, in a large majority, who consider that an extension of the practice of intercommunion would be a valuable preparation for the fuller unity to which we look forward, and those who believe that fellowship in the Sacrament should be postponed until the time of organic unity or the presence of mutually acceptable ministries. But it acknowledges that the Sacrament in all the divided Churches is a real means of grace



through which Christ gives Himself to the believer. It calls on all the Churches to look further into their doctrine and practice, in view of certain inconsistencies which are observable. It concludes by making the recommendation that united Communion Services at Ecumenical Gatherings should be held at the invitation of the local church or churches which sanction such services.

Chapter VI summarizes the findings of the Conference and calls on all Christians to throw off their apathy, to take part in the tasks of study and service which lie before us, and to be ready to receive what God is waiting to give us.

Appendices give the new constitution and membership of the Faith and Order Commission within the World Council of Churches.

## II. COMMENTS OF THE COMMITTEE

1. The Committee commends to the Methodist people, the careful study of the Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order: also the preparatory Reports of the Commissions on 'the Church' 'ways of Worship' and 'Intercommunion', and of the three volumes prepared in connexion with them.

2. The Committee welcomes the complete integration of the Faith and Order movement with the World Council of Churches but deplors the smallness of the new Faith and Order Commission with the consequently inadequate representation of Methodism and other communions.

3. The Committee while valuing the stress laid by the Report on the union between Christ and His Church, which is His body, regrets the almost complete exclusion of the other New Testament descriptions of the Church. Thus conceived, almost solely as the Body of Christ, the Church may usurp some of the functions of the Holy Spirit. The Committee therefore welcomes the recommendation that further study be given to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as well as to the doctrine of Christ in relation to the Church.

4. The Committee regrets that there is no reference in the Report to the chief differences between the Churches on the nature of the Church and particularly on the question of authority (as indicated in the preparatory volume entitled 'The Church') and consequently no clear statement of the problem with which the Theological Commission was confronted. For this reason, it commends to the attention of our people the preparatory report on the Church which was in the hands of the delegates at Lund and should be studied side by side with the larger volume on the nature of the Church.

5. The Committee regards as especially valuable the emphasis throughout the Report on the relation of social, cultural and economic factors to Church Unity and hopes that this matter will be more fully explored. It considers that where these factors are allowed to determine our attitude towards other communions, they become symptoms of a denial of our common fellowship in Christ and potent instruments of disunity.

6. The Committee notes that in spite of certain tendencies towards an undue sacramentalism and towards an exclusive emphasis on liturgical worship in the preparatory report of the Theological Commission on 'Ways of Worship', the Report of the Conference preserves the balance between 'liturgical' and 'free worship', giving to each a place and that it asserts that differences as to the relation of word and

Sacrament should never be more than a matter of emphasis within the one worship of the whole Church.

7. The Committee welcomes as a clear sign of advance in mutual understanding by the Churches represented at Lund the statement: 'We are agreed in recognising the administration of the Lord's Supper in the divided Churches, when controlled by the words of institution, as real means of grace through which Christ gives Himself to those who in faith receive the appointed elements of bread and wine'.

8. The Committee willingly accedes to the statement of doctrine about the Holy Communion which the Report believes to be acceptable to the great majority of the Churches represented at the Conference: 'This dominical sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, controlled by the words of institutions, with the use of the appointed elements of bread and wine, is: (a) a memorial of Christ's incarnation and earthly ministry, of His death and resurrection; (b) a sacrament in which He is truly present to give Himself to us, uniting us to Himself, to His eternal sacrifice, and to one another; and (c) eschatologically, an anticipation of our fellowship with Christ in His eternal kingdom.' It is hoped that the understanding already reached in relation to Holy Communion will be fostered and increased by common study and worship within the ecumenical movement; and that every opportunity will be taken by the members of the various communions to experience and appreciate modes of worship not familiar to them.

9. The Committee wholeheartedly accepts the majority view in the Report that a 'valuable preparation for the fuller unity to which we look forward would be the extension of the practice of intercommunion between different Churches'; and that intercommunion, when agreed without sacrifice of principle, 'may properly and beneficially precede reunion'.

10. The Committee agrees to the suggestion that all Churches should re-examine their ways of ordering and administering the Lord's Supper, in the hope of fuller agreement between them; but is convinced of the great spiritual advantages of opening the Table to all true believers in Christ.

