

59. Memorials to the Conference

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Notes for the guidance of members of the Conference

1. Introduction to memorials

Memorials are messages from Circuit Meetings and District Synods to the Conference. They suggest that the Conference takes action or makes a statement on an issue. The memorials received since the last Conference are listed in this report. These memorials may help members of the Conference to judge the main concerns currently felt in the Connexion, and the strength of opinion they represent.

Each year the Methodist Council is required to appoint a Memorials Committee to aid the Conference in replying to each memorial. The replies to these memorials have been drafted by members of the Connexional Team and officers of other relevant bodies. They have been scrutinised by the Memorials Committee and amended where the committee felt it was appropriate.

The committee recommends to the Conference the replies printed in the Agenda under each memorial. The Conference binds itself to agree each reply, to amend it, or to agree an alternative reply (see Standing Order 133(4), printed in the Rules of Procedure on page 14 of the Agenda).

In some of its responses, the committee makes no comment on the substance of a memorial, but indicates that the reply of the Conference is given in other resolutions of the Conference. This kind of response does not mean that the committee has not taken seriously the points made in the memorial. It means that another report deals with the issue more fully. Debate on that report gives the Conference an opportunity to discuss the issues raised by the memorial and the Conference will have opportunity to consider its reply to the memorial in the context of its debate on that report.

Similarly, the Conference is sometimes invited to adopt the same reply to more than one memorial. This does not imply that the Memorials Committee has not considered each memorial carefully, but merely that the memorials ask the same or very similar things of the Conference.

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2. Consideration of the memorials by the Conference

Any member of the Conference has the right to move an amendment to the reply recommended by the committee, or to propose that it is substituted by a different reply. Amendments to replies should be submitted in the form of a notice of motion, the deadlines for which can be found in the First Report of the Conference Business Committee on page 27-30 of the Agenda. However, members are urged to give notice of their intention to move an amendment as early as possible and not to wait until the deadline.

If the Conference rejects a reply, an acceptable alternative must, then or later, be put to and agreed by the Conference. In addition, any two members of the Conference may, by notice of motion submitted on the first day of the relevant session, propose that, instead of dealing with the committee's recommended replies in the ordinary course of business, the Conference shall debate a resolution based on one or more of the memorials.

This year, the Memorials Committee has recommended to the Conference Business Committee that the replies to any memorials which relate to other items of business in the Agenda be taken at the same time as that business, and that one other (M22) should be considered by the Conference including by the Presbyteral Session under clause 23(m) of the Deed of Union (ie, not as shared business) and that it should also be drawn to the attention of the Conference Diaconal Committee. The committee recommended that the remaining replies should be placed in the *en bloc* business of the Conference, unless the Business Committee feels that they should be debated. Any recommended reply to a memorial which is the subject of an amending notice of motion will automatically be removed from *en bloc* business (see Standing Order 134A(1)(c), Agenda page 15).

Members of the Conference with questions on any matter affecting memorials and the procedures described above should consult the Memorials Secretary, Catherine Dixon. For example, if any member wishes to change the recommended reply of the committee, the Memorials Secretary would be happy to advise on how and when to propose either an amendment or the substitution of a different reply.

The Memorials Secretary will notify each Synod and Circuit of the reply the Conference has made to its memorial.

M1 Methodist corporate email provision for ministers

The Scotland District Presbyteral Synod (Present: 27; Voting: 25 for, 0 against) notes the Methodist corporate email provision for ministers, namely the ministers.name@methodist.org.uk addresses, and is grateful for it. This provision allows for a professional face from Methodism when ministers are dealing with bodies outside the Church, and

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the corporate email provision should ensure that the email system used by ministers is in compliance with GDPR requirements and is suitable for the holding of confidential correspondence including meeting the standards expected around Safeguarding related matters. However, the Presbyteral Session of the Synod wishes to bring to the attention of the Conference, that at times the corporate email provision is not fit for purpose. This has included:

- On at least three occasions in this connexional year (2022/23) interruption to the email provision has occurred without prior notice.
- The system has been compromised on at least one occasion, and this has resulted in all @methodist.org.uk addresses being designated as spam for a time by major email providers.
- That there is limited storage capacity for historic emails on the system.

These issues have impacted the work of the Church in the following way – though this is not an exhaustive list:

- Property sales being delayed – and in some jurisdictions put at risk of falling through – due to not being able to send and receive documents, or such correspondence not being received due to the designation as spam.
- Impact on pastoral work, including the preparations for funerals.
- Uncertainty over the delivery of emails, with at times none being delivered, and at others some recipients receiving them and others not.
- When the @methodist.org.uk email addresses are designated as spam there is a negative impact on the reputation of the Methodist Church, both for those within the Church and also partners and bodies outside the Church.
- The general work of the Church is negatively impacted as correspondence cannot take place.

These issues are also making some users reconsider if the usage of the corporate email provision is practical, and also discourage those who do not use the corporate email provision from doing so.

The Presbyteral Session of the Synod notes that these issues are not a reflection on the system providers or their staff who have always responded promptly to issues raised by users and have resolved those issues within their control and gift. They give a high level of service within the constraints of the system they work with, and this is appreciated by users of the corporate email provision.

The Presbyteral Session of the Synod therefore requests that the Conference establishes a working group, drawn from the users of the corporate email provision, appropriate connexional officers and representatives from the system providers. The task of this working group would be to draw up the options to improve the corporate email provision in order to make it fit for purpose and meet all legal and church requirements

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– especially around GDPR, confidentiality and safeguarding – while also meeting the needs of users.

The Synod further requests that the working group report to the Conference of 2024, with costed recommendations around improving the corporate email provision.

Reply

The Conference is grateful to the Scotland District Presbyteral Synod for raising the issue of email provision for ministers.

Challenges with the existing email system have been evident for some time and work has been underway to identify a more reliable system. Initial draft proposals have been developed and the financial implications are being assessed. Whilst this work has taken longer than had been anticipated, it is now expected that a more robust email service can be implemented during the 2023/24 connexional year and therefore the burden of establishing a working group and bringing back proposals to the Conference of 2024 can be avoided.

The Conference, while accepting the principles of the memorial, recognises that work is already in progress and therefore declines the memorial.

M2 Resourcing the Church

The Bradford North (27/32) Circuit Meeting (Present: 27 Voting: unanimous) notes that the Methodist Church has stated that it seeks to be a growing, evangelistic, inclusive, justice-seeking and safe Church. The current focus on equality, dignity and inclusion training is part of this, helping us to be inclusive and to seek justice for all.

Our numbers are shrinking year on year, and we need to find ways to present the Gospel and talk about faith in ways that people can understand. Will we keep people safe and treat them equally only to make them face the trauma of closing their much-loved church building and having to look for a new home elsewhere?

We ask the Conference to place as much emphasis on helping us to grow and spread the Gospel in a way that people of today's world can understand, as they do on the other areas in the statement above; and for the resourcing, staffing and equipping to make that happen.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Bradford North Circuit Meeting for the memorial and especially for emphasising the importance of holding together the key Gospel commitments of evangelism, justice, inclusion, and growth.

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The Conference accepts this memorial, as it is deeply aligned with God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth (2020-2025), which seeks to expand the above commitments so that new people become disciples of Jesus Christ, faith deepens for everyone, and diverse communities and churches experience transformation.

The Conference encourages lay and ordained people alike to visit www.methodist.org/evangelism to explore the resourcing, programming, and accompaniment offered for the core areas of God for All: (1) a Methodist Way of Life and discipleship pathways; (2) evangelism training for leaders and churches; (3) leading churches into growth and transformation; and (4) starting new Christian communities, including Church at the Margins.

The Conference encourages the exploration of these commitments, as encouraged by the first five years of God for All. It also looks toward the 2024 Methodist Conference, which will consider an extension of God for All, in order to remain focused on embedding these commitments across the Connexion for the long-term.

M3 Annual Returns

The Birmingham (West) and Oldbury (5/6) Circuit Meeting (Present: 24; Voting: unanimous) notes the increasing burden on churches to provide annual returns to the Connexion. The answers to many of the questions are already submitted in the annual statement of accounts, have already been dealt with in previous years, are provided during the course of the quinquennial inspection or could be provided by the Methodist Insurance company.

We would remind the Conference and its officers that the information for these returns is mainly collected and submitted by volunteers, many of whom hold several other roles in their churches. Repetitive questions, dealing with issues which in any case are the province of the local Church Council or Circuit Meeting, sap energy and undermine the morale of our most committed members.

We therefore request:

- 1) That future annual returns only request information that the Connexion is required by law to collect;
- 2) That no information is requested which is already submitted by churches in their annual statement of accounts or through other channels;

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3) That future Conference decisions to request data are only made after an appropriate impact assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the collection of such data will assist the Connexion in our mission to bring people to Jesus.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Birmingham (West) and Oldbury Circuit Meeting for this memorial.