11. The Committee agrees to and will help to carry out the recommendations made by the Report in respect of Communion Services at Ecumenical gatherings, the chief of which is that the local church or churches which sanction such services should invite all members of the gathering to an Open Communion Service.

12. The Committee pledges itself without reserve to full participation in the future conversations of the Faith and Order Movement, and calls upon all Circuits and Churches in Methodism, and all its ministers and members, to act together with other Churches in obedience to the unity which is already ours, and to co-operate with them in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately. It prays that by expressing in action the unity already achieved all the Churches may be led forward by the Holy Spirit into a deeper and fuller unity.

*(Agenda 1953, pp. 31-4)*

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The Conference of 1985 adopted a response to the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (see Volume 2, pp. 412-429).

## **Part VII Other Faiths**

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## USE OF TRUST PREMISES (1972)

There is evidence that minority religious groups recently arrived in this country have difficulty in obtaining premises for their worship. They often at first use private houses, but these may prove too small; and any publicity given to worship in homes may involve them in difficulties with planning authorities. There are also sudden emergencies as in an actual case where their place of worship was accidentally destroyed by fire. The Churches often possess premises which they let for social purposes. In some cases minority religious groups have hired such premises and then cannot understand if they are not allowed to use them for acts of worship. These minority communities need emotional security, and to dig roots, and their worship is of primary importance in giving them cohesion and a sense of belonging. The Churches should give a lead in establishing good relations between these groups and the rest of the community. There is no doubt about the desirability of dialogue with them and friendship towards them. As human beings they have a right to freedom of worship, and Christians should help them to exercise their rights. Must this stop short of permitting worship in Methodist premises?

Some Christians see no great difficulty in this question. They can point to a number of biblical texts which take it for granted that there was some knowledge and service of God outside of the Jewish Christian tradition. They emphasise the continuity between the various faiths of the world, which they see as all species of the genus 'religion' even though some religions are better than others. Some Christians would add that Christ is present 'incognito' in other faiths; and if their worship is not explicitly Christian, it is nevertheless to be encouraged.

Other Christians find the problem more difficult. They believe the weight of biblical evidence to be heavily against the 'inclusive' position outlined above, and stress the discontinuity between that to which Christians bear witness and all human forms of religion; God has said something in Christ which is a judgement on all religion (including much 'Christianity'): Christ calls men to repentance in order to redeem them. Buildings erected to bear witness to Christ are part of the Christian proclamation. Witness to Christ can best be borne in friendly human relations leading to natural dialogue, rather than by appearing to approve the worship of other faiths. What justification is there for continuing missionary work overseas amongst those of other faiths if at home we take steps which seem to rest on the assumption that there will be no proselytisation? We must also consider Christians, both overseas and among immigrants here, who left other faiths at great personal cost. A group of immigrant Christians, admittedly fairly conservative in its outlook, has indeed expressed its disapproval.

Other Christians, while largely holding the theological principles just outlined, point out that the obligation to show a gracious Christian charity is itself a theological principle, rooted in the very nature of God. Thus two theological principles come into conflict. In their judgement the principle of charity should prevail.

The majority of the committee took the view that in certain circumstances it should be made permissible to allow the use of our premises for such worship. This would not imply any denial of the uniqueness and finality of Christ nor any judgement as to the truth of other religions. While some do not attach any 'mystique' to buildings, it was generally felt that normally only the ancillary premises would be used by adherents of other faiths, but as in some premises there is no clear distinction, this was not written into the recommendation.

Permission should be given only when no other building is immediately available and should be temporary. Such communities will normally wish to have premises of their own as soon as possible, and thus the problem may solve itself in a decade or so. The Committee also considered the suggestion that such permission should be confined to certain types of religion, e.g. to monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, or Sikhism, or to religions which avoid the worship of idols. It was, however, found difficult to draw up precise definitions; so it is suggested that the responsibility be given to the Superintendent Minister and the Trustees to ensure that there will be no overt attack on the Christian Religion and that the worship will not either in word or act be offensive to the Christian conscience. Nothing should be done without the goodwill of the local congregation, which can be ascertained through the Leaders' Meeting or the Society or in any other way.