Standing Order 305 states that the Connexional Team is authorised by the Conference, as occasion may require, to obtain from Chairs and Superintendents such statistical returns and other information as are necessary for the business of the Team and Chairs and Superintendents shall furnish all such information in due form.

The Team has been aware over the last period that for some the process of collating and submitting information is falling to a smaller group of people, both volunteers or Superintendents, for which the Conference is grateful, and that for many this process is excessive and burdensome. At the same time there are often requests for the Team to be able to provide more detailed and nuanced information to assist with planning.

At present the Team has been carrying out a thorough review of what information is needed in the Annual Returns and is attempting to minimise this as much as is possible whilst ensuring that information which aids decisions of the Conference is provided.

This memorial draws the distinction between only asking for information that is required 'by law' and information which is not legally required but the Conference requests to see. The focus for the Annual Return needs to be those things that helps us fulfil *Our Calling* rather than only those things required by the laws of the legal jurisdiction in which the Circuit lies. Early discussions acknowledge that historically some questions are also asked to support the work of managing trustees, Circuits and Districts, rather than the Connexional Team, and therefore the purpose of some questions is being explored with others outside the Connexional Team, particularly District Property Secretaries.

The Conference would also want to point out that Annual Accounts are not submitted (nor should be) to the Connexional Team.

Given that the Conference believes that the work is already underway to reduce what is asked in the Annual Returns by using a more nuanced approach than is suggested by the Circuit, the Conference declines the Memorial.

M4 Statement of Methodist Leaders in Jerusalem

The Burnley and Pendle (21/1) Circuit Meeting (Present: 34; Voting: unanimous) notes the tenth anniversary of the Methodist Liaison Office in Jerusalem and the statement

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made by Methodist Leaders who shared in the events marking this occasion. The statement can be accessed at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-worldwide/global-relationships/global-relationships-news/all-global-relationships-news/on-the-situation-of-the-palestinians/>

Since last October, when that anniversary took place, things have deteriorated further, including attacks on Christian personnel and holy places, and statements by Christian leaders seeking outside support. By mid-February in 2023, 50 Palestinians and 9 Israelis had been killed. In 2022 at least 170 Palestinians, including 30 children, were killed. Unfortunately with major news subjects elsewhere the plight of Palestinians has seldom reached the headlines.

Given the statements and actions of the recently-elected Government of Israel, the system of apartheid now being applied on the West Bank (and further afield), the ongoing pleas for support by Christian Palestinians, and the urgent need for effective economic action to persuade the Israeli Government to end its Occupation and engage in serious negotiations for a solution of peace-with-justice for all the people of the Holy Land, we ask the Conference to call on all Methodists to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, as it did in the context of apartheid South Africa, and vigorously recommend all faith communities and public bodies in the UK to do likewise.

We ask the Conference to note in particular the naming of HSBC and Barclays Bank in the recent 'Don't Buy into Occupation' report as two of the three largest lenders to companies active in settlement construction, in contravention of international law, and encourage all Methodists, other Christians and others opposed to apartheid to urge these and indeed all banks to end this support which undermines international law.

Reply

The Conference is grateful to the Burnley and Pendle Circuit Meeting for highlighting the deteriorating situation in the West Bank as a consequence of the deepening occupation that violates rights and egregiously harms the livelihoods of so many in the region.

In recent years the Conference has heard of the worsening situation in the occupied Palestinian territories through memorials, reports of working groups, the accounts of partners in the region as well as through the visit of Presidents, Vice-Presidents, the Secretary of the Conference and others. The Conference acknowledges with sorrow the dire human cost arising from the Israeli Government policy to incorporate the occupied territories of East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank into the economic and security fabric of the State of Israel. The UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur, in his report of 21 March 2022 states that "since 1967, Israel has confiscated more than two million dunams of Palestinian land in the West Bank, which have been used to build settlements, Israeli-only highways and roads, recreational parks, industrial centres,

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military bases and firing zones, all for the purpose of cementing a permanent and immovable demographic presence".¹ These settlements encircle and cut-off Palestinian towns, deny access to olive groves or grazing land, and on some occasions have involved the demolition of Palestinian homes or whole villages.

The Conference has heard, through reports and memorials, detailed accounts of Palestinians' loss of freedom, land, homes, the system of administrative detention, lack of accountability over the shooting of unarmed Palestinians by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and failure to protect Palestinians from attacks by Israeli settlers. It is clear that the Government of Israel does not administer Area C of the West Bank on a temporary basis in the interests of the indigenous Palestinian people as the Oslo Accords intend. Rather, it operates a highly discriminatory planning process and what has been described as a 'matrix of control' that seeks to secure the territory for exclusive Israeli settlement on a permanent basis. The United Nations Human Rights Council, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the Government and Parliament of Ireland, Amnesty International, Christian Aid², the Catholic concern International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity CIDSE³, and several others recognise the situation in the West Bank, as it pertains today, as one of *de facto* annexation which is a serious breach of international law. The Methodist Council also considers the larger part of the West Bank to be subject to *de facto* annexation by the State of Israel (MC/21/18). The Conference notes the significance of the United Nations General Assembly instruction to the international Court of Justice to provide an opinion on the legal status of the occupation, given the ongoing violation by Israel of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, enactment of discriminatory legislation and practices, and measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The Methodist Council report MC/21/18 noted the passing of the Nation State law in 2018. Applying to all areas under Israeli Administration, the National State Law determines that "the land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established" and "the State views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation". The privileging of Jewish settlement in the West Bank has been evident for many years to those who have lost their land and homes and, in Area C, find it almost impossible to secure from the Israeli Authorities planning permission for any Palestinian structure on their own land.

1 [A/HRC/49/28 \(un.org\)](#) page 12

2 ['Where is Palestine? A story of loss, inequality and failure'](#) Christian Aid

3 [Call for an inclusive peace – countering de facto annexation – CIDSE](#)

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Recognising that 'apartheid' has specific definition under international law the Methodist Conference notes that the UN Special Rapporteur, in his report of 21 March 2022 to the Human Rights Council, concluded that "the political system of entrenched rule in the occupied Palestinian territory which endows one racial-national-ethnic group with substantial rights, benefits and privileges while intentionally subjecting another group to live behind walls, checkpoints and under a permanent military rule "sans droits, sans égalité, sans dignité et sans liberté" satisfies the prevailing evidentiary standard for the existence of apartheid".⁴

The Conference further notes the recent claim of exclusive rights for the Jewish people made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on assuming office in December 2022. In his statement he said "These are the basic lines of the national government headed by me: The Jewish people have an exclusive and unquestionable right to all areas of the Land of Israel. The government will promote and develop settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel – in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan, Judea and Samaria."⁵ The Conference acknowledges that this statement is essentially political in nature and that many Jewish people in Israel and beyond will object to such bold assertions of exclusive rights.

The Conference is deeply disturbed by the increase in violence as highlighted by this memorial, and reiterates its opposition to violence on the part of any party or individual, considering all violent actions to be harmful and unwarranted in the process of working towards a lasting and just peace through negotiation.

The Conference recalls its consideration of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions in report 23 'Boycotts, Divestments, Sanctions' to the 2014 Conference and as expressed in the reply to the memorial brought by the Sheffield Circuit Meeting (M8) to the 2022 Conference. The Conference accepts this memorial, inviting Methodist people to engage with the principles proposed by the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and to determine how most appropriate to implement specific actions such that the cause for justice for all is advanced rather than hindered.

The Conference remains committed to prayer, asking for the provision of strength and perseverance to all in the region who are working to raise awareness and political support for a resolution to the ongoing crisis in Israel and Palestine.

4 [A/HRC/49/28 \(un.org\)](#) page 17

5 [Netanyahu's hard-line new government takes office in Israel - BBC News](#)

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M5 Methodist Liaison Office, Jerusalem and Statement from Methodist Leaders

The Darlington District Synod (Present: 68; Voting: 68 for, 3 against) notes the tenth anniversary of the Methodist Liaison Office in Jerusalem and calls upon the Conference to note the statement by senior Methodist leaders who shared in events marking this occasion last October and to share it with our church members. It can be accessed at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-worldwide/global-relationships/global-relationships-news/all-global-relationships-news/on-the-situation-of-the-palestinians/>

Since last October, when that anniversary took place, things have deteriorated further, including attacks on Christian personnel and holy places. Statements by Christian leaders seeking outside support have responded to this deterioration. Already by mid-February in 2023, 50 Palestinians and 9 Israelis had been killed. In 2022 at least 170 Palestinians, including 30 children, were killed. Unfortunately with major news subjects elsewhere the plight of Palestinians has seldom reached the headlines.