If the Conference accepts this recommendation it will not, however, become operative, as it would be contrary to the provisions of the Model Deed, as interpreted by Counsel (Representative Agenda 1970, p.21), to which the Law and Polity Committee did not demur: the alteration would need an Act of Parliament. It is not for the Faith and Order Committee to say what should be done when what is held by the Law and Polity Committee to be legally possible is less than what is held by the Faith and Order Committee to be theologically desirable, but it asks the Conference to refer that conflict to the General Purposes Committee.

The Faith and Order Committee gives to this Conference this summary of its discussion, in the hope of showing how it reached its conclusions. The Conference is invited to endorse what follows:

(Clauses 1-4 summarise the views which the Committee previously expressed and which still stand: Clause 5 contains the view here expressed for the first time, to which this discussion led.)

#### **Opinions and Recommendations on the use of Trust Premises**

- (1) Local churches should take the initiative to establish 'dialogue' with the representatives of other faiths.
- (2) Adherents of other faiths should be allowed the use of Methodist premises for their secular and social activities.
- (3) Such occasions may be permitted even when an incidental religious rite is involved, as for example, the saying of grace at a meal, a brief blessing attached to a wedding reception following a religious wedding elsewhere (but not a full religious wedding service), or an act of individual prayer demanded at a particular hour. (These occasions are listed separately, as they are already legally permissible and the Faith and Order Committee has already expressed its approval of them. If paragraph 5 is accepted and the worship described in it eventually becomes legally permissible, the distinctions drawn in this paragraph will not be necessary).
- (4) Christians should take opportunities where it is permitted for the sympathetic observation of other faiths, with a view to deeper understanding, and should gladly accept whatever experience and communion with God arises in such relationships. Those Christians who are called to make a deep study of another faith would best do so by sympathetic observation of its worship in its regular services. Christians should scrupulously avoid those forms of inter-faith worship which

compromise the distinctive faiths of the participants and should ensure that Christian witness is neither distorted nor muted; nor should they encourage occasions in which those of different faiths do in turn what is characteristic of their own religion, but in the present climate of opinion with its tendencies to syncretism should stress the distinctiveness of the Christian faith.

*(Agenda 1972, pp. 281-4)*

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The Conference adopted the report in the above form, having removed its final paragraph which read as follows:

- (5) The Committee is of the opinion that to give permission to non-Christian communities as an expression of Christian love and the desire to improve relations to hold their worship in Methodist premises does not of itself imply any denial of the uniqueness and finality of Christ or any judgment on the truth of other religions. It therefore recommends that when a non-Christian community seeks permission to use Methodist premises for its worship because no building is immediately available for its use the Superintendent, Minister and Trustees should be given discretion to grant permission as a temporary measure if they are satisfied that the worship will not offend the Christian conscience and that such permission will have the goodwill of the local congregation.

The Conference of 1997 adopted *The Use of Methodist Premises by Other Faith Communities* (see Volume 2, pp. 439-450).

## INTER-FAITH MARRIAGES (1972)

- (1) The Minister should discuss fully with the parties the religious, domestic and social implications of a marriage between a Christian and a member of another religion.
- (2) The normal practice should be to supplement a ceremony in the Register Office by prayers in the home. Such prayers should not take the form of the new Service of Blessing. This practice accords with that of most overseas Churches in countries from which members of other faiths have come. (Any suggestions that the new Service of Blessing creates less difficulty for such a 'mixed marriage' than the new Marriage Service is ruled out on the grounds that the Christian content of the two services is identical.)
- (3) None the less it is recognised that the result of the pastoral counselling involved in (1) may be that both parties desire the marriage service. In this event, the following conditions are suggested:
  - (a) The non-Christian partner respects the Christian convictions of the other partner and his/her right both to practise the Christian faith and to seek to bring up any children of the marriage in this faith.
  - (b) The non-Christian partner, having read the Service, has expressed willingness to take part in it.
  - (c) Nothing should be *added* to the structure of the Service.
  - (d) The *omissions* in the service should be minimal, and have regard only to what the non-Christian partner cannot say in good conscience.

This might involve the following omissions:

**The New Marriage Service**

7: the final words ('in the name of . . . Holy Spirit'.)