Given the statements and actions of the recently-elected Government of Israel, the ongoing pleas for support by Christian Palestinians, and the urgent need for effective economic action to persuade the Israeli Government to end its Occupation and engage in serious negotiations for a solution of peace-with-justice for all the people of the Holy Land, we ask that the Joint Public Issues Team to provide guidance upon how Methodists can better support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

We note in particular the naming of HSBC and Barclays Bank in the recent 'Don't Buy into Occupation' report as two of the three largest lenders to companies active in settlement construction, in contravention of international law, and encourages all Methodists, other Christians and others opposed to the unjust actions of the Israeli Government to urge these and indeed all banks to end this support which undermines international law.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Darlington District Synod for its memorial and adopts the same reply as for M4.

M6 Antisemitism

The Lincolnshire District Synod (Present: 64; Voting: 52 for, 3 against) notes that, according to Home Office statistics, Jews are more than five times likelier to be targets of hate crimes than members of any other faith group with some 730 hate crimes per 100,000 of the Jewish population in 2021/22.

The Jewish community is suffering an average of more than five hate crimes every single day.

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The Lincolnshire District Synod calls on the Methodist Conference to

- express sorrow at such figures
- urge greater understanding of the roots of all forms of Jew-hatred
- commend for study the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism.
www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism
- reaffirm the Methodist Church EDI Toolkit Definition of Antisemitism: *Any belief, policy or action that discriminates against or incites hatred towards Jewish people, either by race or religion, or caricatures Jewish people and culture. This can include denying the right of Israel to exist, or judging it by standards not applied to other nations*

Reply

The Conference thanks the Lincolnshire District Synod for its memorial.

The Conference expresses deep sorrow at the rise of antisemitic attacks. In particular the Conference recalls its reply to Memorial 26 in 2018 deploring the rising incidence of such attacks and condemning antisemitism as evil and wrong. It also recalls its replies to memorial 32 in 2011 and memorial 35 in 2006, when the Conference affirmed that it identifies itself with the Charta Oecumenica, adopted in 2000 by the Conference of European Churches, which stated that:

'We deplore and condemn all manifestations of anti-Semitism [sic], all outbreaks of hatred and persecutions. We ask God for forgiveness for anti-Jewish attitudes among Christians, and we ask our Jewish sisters and brothers for reconciliation.

The Conference deplores all forms of antisemitism and racism and urges greater understanding. It commends the work of the Justice Dignity and Solidarity committee and notes the mandatory EDI training the Conference agreed in 2021. The Conference is committed to life-long learning about the riches of human diversity and to learning from one another.

The Conference welcomes all declarations on antisemitism that have gained a significant degree of support within the Jewish community in order that together these declarations may help to highlight and address antisemitic attacks.

The Methodist Conference reiterates its commitment to oppose antisemitism and further stands by all who are discriminated against or persecuted on grounds of their religion or ethnicity, and accepts the memorial.

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M7 Rural Mission Policy

The Birmingham District Synod (Present: 96; Voting: 83 for, 0 against) has seen a considerable acceleration in the decline of rural Methodist Churches since 2019 and believe this to be reflected across the Connexion. At the current pace it will only be a few years before Methodism becomes little more than a memory in the countryside with chapels converted to dwellings, commercial use, or demolished with perhaps little more to show than street names such as "Chapel Street". We believe that the distinctive contribution made by the Methodist Church has a vital part to play in rural communities in the twenty first century and beyond.

The District is asking the Conference to appoint a suitable team, which should include the Connexional Rural Officer, to research the current situation in circuits who have, or used to have until recently, places of worship and community engagement in rural communities. How many such places were there in 2019 and will there be in 2023?

This research team should report to Conference 2024 with accessible information that can assist Districts and Circuits in forming a Mission Policy. The research should include examples of models of mission and ministry that have enabled a continuing Methodist presence after a chapel has closed as well as analysis of why congregations have ceased to meet. Funding for this work could be paid for from the Connexional Levy on the sale of rural chapels and manses which has seen a considerable boost in recent years.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Birmingham District Synod for its memorial, and acknowledges the reality being described and shares the hope for maintaining an important rural presence. Rural Mission and Ministry is and will continue to be a key part of the work of the Church, as shown in the expanded commitment to rural areas in creating a full-time Rural Officer role in 2020, and the inclusion of rural work in God For All (GFA). For the proposed extension of GFA (scheduled to come to the Conference in 2024), an expanded section on rural mission and ministry is planned, as well as joined-up work alongside Heritage and Property Services to offer more specific support for small and rural churches.

In addition, the recent Merge Churches for Mission work (which is ongoing and will continue to develop) provides in many ways the particular mission guidance that the memorial asks for. This guidance includes mission help, pastoral support, legal considerations, and many stories and testimonies of churches. This guidance goes beyond just rural contexts, but its focus on the experiences of small churches will mean that it will serve the needs of rural churches well. <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/lead-churches-into-growth/merge-churches-for-mission>.

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An extensive toolkit of general mission planning resources, including step-by-step video guidance, is also available to support churches and Circuits as they prayerfully and carefully develop mission policy and plans for their contexts. <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/lead-churches-into-growth/write-a-great-mission-plan/mission-planning-toolkit>.

Further, the Rural Officer is currently building a network for those starting or maintaining a Christian presence in a community without a chapel building. This includes provision for those who wish to focus on discipleship and a Methodist Way of Life, ecumenical partnerships, and/or replanting and New Places for New People. See <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/rural-hope> and <https://www.eventbrite.com/cc/rural-hope-1123799>.

As much of the work requested by this memorial is already ongoing, the Conference declines the memorial.

M8 The District Probationers' Committee and Probationers Retreat

The Darlington District Presbyteral Synod (Present: 41; Voting: unanimous) asks the Conference to reconsider the size and composition of District Probationers' Committees, their ways of working, and the provision of the district probationers' retreat.

Whilst it is already possible for Districts to establish joint probationers' committees, a number of factors indicate that a connexional review would be helpful, not least to explore potential models that might best enable districts to exercise these particular oversight responsibilities. The Darlington District is already in conversation with other Districts about joint working, but notes that shared, connexional, discernment regarding best practice and the parameters of possible models is important.

As there are also broader conversations currently being undertaken about the size and shape of Districts, such a review is timely.

Some of the factors shaping the current conversations include:

- Identifying and recruiting people who have the time and capacity as well as the necessary gifts, aptitudes and experience to serve on the District Probationers' Committee;
- Effective ways of working with a large committee when there is only one probationer;
- The geographical challenges of combining committees across Districts. This can change the nature of the experience and it raises questions about the extent to which particular cultural and contextual understanding and knowledge within the committee is important at this stage of the process. Some Districts

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have found that the broader contextual knowledge of the probationer's circuit and its relational dynamics has been an invaluable part of the process;

- Under the current Standing Orders (SO 484(4)), if more than two Districts seek to establish a joint committee then the balance of the committee is increasingly affected by the proportion of presbyters (Chairs of District, probationers' secretaries and (where applicable) the presbyteral secretaries of the Synods).

For several years the Darlington District has combined with three other Districts to provide the annual probationers' retreat. These have been invaluable in providing space to reflect on ministry and time for prayer and spiritual and personal reflection. They also offer an opportunity for fellowship with other probationers, mutual support and learning, as well as a chance to deepen relationships, not least with the Chairs of District and District Probationers' Secretaries. As there is now a relatively small number of probationers involved, it may be beneficial for a larger number of Districts to work together in this respect. The Darlington District thinks it is therefore timely for the Conference to explore whether this retreat should instead be offered connexionally (as a single retreat, or perhaps with one offered in the north and one in the south), alongside looking at ways in which more Districts might combine to offer such retreats in the future. It would be helpful to identify what might be gained, and what lost, in different ways of working.

Whilst such a review is undertaken, in order to help District Probationers' Committees work effectively, pastorally and robustly, the Darlington District asks that SO 484(1) is amended to allow for the possibility of a smaller committee.

The Darlington District therefore asks the Conference to direct the Ministries Committee to:

- Review the size, composition and ways of working of the District Probationers' Committee, including looking at the questions that arise when joint Probationers' Committees are formed;
- Review the role and nature of the district probationers' retreat and look at how provision might best be made for this, including considering offering it connexionally.

It also asks the Conference to amend SO484(1) as follows:

484 Probationers Committee. (1) Subject to clause (4) below, the Synod shall appoint a district Probationers Committee consisting of the Chair of the District, the secretary and (if appointed) the presbyteral secretary of the Synod, a district probationers secretary and **between seven and** eleven other persons of whom one shall be a deacon, **at least two and up to** four shall be presbyters and **at least four** the remainder lay.

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Reply

The Conference thanks the Darlington District Presbyteral Synod for its memorial and for drawing the attention of the Conference to the structures and operations of the District Probationers' Committees, and the provision of the district probationers' retreat.

In recent years adaptations to SO 484 have permitted two or more Synods together to appoint a Probationers' Committee which shall fulfil the functions of, and shall be, the District Probationers' Committee for both Districts. This is a permissive provision but does not require Districts to operate in this way. Some of the factors listed could be answered by a District choosing to retain its own single District Probationers' Committee. As the memorial itself identifies, there are significant differences in the numbers of probationers serving in the different Districts at any one time. Therefore the Conference believes that the current provisions allow for the flexibility requested by the memorial and that each District has the capacity to review its own practice with regard to its Probationers' Committee.

The subject of district probationers' retreats has been discussed regularly by District Probationers' Secretaries, by the Ministerial Candidates and Probationers Oversight Committee (MCPOC), and by Connexional Team members in consultation with the Chairs' Meeting, for a number of years. It has been previously proposed that a connexional retreat would now be preferable, to take account of the difficulties Districts can experience when they have a low number of probationers, who can be outnumbered by retreat leaders and district officers at the retreat. However, although there is not unanimity in those groups on this, the preference has always been for maintaining district or regional retreats for probationers and for allowing regional flexibility in deciding how best to make the provision. The pastoral relationships that develop between probationers, their Chair of District and District Probationers' Secretary are immensely valued, and the contextual nature of the retreat is regarded as important. Various ways of solving the issues for low numbers of probationers are already employed across the Connexion, such as combining a probationers' retreat with an under 5s retreat, or reducing the numbers of district officers present at each element of the retreat, or combining with (an)other District(s) in a region. The Conference therefore does not believe that there is sufficient benefit to be gained from carrying out that consultation at this stage but does encourage the Chairs' Meeting further to explore what may now be desirable with a view to implementing a way forward upon which it is agreed, in consultation with the Ministries Committee.

The Conference acknowledges that there are difficulties in identifying sufficient people to serve on the District Probationers' Committee, whether that is in one District or serving more than one District. Although it is important to ensure that all probationers receive similar levels of oversight, it is recognised that the flexibility in the size of the Probationers' Committee proposed in the memorial would be beneficial and

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therefore that portion of the memorial relating to the change to SO 484(1) is welcomed and accepted.

A consultation regarding the ways of working of District Probationers' Committees was held in 2022, overseen by MCPOC. This has resulted in guidance to be issued to District Chairs and Probationers' Secretaries in 2023. Members of the Connexional Team continue to be in ongoing consultation with all District Probationers' Secretaries, whose voice, individually and collectively, is thus heard frequently by both MCPOC and the Ministries Committee. The Conference does not believe that there is need for a further review to be carried out at this stage.

Therefore the Conference declines the first section of the memorial, but accepts the proposed change to SO 484(1).

M9 District Probationers' Committee and Probationers' Retreat

The Newcastle upon Tyne District Synod (Present: 115; Voting: 112 for, 0 against) asks the Conference to reconsider the size and composition of District Probationers' Committees, their ways of working, and the provision of the district probationers' retreat.

Whilst it is already possible for Districts to establish joint Probationers' Committees, a number of factors indicate that a connexional review would be helpful, not least to explore potential models that might best enable Districts to exercise these particular oversight responsibilities. The Newcastle upon Tyne District is already in conversation with other Districts about joint working, but notes that shared, connexional, discernment regarding best practice and the parameters of possible models is important. As there are also broader conversations currently being undertaken about the size and shape of Districts, such a review is timely.

Some of the factors shaping the current conversations include:

- identifying and recruiting people who have the time and capacity as well as the necessary gifts, aptitudes and experience to serve on the District Probationers' Committee;
- effective ways of working with a large committee when there is only one probationer;
- the geographical challenges of combining committees across Districts. This can change the nature of the experience and it raises questions about the extent to which particular cultural and contextual understanding and knowledge within the Committee is important at this stage of the process. Some Districts have found that the broader contextual knowledge of the probationer's Circuit and its relational dynamics has been an invaluable part of the process.
- Under the current Standing Orders (SO 484(4)), if more than two Districts seek to establish a joint committee then the balance of the Committee is increasingly

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affected by the proportion of presbyters (Chairs of District, probationers' secretaries and, where applicable, the presbyteral secretaries of the Synods).

For several years the Newcastle upon Tyne District has combined with three other Districts to provide the annual probationers' retreat. These have been invaluable in providing space to reflect on ministry and time for prayer and spiritual and personal reflection. They also offer an opportunity for fellowship with other probationers, mutual support and learning, as well as a chance to deepen relationships, not least with the Chairs of District and District Probationers' Secretaries. As there is now a relatively small number of probationers involved, it may be beneficial for a larger number of Districts to work together in this respect. The Newcastle upon Tyne District thinks it is therefore timely for the Conference to explore whether this retreat should instead be offered connexionally (as a single retreat, or perhaps with one offered in the north and one in the south), alongside looking at ways in which more Districts might combine to offer such retreats in the future. It would be helpful to identify what might be gained, and what lost, in different ways of working.

Whilst such a review is undertaken, in order to help District Probationers' Committees work effectively, pastorally and robustly, the Newcastle upon Tyne District asks that SO 484(1) is amended to allow for the possibility of a smaller committee.

The Newcastle upon Tyne District therefore asks the Conference to direct the Ministries Committee to:

- review the size, composition and ways of working of the District Probationers' Committee, including looking at the questions that arise when joint Probationers' Committees are formed;
- review the role and nature of the district probationers' retreat and look at how provision might best be made for this, including considering offering it connexionally.

It also asks the Conference to amend SO 484(1) as follows:

484 Probationers Committee. (1) Subject to clause (4) below, the Synod shall appoint a district Probationers Committee consisting of the Chair of the District, the secretary and (if appointed) the presbyteral secretary of the Synod, a district probationers secretary and **between seven and** eleven other persons of whom one shall be a deacon, **at least two and up to** four shall be presbyters and **at least four** the remainder lay.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Newcastle upon Tyne District Synod for its memorial and adopts the same reply as for M8.

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M10 District Probationers' Committee and Probationers' Retreat

The Scotland District Presbyteral Synod (Present: 28; Voting: 25 for, 0 against) asks the Conference to reconsider the size and composition of District Probationers' Committees, their ways of working, and the provision of the district probationers' retreat.

Whilst it is already possible for Districts to establish joint Probationers' Committees, a number of factors indicate that a connexional review would be helpful, not least to explore potential models that might best enable Districts to exercise these particular oversight responsibilities. The Scotland District is already in conversation with other Districts about joint working, but notes that shared, connexional, discernment regarding best practice and the parameters of possible models is important. As there are also broader conversations currently being undertaken about the size and shape of Districts, such a review is timely.

Some of the factors shaping the current conversations include:

- Identifying and recruiting people who have the time and capacity as well as the necessary gifts, aptitudes and experience to serve on the District Probationers' Committee;
- Effective ways of working with a large Committee when there is only one probationer;
- The geographical challenges of combining committees across Districts. This can change the nature of the experience and it raises questions about the extent to which particular cultural and contextual understanding and knowledge within the Committee is important at this stage of the process. Some Districts have found that the broader contextual knowledge of the probationer's Circuit and its relational dynamics has been an invaluable part of the process;
- Under the current Standing Orders (SO 484(4)), if more than two Districts seek to establish a joint committee then the balance of the Committee is increasingly affected by the proportion of presbyters (Chairs of District, probationers' secretaries and (where applicable) the presbyteral secretaries of the Synods).

For several years the Scotland District has combined with three other Districts to provide the annual probationers' retreat. These have been invaluable in providing space to reflect on ministry and time for prayer and spiritual and personal reflection. They also offer an opportunity for fellowship with other probationers, mutual support and learning, as well as a chance to deepen relationships, not least with the Chairs of District and District Probationers' Secretaries. As there is now a relatively small number of probationers involved, it may be beneficial for a larger number of Districts to work together in this respect. The Scotland District thinks it is therefore timely for the Conference to explore whether this retreat should instead be offered connexionally (as a single retreat, or perhaps with one offered in the north and one in the south), alongside looking at ways in which more Districts might combine to offer such retreats in the future. It would be helpful to identify what might be gained, and what lost, in different ways of working.

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Whilst such a review is undertaken, in order to help District Probationers' Committees work effectively, pastorally and robustly, the Scotland District asks that SO 484(1) is amended to allow for the possibility of a smaller committee.