**The New Service of Blessing**

6: (middle) the first phrase ('In the name of . . . Holy Spirit') and the word 'Christian' in the second line.

**The 1936 Order for Matrimony**

(At the giving of the Ring, if the person giving the Ring is not a Christian) the words 'in the Name . . . Holy Ghost'.

*(Agenda 1972, pp. 284f)*

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The Conference of 2000 adopted a further report on this matter (see Volume 2, pp. 451-453).



## RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS (1983)

'Dialogue' is a relative newcomer to the Christian vocabulary. It was first popularised as a reaction to the kind of missionary engagement in which the Christian preacher assumed that he possessed the whole truth and his hearers none. Unfortunately, therefore, the word 'dialogue' has often been taken to mean the very denial of preaching or evangelism, whereas it can become full of creative possibilities for Christians in their relations with people of other faiths. This is the theme of the British Council of Churches' booklet: *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain* (1981).

The Faith and Order Committee has set itself the task over the next five years of trying to help Methodists make a positive Christian response to the presence of other faiths in Britain today. To prepare the ground we here commend to the study of the Methodist people the B.C.C. booklet and make our own first brief response to it.

We understand dialogue to be a proper part of the total mission we are called to – a mission which is rooted in the belief that God, as Jesus Christ has revealed him, is not simply the God of Christians but the God of the whole universe. This belief John Wesley reinforces in Sermon XCI, 'On Charity': '... He "is rich in mercy" to all who call upon Him according to the light they have, and "in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him."' God's purpose embraces creation and redemption. He is the Lord of nature, of history and of people of every nation, race and language; and he calls us to share his active love towards our fellow human creatures whoever they be.

This will involve our entering into conversation with our neighbours of other faiths: and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves means that we do not monopolise the conversation but allow him to express himself, his hopes, his fears, his heritage (p. 5:3, p. 7). Conversation or dialogue is an integral part of loving another person. It is not a technique to break down the other's defences and win his allegiance to Christ more easily. In dialogue both partners have much to learn; the Christian must want to know what the God of the universe has been doing in the life and heritage of his partner as well as to share his own experience of God-in-Christ. There must be respect for the integrity and contribution of the other partner as well as freedom to witness to what rings true for oneself.

At the same time, Christians will recognise that truth for them is essentially a person, Jesus Christ, and that he is the norm by which they try to discover what is creative and what is destructive in their own and others' faiths. But we can speak of a shared search for truth, in that the truth is greater than the members of any faith have grasped. Indeed, Christians may well find that they are shaken to the foundations by dialogue.

Dialogue with people of other faiths certainly has its own intrinsic value quite apart from whether it wins people to allegiance to Christ or not. The Christian partner will usually emerge from dialogue a more sensitive and discerning Christian. Also, insofar as dialogue is often part and parcel of community building in a multi-faith neighbourhood, it finds its place in the total mission of the Church which derives from the activity of God. Of course we shall want to co-operate with people of all faiths and of none who are working for a more just and peaceful world.

None of these considerations inhibits the Christian from witnessing to his experience of the universal Lordship of Christ in the presence of people of other faiths, though it will affect the *manner* in which this is done (p. 12). It detracts neither from the urgency of evangelism nor from the centrality of commitment to Christ. While recognising the Holy Spirit's sovereign freedom in the work of conversion. Christians involved in formal interfaith meetings will refrain from using these as opportunities for soliciting converts. The Church's ministry of preaching for decision will be exercised on other more appropriate occasions. Nevertheless such preaching and evangelism ought always to be sensitive to the principles of dialogue.

As the B.C.C. booklet makes clear, dialogue covers many different forms of meeting from the formal to the personal, but however or wherever the Christian engages in evangelism, people of other faiths must be left 'utterly free to respond as free persons to God's act in Christ, whether that response is that they be confirmed in their original faith or that they take the step of acknowledging Christ as Lord' (p. 12). We believe that the principles of dialogue as set out in the B.C.C. booklet always apply, namely, I. Dialogue begins when people meet each other (p. 4), II. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust (p. 5), III. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community (p. 6) and IV. Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness (p. 6).

Many of the observations we make above are reiterated and vividly illustrated in the B.C.C. booklet. Very practical guidance is given to Christians who already share friendships with people of other faiths, and Christians who do not yet enjoy this privilege are helped to appreciate that the subject still applies to them. There are statements on the subject from world Christian bodies like the World Council of Churches (pp. 8-10), the Second Vatican Council (p. 11), the International Congress on World Evangelism etc. (p. 13); and the subject is applied to issues such as community relations, hospital chaplaincy work, interfaith marriages, religious education in local authority and denominational schools, the use by others of church premises and interfaith services (pp. 14-19).

The booklet also includes three Bible studies (pp. 20f) as well as two pages of resource material (pp. 22f), and is divided into short manageable sections which make it appropriate for study by church groups.

The B.C.C. Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths responsible for the booklet includes a wide range of theological opinion as well as several Methodists. Observers from the Evangelical Alliance and Roman Catholic Church also participated in the booklet's preparation.

Copies are obtainable from the British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London SW1W 9BL, at 35p plus postage and packing.

*(Agenda 1983, pp. 57f)*

## **Part VIII Miscellaneous**

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## **A FIXED EASTER (1965)**

The Committee has reason to believe that the Conference desires the necessary steps to be taken for the institution of a fixed Easter, and as the result of a suggestion from the Joint Liturgical Group asks the Conference to notify its wishes in the matter to the British Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches.

*(Agenda 1965, p. 43)*

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The Conference expressed its desire for a fixed Easter, but no ecumenical move in that direction took place. In 1999, the Conference approved the concept of a 'common' rather than a 'fixed' date for Easter (see Volume 2, pp. 669f).

## THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT (1974)

### 1. Terms of reference

'In view of the great interest throughout the Church in the Charismatic Movement, Conference asks the Faith and Order Committee for guidance regarding the experiences and insights involved, in the light of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit'

(Conference 1973 *Daily Record* pp. 32, 68).

### 2. Limitations

The task set by Conference is a difficult one. The Charismatic Movement itself spreads across all the major Christian denominations, though with variations in each. It is not classical Pentecostalism and yet it has much in common with it. Those who claim the 'charismatic experience' do not as a result abandon more generally held traditional beliefs about the Holy Spirit, nor do they seek a different church structure or denominational allegiance. They readily admit that the experience itself has the character of a pilgrimage and is therefore not easily definable in a static way. In any case the attempt to discover the boundaries and the exact nature of a personal experience is in itself a difficult task.

Two further difficulties must be noted at this point. The first is that a full scale examination of the biblical bases of the 'charismatic experience' would require much more time and a much fuller report than is possible here. The Committee has therefore limited itself to a few of the more obvious topics in this connection. The other difficulty is that the charismatic experience and teaching exist along-side more usual Christian experience and teaching, but also draw into their orbit certain aspects of the latter which the 'charismatic experience' highlights differently for different people. Thus some descriptions are close to 'second blessing' teaching, others to 'assurance' and so on. Discovering with exactness what is the precise differentia of the Charismatic Movement is perhaps the most difficult task of all because of this.

In facing this task the Committee has been greatly assisted by leaders of the Charismatic Movement in Methodism, whose co-operativeness, frankness and concern to avoid divisiveness were most helpful.

### 3. Positive Contributions

(a) One striking characteristic of this Movement is the way in which genuine Christian qualities are sought and enjoyed – qualities such as joyful engagement in living, inner peacefulness of personality, a sense of being empowered to obey God's will. And such experience is characterised not as 'a grim striving to achieve', but 'a patient acceptance of the Spirit's influence.' Arising from this is the significant factor that the Movement focuses attention on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, not in order to complete a specific theological system, but out of necessity to formulate a theological framework adequate to the experienced reality of Christian faith.

(b) Closely linked to this is the concept of rediscovering the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit – such as speaking with tongues, interpretation and prophecy – and learning to treat them as ordinary, or at least normal, within the Christian community. At best this is more than 'gift seeking' for it enlarges one's vision to see that all of life

is gift. We were glad to have charismatic leaders affirming that their list of gifts did not have any fixed order of priority, and that gifts like ministry, celibacy, martyrdom were also included. The stress upon what are viewed as extraordinary gifts is attributed to their previous neglect by the church at large.

(c) In particular the Movement is leading to renewed interest, and encouraging a new confidence, in the areas of healing and personal devotional life. Against a cultural background that includes excessive rationalism, secularism and scepticism the charismatic emphasis has enabled many to discover hope and liberation in these elements of Christian living.