The Scotland district therefore asks the Conference to direct the Ministries Committee to:

- Review the size, composition and ways of working of the District Probationers' Committee, including looking at the questions that arise when joint Probationers' Committees are formed;
- Review the role and nature of the district probationers' retreat and look at how provision might best be made for this, including considering offering it connexionally.

It also asks the Conference to amend SO 484(1) as follows:

484 Probationers Committee. (1) Subject to clause (4) below, the Synod shall appoint a district Probationers Committee consisting of the Chair of the District, the secretary and (if appointed) the presbyteral secretary of the Synod, a district probationers secretary and **between seven and** eleven other persons of whom one shall be a deacon, **at least two and up to** four shall be presbyters and **at least four** the remainder lay.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Scotland District Presbyteral Synod for its memorial and adopts the same reply as for M8.

M11 District Probationers' Committee and Probationers' Retreat

The Cumbria District Presbyteral Synod (Present: 33; Voting: unanimous) asks the Conference to reconsider the size and composition of District Probationers' Committees, their ways of working, and the provision of the district probationers' retreat.

Whilst it is already possible for Districts to establish joint Probationers' Committees, a number of factors indicate that a connexional review would be helpful, not least to explore potential models that might best enable Districts to exercise these particular oversight responsibilities. The Cumbria District is already in conversation with other Districts about joint working, but notes that shared, connexional, discernment regarding best practice and the parameters of possible models is important. As there are also broader conversations currently being undertaken about the size and shape of Districts, such a review is timely.

Some of the factors shaping the current conversations include:

- Identifying and recruiting people who have the time and capacity as well as the necessary gifts, aptitudes and experience to serve on the District Probationers' Committee;

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- Effective ways of working with a large Committee when there is only one probationer;
- The geographical challenges of combining committees across Districts. This can change the nature of the experience and it raises questions about the extent to which particular cultural and contextual understanding and knowledge within the Committee is important at this stage of the process. Some Districts have found that the broader contextual knowledge of the probationer's Circuit and its relational dynamics has been an invaluable part of the process;
- Under the current Standing Orders (SO 484(4)), if more than two Districts seek to establish a joint committee then the balance of the Committee is increasingly affected by the proportion of presbyters (Chairs of District, probationers' secretaries and (where applicable) the presbyteral secretaries of the Synods).

For several years the Cumbria District has combined with three other Districts to provide the annual probationers' retreat. These have been invaluable in providing space to reflect on ministry and time for prayer and spiritual and personal reflection. They also offer an opportunity for fellowship with other probationers, mutual support and learning, as well as a chance to deepen relationships, not least with the Chairs of District and District Probationers' Secretaries. As there is now a relatively small number of probationers involved, it may be beneficial for a larger number of districts to work together in this respect. The Cumbria District thinks it is therefore timely for the Conference to explore whether this retreat should instead be offered connexionally (as a single retreat, or perhaps with one offered in the north and one in the south), alongside looking at ways in which more districts might combine to offer such retreats in the future. It would be helpful to identify what might be gained, and what lost, in different ways of working.

Whilst such a review is undertaken, in order to help District Probationers' Committees work effectively, pastorally and robustly, the Cumbria District asks that SO 484(1) is amended to allow for the possibility of a smaller committee.

The Cumbria District therefore asks the Conference to direct the Ministries Committee to:

- Review the size, composition and ways of working of the District Probationers' Committee, including looking at the questions that arise when joint Probationers' Committees are formed;
- Review the role and nature of the district probationers' retreat and look at how provision might best be made for this, including considering offering it connexionally.

It also asks the Conference to amend SO 484(1) as follows:

484 Probationers Committee. (1) Subject to clause (4) below, the Synod shall appoint a district Probationers Committee consisting of the Chair of the District,

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the secretary and (if appointed) the presbyteral secretary of the Synod, a district probationers secretary and **between seven and** eleven other persons of whom one shall be a deacon, **at least two and up to** four shall be presbyters and **at least four** the remainder lay.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Cumbria District Presbyteral Synod for its memorial and adopts the same reply as for M8.

M12 Access to the Worship: Leading and Preaching Course

The Yorkshire North and East District Synod (Present: 74; Voting: 69 for, 4 against) draws the Conference's attention to issues around inclusion and accessibility to the Worship: Leading and Preaching (WLP) course.

We recognise that the content and delivery of WLP has been the subject of previous memorials to the Conference, most recently M3 (2020) and M5 (2021) both of which included issues around accessibility. We believe that these issues have not yet been fully addressed.

The Methodist Council report part 2 (Agenda 2 page 160) to the 2022 Conference highlighted that "The Local Preachers' Study Board (LPSB) has fully embraced the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity (JDS) strategy, and a sub-group has been established to advise on improvements to training and development". We ask that this sub-group consider the accessibility of WLP to people who cannot use computers or are not online.

This year one of our Circuits contacted the local preachers' office to discuss options for an individual who is academically able to undertake the training, but has additional needs which lead to them not being able to use computer software. Replies received indicated that there is no other way of accessing the course except online. We believe that this raises serious concerns around inclusion (individuals not coming forward to train as local preachers or worship leaders because of concerns around accessibility to training needs) and could benefit from comparison with reasonable adjustments made in secular workplaces with regards to training and development. In moving towards a 'digital first' approach we are perhaps excluding and discriminating against those for whom digital is not an option.

We request that the Conference directs the Local Preachers' Study Board to investigate ways in which WLP can be adapted and to show how it is working with the JDS strategy team so that "All can participate fully in the life of the church".

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Reply

The Conference thanks the Yorkshire North and East District Synod for its memorial and its concerns regarding the accessibility of the Worship: Leading & Preaching course to those who cannot use computers.

The Worship: Leading and Preaching course has been developed as a blended learning course, allowing full use to be made of a range of media including video, audio and written content. The course materials are centred around a website, requiring use of a computer or other device. Use of technologies such as online project assessment and video conferencing have proven invaluable in increasing access to training, especially for those with no local tutor, or those with additional learning needs who depend on technologies such as audio transcription.

The Conference recognises however that for some, the use of technology can be a barrier. For this reason, reasonable adjustments can be made. The portfolio projects are designed to allow students to present work in media other than written text and with the co-operation of the Tutor, project work can be presented without use of computer software. Course materials can be printed or transcribed to audio for listening. The Learning Network can provide support by advising Circuits what adaptations can be put in place to facilitate learning. The Officer for Worship and Local Preaching would be more than happy to discuss the requirements on a case-by-case basis to ensure that no one who is called by God to lead worship and preach is excluded from being equipped by the Church to serve.

The Conference notes the wording of the memorial with regard to advice received from the local preachers' office and directs the Connexional Team to investigate how the communication of inaccurate or misleading information can be avoided in future.

The Local Preachers' Board of Studies is currently working with the Justice, Diversity and Solidarity Strategy Group in various areas where accessibility of training materials can be improved. This has already borne fruit in the provision of training in study skills, advanced training for tutors, and review of cultural and language-specific content relating to inclusion. We remain committed to the aim of equipping the people of God in worship and in the proclamation of the gospel.

The Conference therefore declines the memorial, but notes that the Board of Studies remains committed to improving the accessibility of the course and the Learning Network to the support of students, tutors and mentors, including those who cannot make use of computer software.

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M13 Ministerial Development Review

The Newcastle upon Tyne District Synod Representative Session (Present: 115; Voting: 111 for, 1 against) following a unanimous recommendation from the Presbyteral Session welcomes the advent of 'The Covenant Relationship between the Church and its Ministers' and the opportunities that this brings for reflection on the ministry of the whole people of God. Given that the Covenant is about a partnership between church and minister, the existing process of Ministerial Development Review (MDR) no longer seems appropriate, given that it is purely minister-centred. Furthermore, many of the commitments and expectations within the covenant more than adequately cover the requirements of MDR.

The Ministerial Covenant also references CPD Book VII Guidance, Part 3 re the expectation that full-time stations will involve only 12 sessions a week. We are concerned that engaging in MDR and regular review of the Commitments and Expectations will make heavy/unrealistic demands on time for both lay and ordained.

Ministers are discovering the value of our supervision system and finding the benefit of this for the development of ministry. This requires 6 sessions a year and preparation as well as training for those involved in its delivery.

The Synod believes that it would be better, in the light of the covenant relationship and alongside supervision, to use the commitments of the Covenant instead of MDR for members, presbyters and deacons to review and develop the ministry of members, presbyters and deacons within the District.

In addition, we ask the Ministries Committee to consider the question of withdrawing the mandatory requirement to engage in MDR.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Newcastle Upon Tyne District Synod for the memorial and particularly for its welcome of 'The Covenant Relationship between the Church and its Ministers' (2022), which now forms Part 6 of Book IV of CPD and is entitled 'Renewing Full Connexion: Commitments and Expectations'.