(d) The nature of the Spirit's giving of gifts includes a double view within the Movement. On the one side the actual *giving* of gifts is envisaged, the receipt by the believer of abilities hitherto not possessed. But on the other side there is concentration upon the Spirit *releasing* and directing gifts already possessed but virtually unused. Here again there is a welcome emphasis upon the potential of the whole of one's life under the Spirit's control.

(e) Nor is this a purely individualistic experience. There is a strong corporate sense which finds expression in group fellowship and in worship. In the former there is emphasis upon the ministry exercised within the group to its members. In the latter there is the inter-dependence of those with various gifts; the speaker in tongues and the interpreter for example, or the prophet and the group testing the prophecy. There is also a freedom and spontaneity which enables full congregational participation; the involvement of the whole man; the evolution of spontaneous group preaching and the removal of unhealthy rigidity in distinguishing between laity and ordained ministry. And there is a new experience in ecumenism afforded by this Movement, a joyous unity in the Spirit and in shared experience.

(f) A positive attitude to those outside the Church is also observable. Many in the Charismatic Movement testify to a new-found freedom to speak about their faith, partly because their love and concern for others has been deepened by their spiritual experience. And there is evidence of a broader concept of responsibility to the world as the gifts of the Spirit for service outside the Church are increasingly recognised and exercised.

(g) Perhaps most striking of all is the repeated emphasis upon the Movement as essentially a 'Jesus' movement. Although there is stress upon the work of the Spirit, in both the individual and the group, His supreme role is seen as 'glorifying Jesus'. A greater love for and obedience to Christ figures constantly in charismatic testimonies. The primacy of intimate personal experience of the Lord, with evidences, is seen as central to the Holy Spirit's work in the believer, and much of the liberation and growth experienced within the Movement is based upon this single foundation.

#### **4. Causes for Concern**

We were (mercifully) not called upon to pass judgement upon the Movement. It seems right, however, that part of the 'guidance' called for by Conference should include some comment about aspects of the Movement which require further clarification or safeguards against abuse.

(a) It is doubtful whether 'Baptism in the Spirit' is the most appropriate phrase to describe the charismatic experience. In its favour there is the impression of a decisive and powerful happening, which is what the charismatic wishes to communicate by the phrase. Also, in the true verbal form 'baptize in the Holy Spirit', it occurs in the New

Testament. The debate, however, revolves around the exact application of these New Testament passages, which have normally been taken to refer to the initial entry into Christianity. The use of the phrase 'Baptism in the Spirit' to describe a later Christian experience thus causes confusion in many minds about its relationship to the liturgical act of water-baptism and the psychological experiences of conversion. An expression like 'the fulness of the Spirit' might be more accurate, so long as there was a proper balance between the context of *an event* in Acts, and *a process* in Pauline teaching about the Spirit in the believer. Here we note that various forms of theological interpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit are present alongside each other in the New Testament.

(b) There is constant danger that a movement emphasising the more exhilarating gifts of the Spirit might unintentionally create a devaluation of more ordinary gifts, such as 'administration', or lay too much stress upon any particular gift, such as 'tongues'. In fairness it must be noted that the leaders interviewed were aware of both dangers and sought to guard against them. Ministers who filled in a recent questionnaire also showed great balance in this matter. Nevertheless, the danger is inherent in this kind of emphasis and ought at least to be noted. In particular we would stress the importance of the use of the gift, rather than the emotional experience of receiving it.

(c) There is need of further study of the sociological and psychological factors involved in the experience, factors which operate in other 'charismatic' experiences both Christian and non-Christian; so that the precise differentia of the Movement, and the distinctiveness claimed for the 'baptism in the Spirit', may be more clearly identified.

(d) Where a person feels that a gift, previously exercised, has been lost, we advise caution about teaching or pastoral care which suggests that God has removed it.

(e) It should be made clear that this one Christian experience is not the clue to the solution of all problems in the Christian life. Some Christians face difficulties with psychological and sociological roots, requiring more than a spiritual experience for their resolving. It should also be emphasised that some Christians find other routes to an equally mature, satisfying and spiritual Christian experience, manifesting gifts of the Spirit without being able to testify to the particular pattern outlined within the Movement. Again, leaders were quick to take these points. Our plea is for the spread of such teaching throughout the Movement.