'Renewing Full Connexion' sets out mutual expectations of ministers, members and the Church and can offer a helpful framing of a range of conversations including supervision, MDR, discernment processes and as part of the lifelong work of reflecting on ministry of both lay and ordained.

The purpose of the Ministerial Development Review (MDR) is set out in Standing Order 743 as being a process which enables every presbyter or deacon to reflect, with input from others, on how the ministry of that presbyter or deacon is being experienced and

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fulfilled both in relation to the Church as a whole and within the particular context in which the ministry of the relevant presbyter or deacon is being exercised.

MDR offers an opportunity for feedback from those amongst whom ministry is exercised, in a way which supervision does not. The Ministries Committee has recently reviewed MDR and recognised it is one part of a suite of support and accountability tools for ministers and the Church. In 2021 a new resource supporting MDR was launched, which can be accessed at [ministerialdevelopmentreview_final.pdf \(methodist.org.uk\)](#) on the Methodist Church website.

Whilst the Conference declines the proposal to remove MDR, it recognises that there is further work to be done, in order for 'Renewing Full Connexion' to bear fruit in the life of the church and directs the Ministries Committee to consider these matters and to report to the Conference of 2025.

M14 Review of Part 11 of Standing Orders

The Nottingham Trent Valley (22/4) Circuit Meeting (Present: 39; Voting: unanimous), with reference to the decision of the 2019 Conference to undertake a review of Part 11 of the Standing Orders, asks the Conference that the following proposals are considered as part of that review, with a view to improving the experience of all those affected by the processing of complaints about and between ministers:

- We request the involvement of an independent professional body to manage/ co-ordinate the processing of complaints.
- We request the provision of specific and separate third-party support for Circuit Leadership Teams and individual congregations affected by complaints involving any member(s) of their ministerial teams during and after the processing of these complaints, to include:
 - The sharing of appropriate (non-confidential) information about the process and its progression, promoting a sense of transparency;
 - Advice and guidance on activities and communications with the minister(s) involved during the process;
 - Advice and guidance on representations to a Connexional Complaints Panel;
 - Communication about processes, progress, actions taken and outcomes in order to mitigate damaging rumour-mongering;
 - Pastoral care and prayer.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Nottingham Trent Valley Circuit Meeting for the memorial and for raising these concerns.

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The Conference agrees that it is vital that confidence and trust in our processes are maintained and that the experiences of all those affected by the processing of complaints about and between ministers and other church officeholders is improved.

The Conference notes the Circuit Meeting's requests for the involvement of an independent professional body to manage/co-ordinate the processing of complaints, and for third-party support to be provided to Circuit Leadership Teams and individual congregations affected by complaints.

The Conference understands that these issues are already being considered within the overall review of the Church's complaints and discipline process ("the Part 11 Review"), as reported elsewhere in the Council's first Report to the Conference, Section H (page 71 of the Agenda).

Notwithstanding the above, the Conference, by way of interim reply, refers it to the Methodist Council for consideration by those working on the Part 11 Review.

M15 Funding the payment of a stipend for a minister during long-term absence

The South Worcestershire (5/16) Circuit Meeting (Present: 43; Voting: unanimous), draws the Conference's attention to the disparity over funding the payment of a stipend for a minister's long-term absence during a disciplinary investigation compared with the funding arrangements when a minister is on long-term sick leave. In both cases the minister is entitled to be paid their full stipend until there is an outcome.

In the case of long-term sick leave, the Circuit can be reimbursed by the Methodist Church Fund for the cost of the stipend after 6 months of absence (see SO 365). According to SO 365, Circuits are required to bear the full cost of payment of a stipend to a minister for the first 6 months of absence due to sickness or injury. After this period, a Circuit may apply to the Methodist Church Fund for reimbursement of stipend costs (less credit for Social Security Benefits and Statutory Sick Pay) paid by the Circuit to the minister for the next 12 months.

However, when a minister is suspended during a disciplinary investigation, there is no provision to reimburse a Circuit, even when a suspension lasts for more than 6 months. Instead, the Circuit must continue to bear the stipend cost in full, however long the process takes, and it can go on for a very long time (well over a year).

The South Worcestershire Circuit asks the Conference to urgently address this disparity and take action to provide funding for Circuits to pay a stipend where a minister is suspended for longer than 6 months.

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Reply

The Conference thanks the South Worcestershire Circuit Meeting for this memorial relating to long term absence of a minister.

The Conference appreciates the reasons for the Circuit raising these concerns and notes that other Circuits will have experienced similar situations. The suspension of a minister, particularly when extended over many months, can lead to understandable frustration about the continuing costs of ministry. However, the Conference notes that a stipend is not a wage (a payment for work undertaken) but a living allowance and that the Circuit will have budgeted for the costs of stipends; it will not have budgeted for additional costs incurred if others serve in place of the suspended minister.

SO 365(7)(i) permits reimbursement of 'any payments, expenses or liabilities incurred or arising in connection with any actual or potential disciplinary proceedings against any person'; the Council [MC/20/113, October 2020] delegated to the Secretary of the Conference decisions about when and what payments should be made under this Standing Order. Clearly, additional costs to supply ministry in the stead of a suspended presbyter or deacon can be regarded as a legitimate additional expense. However, the Conference agrees that that might helpfully be made clearer in the Standing Order. The Conference therefore declines the memorial but directs the Ministries Committee in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee to review and amend the text of Standing Order 365(7) in line with the current de facto policy.

M16 Funding the payment of a stipend for a minister during long-term absence

The Birmingham District Presbyteral Synod (Present: 61; Voting: unanimous) draws the Conference's attention to the disparity over funding the payment of a stipend for a minister's long-term absence during a disciplinary investigation compared with the funding arrangements when a minister is on long-term sick leave. In both cases the minister is entitled to be paid their full stipend until there is an outcome.

In the case of long-term sick leave, the Circuit can be reimbursed by the Methodist Church Fund for the cost of the stipend after 6 months of absence (see SO 365). According to SO 365, Circuits are required to bear the full cost of payment of a stipend to a minister for the first 6 months of absence due to sickness or injury. After this period, a Circuit may apply to the Methodist Church Fund for reimbursement of stipend costs (less credit for Social Security Benefits and Statutory Sick Pay) paid by the Circuit to the minister for the next 12 months.

However, when a minister is suspended during a disciplinary investigation, there is no provision to reimburse a Circuit, even when a suspension lasts for more than 6 months. Instead, the Circuit must continue to bear the stipend cost in full, however long the process takes, and it can go on for a very long time (well over a year).

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The Birmingham Presbyteral Synod asks the Conference to urgently address this disparity and take action to provide funding for Circuits to pay a stipend where a minister is suspended for longer than 6 months.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Birmingham District Presbyteral Synod for its memorial and adopts the same reply as for M15.

M17 Membership and Statistics for Mission

The North Bedfordshire (34/1) Circuit Meeting (Present: 63; Voting: unanimous) is concerned by the reliance in SO 605A, which deals with the cessation and merger of churches, on membership numbers. This is because it feels that membership lists do not always reflect what is happening in terms of mission, especially in some of our smaller rural churches. In some places, membership numbers may be poor, but there could still be very rich mission.

The Circuit was further concerned that 'Statistics for Mission' which now requests only membership numbers and attendance at 'main worship services' further perpetuate a narrow view of belonging that does not reflect the missional engagement of the Church and its impact, particularly in some rural settings. This is especially true when mission and evangelism are ongoing works in progress and getting people to a point of membership as it is currently understood may take many years.

It is our view therefore that our understanding of membership and belonging and the current 'statistics for mission' both need looking at again in order to take account of the full spectrum of contexts that we have in the Methodist Church.

Reply

The Conference thanks the North Bedfordshire Circuit Meeting for its memorial and for its attention to the breadth of the mission of its churches. The Conference of 2022 received the report *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century* which gave attention to some of the challenges relating to our current understanding and practice of membership but reaffirmed its importance. Among other things, membership expresses our commitment as Methodists to the work of the church in a particular place and our willingness to share in it. Thus membership is an appropriate category in Standing Order 605A: it asks, 'Are there enough people who are committed to the work of the church in this place in order for it to function effectively as a Local Church?'

The Conference also directed the Faith and Order Committee to engage in further work on the understanding of membership and report to the Conference of 2024. This work will consider:

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[...] some of the questions requiring attention, including those questions around ecclesial identity and the extent to which membership is essential to Methodist identity, especially in relation to ecumenical, online and New Places for New People contexts [...]; and how different understandings of membership in Methodist Churches around the world impact on those who also wish to belong to the Methodist Church in Britain, for example through the Fellowship Groups.

Where a particular Local Church has fewer than the minimum number of members specified in Standing Order 605A, there are more options than simply closure of both building and congregation.

These were set out in detail in the response to Memorial M18 (2022) and provide ways forward for local congregations in such situations. These may include retaining their own buildings, services of worship and so on and allow for the continuation of a congregation's rich mission to which the Circuit Meeting refers. As the reply noted, "The operation of Standing Order 605A can release a congregation to continue and even increase their worship, fellowship and outreach activities."

The Conference is aware that while some would wish for a more detailed and nuanced collection of information in the Annual Returns, others continue to find them excessive and burdensome. Work is currently underway to review the Annual Returns, including what information is requested.

The Conference therefore declines the memorial, but directs the Faith and Order Committee and those engaged in the review of the Annual Returns to note its comments.

M18 EDI Training

The Nidd Valley (29/26) Circuit Meeting (Present: 35; Voting: unanimous) welcomes the Methodist Church in Britain's desire to become a welcoming and inclusive church; it is a key part of being a Christian in the twenty-first century. However, at a time when numbers across the Connexion are declining, our focus also needs to be on mission, discipleship and worship, rather than increasing governance demands.

The Conference of 2021 adopted the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity Strategy which included the creation of mandatory EDI training. This has great value. However the obligation to undertake this training is adding a greater burden onto the declining numbers of volunteers and staff, and is making it harder to find volunteers to take on important positions of responsibility. By being only available online the course itself defeats the object of being inclusive.

Unfortunately the course is too long; Circuits are already creaking under the weight of imposed governance. We look to the Connexion to recognise the challenges of circuit life

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and relieve us from the burden of governance, which will not grow the church, in order to allow us to focus on mission, discipleship and worship which will grow the church.

The meeting requests that the Conference review the structure, participation and delivery of this new course, finding ways to make this more accessible and less demanding on Circuits who are already over-stretched.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Nidd Valley Circuit Meeting for the memorial and the encouraging engagement with the JDS strategy.

Whilst the Conference understands the concerns raised over the length of the training material on MCBX, one of the advantages of an online learning option is that individuals are able to study at their own pace as and when time is available. From the feedback that has been received by the Connexional Team the average time that the training is taking for individuals to complete is between 2 – 4 hours to complete, although it recognises that this has been longer for some individuals.

The Conference acknowledges the challenges inherent in recruiting and retaining volunteers at this time and emphasises the need to ensure that all those in church roles are suitably equipped to carry out their role as we continue to minimize the risks of any kind of discrimination.

This training enables the Conference to have an assurance that there has been a consistent approach and understanding of the fundamentals of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) which hopefully ensures that our mission, discipleship and worship are free of discrimination as we strive to become a fully inclusive church.

The EDI training was planned to be reviewed six months after its launch. This review took place in April 2023. As a result of the feedback that had been received some amendments to the online material have been made on MCBX. In addition to this the Connexional Team, having heard concerns over the ability to engage only on line, have produced and made available additional resources that enable people to engage with the training in groups locally. (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church/training-for-justice-dignity-and-solidarity/mandatory-edi-training-equality-diversity-and-inclusion/training-resources/>)

Whilst the Conference agrees with the challenges that are highlighted within this memorial it believes that these have already been addressed through the work that the Connexional Team has undertaken in providing the additional resources and therefore declines the memorial.

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M19 EDI Training

The Bede (20/13) Circuit Meeting (Present: 34; Voting: unanimous) is very concerned that the EDI training is mandatory for local preachers and church stewards. Attention is drawn to the additional time it takes to complete the training and the difficulty in accessing the course for those who do not have a computer, or the necessary computer skills. The concern is that many will resign from these positions.

We therefore ask the Conference to:

- change the wording from 'mandatory' to 'highly recommended'
- reduce the length of the training
- make the training more accessible through a variety of delivery methods, for example small group sessions.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Bede Circuit Meeting for the memorial and the concerns raised through the memorial.

This training enables the Conference to have an assurance that there has been a consistent approach and understanding of the fundamentals of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) which hopefully ensures that our mission, discipleship and worship are free of discrimination as we strive to become a fully inclusive church. The Conference therefore resists the request to change the wording from 'mandatory' to 'highly recommended'.

Whilst the Conference understands the concerns raised over the length of the training material on MCBX, one of the advantages of an online learning option is that individuals are able to study at their own pace as and when time is available. From the feedback that has been received by the Connexional Team the average time that the training is taking for individuals to complete is between 2 – 4 hours to complete, although it is recognised that this has been longer for some individuals as highlighted within this memorial.

The EDI training was planned to be reviewed six months after its launch. This review took place in April 2023. As a result of the feedback that had been received some amendments to the online material have been made on MCBX. In addition to this the Connexional Team, having heard concerns over the ability to engage only on line, has produced and made available additional resources that enable people to engage with the training in groups locally. (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church/training-for-justice-dignity-and-solidarity/mandatory-edi-training-equality-diversity-and-inclusion/training-resources/>)

The Conference therefore declines this memorial whilst recognising that the accessibility of the training material has already been addressed through the work that the Connexional Team has undertaken in providing the additional materials.

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M20 SO 650(6)

The Notting Hill (35/14) Circuit Meeting (Present: 6; Voting: unanimous) requests the Conference to direct the Law and Polity Committee to bring an amendment to Standing Order 650(6), clarifying intentions on the uses of the General Church Fund and the purposes of the Local Church.

Standing Order 650(6)(v) states that the purposes of the Local Church include, subject to provisos, the support from the General Church Fund of any other charitable fund or body, except if such support would be contrary to the purposes of the Methodist Church or its discipline.

Discussions between the Notting Hill Circuit and legal officers from TMCP and the Connexional Team in recent years have revealed an interpretation of this Standing Order which we believe is contrary to guidance received in previous decades, is not widely known across the Connexion, and does not compare well with practice among our ecumenical partners.

This interpretation states that Methodism's own needs are so great across the Connexion that Local Churches with spare resources in their general funds should support solely Methodist causes. In other words, that clauses SO 650(6)(i)–(iv) are sufficient, and clause (v) is effectively redundant. Grants to any other bodies cannot be justified. In other words, grants from general church funds to charitable organisations such as Christian Aid and the Fund for Human Need are not permitted.

The Notting Hill Circuit requests amendment to SO 650 to make provision so that:

- (i) The purposes of the General Church Fund should not be exclusively confined to funds within the Connexion, but may apply to other charitable purposes locally and globally as an expression of Christian witness and service.
- (ii) Support to charitable organisations with which the church is involved as part of its work among the local community should be made possible, under such criteria as the Law and Polity Committee recommends.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Notting Hill Circuit Meeting for its Memorial.

Following the concerns expressed by the Notting Hill Circuit in the memorial, the views of the Law and Polity Committee have been sought and research has been undertaken into the way in which Standing Order 650 has been understood in earlier times. It is clear from that research that the earlier understanding was that it is in principle open to a Local Church to decide, under Standing Order 650(6)(v), to apply sums from the general church fund in making donations to non-Methodist charitable funds or bodies, subject to

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certain safeguards or caveats. The Law and Polity Committee has now confirmed that that is also its understanding of the effect of Standing Order 650. Those safeguards or caveats are as follows:

1. It will be appreciated that under Standing Order 650(4) the payment of the circuit assessment is the first charge on the general church fund and the discretion given by Standing Order 650(5) to apply funds for the charitable purposes of the Local Church is subject to performance of that obligation. (Standing Order 917(3) similarly makes model trust money which is local property applicable for the purposes for which the general church fund may be applied under Standing Order 650(4) or (5), but subject to paying (i) taxes, assessments, rates and similar outgoings in respect of the property, (ii) appropriate insurance premiums and (iii) interest on relevant borrowings. If the model trust money in question is capital money, Standing Order 917 is itself subject to Standing Order 916.)
2. Some content must be given to the words “subject to (i), (ii) and (iii) above” in Standing Order 650(6)(v). Nevertheless the Committee does not hold the view stated in the memorial that Methodism’s own needs are so great that Local Churches should support solely Methodist causes and paragraph (v) is effectively redundant. The Committee’s view is rather that before the Church Council or the body to whom authority is delegated decides to apply sums from the general church fund under paragraph (v) it should consider the possibility of one or more alternative applications under paragraphs (i), (ii) and (iii). It is therefore perfectly possible for the relevant body, having weighed up the competing demands of the purposes identified in Standing Order 650(6), to decide, for good reason, to make a donation to a body such as Christian Aid or the Fund for Human Need. It would also be possible to support charitable organisations with which the church is involved as part of its work among the local community.
3. In making a decision as to the application of the general church fund (or model trust money which has become applicable for the purposes specified in Standing Order 650(4) and (5), the relevant body is of course acting as a charity trustee and so must comply with the ordinary duties of charity trustees. Those duties require that the trustees should always act in the best interests of their charity, which necessarily involves acting prudently and responsibly to further the charity’s purposes. In the case of a local church, Standing Order 650(6) makes clear that the charity’s purposes include wider Methodist purposes and the “subject to” requirement ensures that they are not overlooked. Clearly the amount of any donation to a particular purpose as well as the principle of whether such a donation should be made will be part of the consideration required.
4. Paragraph (v) is also subject to an exception excluding support for a fund or body where such support would be contrary to any purpose of the Methodist Church or to Methodist discipline. Although the scope of this exception is undefined, the Committee

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takes the view that there would be no room for doubt in the case of most concrete examples and certainly none of the examples given by the Notting Hill Circuit Meeting would give rise to any such concern.