(f) While it is true – and the Charismatic Movement has underlined the fact – that Christianity is greatly impoverished when the rational element is stressed at the expense of the emotional and the volitional; it is equally important to guard against any danger of irrationality, with the consequent devaluing of the mind in Christian experience, since for many Christians reason is the supreme tool for discerning the Spirit. Such safeguards are particularly necessary in a Movement in which the extraordinary and the unusual receive emphasis.

At times, it must be repeated, some of those deeply involved in the Movement – including those we interviewed – have expressed their concern about some of these matters. They are listed here as part of the attempt to establish a balanced view of the total phenomenon and to show proper care for those who benefit from the 'charismatic experience'.



## 5. Guidance

(a) We recommend that this Movement be allowed the freedom to be itself within the life of our Church, and to continue to share its insights with those who wish to receive them. We offer the comments above as guidelines to be noted, not rules to be obeyed.

(b) We welcome the renewed emphasis upon the individual and corporate experience of the Holy Spirit, including those aspects of the experience highlighted by the Charismatic Movement, so long as they are not held to be universally obligatory, exclusive of or superior to other Christian insights.

(c) We wish to encourage those involved in the Charismatic Movement as they continue to explore the theological and biblical – as well as the psychological and sociological – bases of their experience and teaching. We would presume to advise, however, that they avoid the snare of stultifying the joyful experience they know in the interests of a watertight apologia for their position.

(d) We urge that all Methodists, whatever their experience of the Holy Spirit, show tolerance in seeking to understand the claims and experiences of others. In particular we would hope to avoid the splitting of societies over this issue, or the creating of a ‘second-class Christian’ outlook *in either direction*.

The Spirit blows where He wills. We express the hope that none of us will oppose His doing so, and equally that none will claim a monopoly of His presence.

*(Agenda 1974, pp. 267-71)*

## EXORCISM (1976)

### INTRODUCTION

In Autumn 1974, the Healing and Pastoral Ministry Committee of the Division of Social Responsibility considered a preliminary paper on the current interest in the occult. Shortly afterwards the issue of exorcism was raised by extensive Press coverage of a particular case in which members of the Methodist Church were involved. The Committee therefore set up a working party to consider the questions raised by the practice of exorcism and reported its intention to the Conference of 1975. The Conference encouraged the Division to undertake this study on the understanding that the Faith and Order Committee would be fully represented. The working party therefore became in effect a joint group appointed by the two committees.

Constituted in this way, the working party has recognised the need to offer pastoral comment and advice, but has been equally aware that theological, psychological and sociological aspects of the question require considerable analysis and investigation.

The working party concentrated on defining three primary views concerning exorcism held among Christians in general, and on indicating some of the ways in which they conflict. Manifestly, these views cannot all be true and fundamental principles of theological method are involved. It is the judgement of the working party that these theological issues would repay further detailed study. This is a major task which would be the responsibility of the Faith and Order Committee. The purpose of the present report of the working party is to proceed from an analysis of the differing views to offer suggestions, applicable irrespective of the position held, concerning basic pastoral care for those who think themselves or are thought to be possessed.

### THE VIEWS

Three differing views currently held by Christians are:

1. The process of exorcism involves the casting out of an objective power of evil which has gained possession of a person. This view includes the conviction that the authority to exorcise has been given to the Church as one of the ways in which Christ's Ministry is continued in the world. Some who hold this view believe in the ontological reality of evil spirits; others prefer to speak of people as being overpowered by a personal force of evil.
2. The process of exorcism is a necessary or at least an effective psychological means of reassuring those who believe themselves to be possessed. In this case, performing the rite of exorcism according to the New Testament pattern does not involve the minister  in accepting for himself the ontological reality of the spirits which are removed, although he accepts their psychological reality for the person who believes himself to be possessed.
3. A belief in demons is explicable sociologically and psychologically. It is undeniable that there are people who claim to believe in demons, but – since demons do not exist – it is their belief with which we should deal, not demons. In this case exorcism would be inappropriate, since what is to be

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The use of the word 'minister' in this report will normally (but not exclusively) mean an ordained minister.

dealt with is false belief. To pretend to accept a situation which is false is not a means of bringing people to the truth. Those who take this view stress that the normal ministry of word and sacraments, together with appropriate pastoral care, can deal with these situations. Fears and anxieties can be dealt with by the assurance of the presence and love of Christ. On this basis, the wholeness which God wills for all people can be discovered and the necessity of exorcism is excluded.

**Comment** (The figures used throughout this section refer respectively to the numbered 'Views' set out in the previous section of the report).

- (a) All three views pay full regard to Christ's ministry of healing and have the aim of bringing wholeness to people.
- (b) View 3 is clearly in conflict with view 1.
- (c) 1 and 2 may be, but are not necessarily in practice, in conflict with one another. Whether they were or not would depend upon the minister's decision about addressing an evil spirit.
- (d) 2 and 3 may be in conflict, but again may not be in practice. This would depend on whether the minister in 2 thought it sufficient to affirm the power of God through Christ, or believed it necessary to address an evil spirit.
- (e) The interpretation of the Bible is a contentious issue in this connection. Those who embrace view 1 believe they have scriptural warrant for doing so on the ground that Jesus practised exorcism. Those who accept 3 think that the language and thought-world of exorcism in the New Testament belong to a bygone culture and cannot be transferred to ours, so that there is no reason to think that in our time a Christian should claim the power to 'drive out demons'.
- (f) 1 is thought by 3 to undermine the notion of human responsibility, even if it be held that the person seeking help is often responsible for the early stages of the events leading to the crisis. 3 also considers that 1 makes impossible a rational view of providence since it divides the control of the universe between God and an objective power of evil. 3 is thought by 1 to involve an unrealistic approach to the hard facts of evil and to the limitations of man's power in face of it. Moreover, 1 judges that some interpretations from the behavioural sciences are more likely to undermine individual responsibility. 1 also affirms that a rational view of providence is consistent with the practice of exorcism on the basis of a limited dualism.
- (g) 2 believes that pastoral responsibility involves acceptance of the frame of reference of the person who seeks help. 3 holds that the only sound pastoral practice is based on reconciliation with the truth, which is that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is real whereas evil spirits are not.

## GUIDELINES

Despite the variety of viewpoint which is reflected within Methodism, certain interim guidelines can be offered to ministers giving pastoral help to those who believe themselves to be possessed, or whom the minister believes to be possessed.

- (i) These cases must remain within the context of the life and worship of the Church. Even when exorcism is practised it must be regarded as only one aspect of the pastoral ministry required.
- (ii) No minister or layman should act independently in these circumstances. The Superintendent and other Ministers of the Circuit must always be consulted as they would be in other difficult pastoral situations. The Chairman of the District should also be asked to suggest appropriate sources of help.
- (iii) There should be a thorough pastoral investigation of the case, including, save in totally exceptional circumstances, close and continuing collaboration with those qualified in medicine, psychology and the social services, including the appropriate referral of the person seeking help.
- (iv) Since pastoral guidance is first and foremost concerned to assure people of the presence and love of Christ, it is important to follow this practice in these cases also.
- (v) The ministry of bible, prayer and sacraments should be extended to those seeking help.
- (vi) The form of any service of healing for those believed to be possessed should be considered in consultation with the ministerial staff of the circuit (or in one-minister circuits with those whom the Chairman of the District suggests). Such a service should not be carried out when a person is in a highly excited state. It should not be unnecessarily prolonged. Publicity must be kept to a minimum.
- (vii) Continuing pastoral care of the person concerned should involve as essential ingredients the teaching of the faith and incorporation into the worshipping community of the Church.

*(Agenda 1976, pp. 105-7)*

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The Conference made two alterations in the last section, Guidelines. In line 3 of paragraph (iii) it substituted the words 'suitable persons' for 'those', and in line 1 of paragraph (vi) it inserted the words, 'or believing themselves' after the word 'believed'.

## **EXORCISM (1977)**

The Committee, as directed by the Conference, has given further consideration to this issue and reached the conclusion that the time is not opportune for a more extensive theological statement than that submitted by the Division of Social Responsibility to the Conference of 1976 (*Agenda* 105-7). The Committee nevertheless expresses its willingness to consider any specific questions on the subject of Exorcism or related matters that may be addressed to it.

*(Agenda 1977, p.96)*