In the light of the above clarification of the Law and Polity Committee's understanding of the effect of Standing Order 650, the Conference does not regard it as necessary to direct the Committee to bring to the Conference the particular amendments proposed in the memorial. The Conference does, however, recognise that the terms of the Standing Order have given rise to some uncertainty and that any clarification may give rise to issues of policy going beyond the purview of the Law and Polity Committee. The Conference therefore, by way of interim reply, refers the memorial to the Methodist Council, in conjunction with the Law and Polity Committee, for consideration and report, to the Conference of 2024 if possible.

M21 Locally Resident Members

The Ashbourne (22/11) Circuit Meeting (Present: 23; Voting: unanimous) requests that the Methodist Church fully implements the stated aims of its own Equality and Diversity policy by eliminating unfair discrimination. In the instance of Oversight and Trusteeship this has specific reference to the definition of 'locally resident' church members. To apply such a definition of 'locally resident' is institutionalised discrimination based on geographical area. We ask that the term 'locally resident' be abolished and we urge the Connexion to review the definition of 'locally resident' member giving due consideration to regular, involved and committed members of congregations.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Ashbourne Circuit Meeting for the Memorial. The Conference is sensitive to the concerns raised.

Having consulted with the Law and Polity Committee and the EDI Adviser in the Connexional Team, the Conference is advised that living within or outside a geographical location is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 and therefore cannot legally be considered to be discriminatory. In any case, there is nothing to prevent a person living outside the local area being a member of a church, provided that the church is prepared to have them as a member. The only provisions that use the phrase are Standing Orders 605 and 605A, which say that a Local Church cannot be formed or reconstituted, or continue to be entitled to be recognised as a Local Church beyond four quarters, if fewer than twelve of its members are locally resident.

It is important to recognise that the existing definition in Standing Order 605(3) does not provide a fixed geographical boundary within which someone is 'locally resident'. Rather a person is locally resident for these purposes 'if resident in such a place that the Local Church in question is a natural centre for worship or fellowship.'

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Paragraph 8.3 e) at page 428 of the Oversight and Trusteeship Report 30 to the Conference of 2021 reported that the Law and Polity Committee had considered whether 'locally resident':

"might be widened or alternatively more closely defined than as presently set out in Standing Order 605(3). However, the Committee advises against this at this time, so as to continue to allow careful reflection in each Circuit's context as to how "locally resident" might be most sensibly understood and applied, including as part of the process of considering what might be the minimum number of trustee bodies required. (If at any stage the Conference prefers to establish instead a wider or narrower understanding, this can of course be developed.)"

The requirement that a Local Church have a minimum number of locally resident members is not an arbitrary restriction but is related to the nature of the Local Church's mission. *Called to Love and Praise* noted that 'the local Church has the task of sharing in the whole ministry of Christ both in its neighbourhood through worship, fellowship, pastoral care, mission and service, and also in the wider world by its prayers, gifts and outreach.' (§4.7.3) In order to fulfil the first aspect of this, it is essential that the Local Church has a core of members who are rooted in the neighbourhood(s) in which it is seeking to exercise these ministries. This is, of course, not to say that members who live elsewhere cannot make a valuable contribution to a Local Church's mission and ministry. However, Christian ministry and mission is in, among and alongside – incarnational in other words – rather than 'done to' from outside. The requirement is an expression of these missional principles.

The concept of 'locally resident' in SO 605(3) is deliberately flexible as what is 'a natural centre' will be a question to be determined according to the local context. There may be more than one Local Church which is such a 'natural centre' in a given case. To use the memorial's example of an individual with a disability who worships at a church other than their nearest one because its facilities are more suited to their needs, the Conference would consider that church clearly to be a 'natural centre for worship or fellowship' for that person (and for any family members, companions or carers who accompany them). At the same time, the Conference encourages all Local Churches to make their premises as accessible as possible.

In reflecting on the meaning of 'natural centre for worship or fellowship', it is important to pay attention to the local context of both the church and local community as well as the members concerned. For example, a town or city centre church may be a natural centre for quite a wide area. Similarly, a church which offers worship in different languages may be a natural centre for people who speak those languages. The Conference encourages a flexibility of approach while holding the principle that Local Churches must be rooted

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in the communities they seek to serve. As a result, the Conference considers that the existing definition of 'locally resident' continues to be appropriate and therefore declines the memorial.

In declining the memorial, the Conference notes the work currently being undertaken around the concept of "online church" reported elsewhere in the Conference Agenda and acknowledges that it may be necessary in the future to consider how the requirement for locally resident members should apply to Local Churches that meet for worship predominantly or wholly online.

M22 Annual Affirmations

The Plymouth and Exeter District Synod (Present: 89; Voting: 66 for, 8 against) requests that Conference instructs the Faith and Order committee to consider whether the questions asked of presbyters in the Presbyteral Session of Synod remain appropriate, if they are appropriate then the Faith and Order Committee be tasked with amending them so that all presbyters are able to answer them.

A possible way forward would be to replace the two questions with just one such as the following:

Does each of us continue faithfully within the Methodist Church to discharge the obligations laid upon us by the ministry which we have received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God?

Background – There are two questions asked annually of presbyters which are required to be answered as one.

1. Do you continue to faithfully discharge the obligations laid upon us by the ministry which we have received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God?
2. Do you continue to believe and preach our doctrines and administer our discipline?

If the answer is not yes to these questions then potential disciplinary issues are raised for presbyters.

Since the Conference resolutions on Marriage and Relationships there are a number of presbyters who feel unable to answer "yes", however they wish to stay within the Methodist Church. In bringing this memorial we recognise the contribution made by the Secretary of the Conference and others in the pamphlet published in 2021 "The Annual Affirmation", however we note that this has not had the effect of moving us forward.

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We long to live with contradictory convictions and move towards doing this in peace with each other, however asking the question and pointing out the difference each year perpetuates and exacerbates the difference.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Plymouth and Exeter District Synod for its memorial and for its concern for living well with contradictory convictions. The Conference is aware that the Annual Inquiry continues to cause challenges in some Synods.

The content of the affirmations in the Annual Inquiry is essential to what it means to be in 'Full Connexion' with the Conference, as well as essential for the Methodist Church as it seeks to remain faithful to the apostolic mission. The Conference reminds presbyters that being in Full Connexion means that they are entitled to the full status and privileges, and are subject to all the obligations of a presbyter of the Methodist Church. In being received, presbyters affirm that they accept these obligations, believe and will preach our doctrines, and will faithfully observe and administer our discipline as determined by the Conference. This is an enduring commitment, for as long as the presbyter remains in Full Connexion, and it is therefore appropriate that it be reaffirmed each year in the Annual Inquiry. It expresses specific commitments, not simply a general one to Christian ministry in a broadly Methodist context.

The Conference is obliged by the Deed of Union to uphold its doctrinal standards – not just as a formality but in its ministry and mission. The doctrinal standards are contained in clause 4 of the Deed of Union and the term 'our doctrines' in the promises made at reception into Full Connexion and reaffirmed in the Annual Inquiry refers to the doctrines specified by clause 4. Expecting its preachers (itinerant and local) to affirm (in their respective ways) the doctrinal standards, is part of the way in which the Methodist Conference maintains and transmits its doctrinal standards and so remains faithful to the apostolic mission.

The doctrinal standards are integral to the 'obligations' laid upon presbyters and are intended to safeguard the integrity of 'the gospel of the grace of God' as this has been received and transmitted by the Methodist Church. In specifying 'standards' of preaching, the Deed of Union deliberately does not seek to create a 'system of formal or speculative theology' but does seek to 'secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.' The doctrinal standards therefore permit a broad theological outlook, though there are limits. To remove the doctrinal question from the Annual Inquiry would be to broaden this significantly further and to such an extent that it would be inconsistent with the Methodist tradition. For example, were the memorial's proposal to be adopted, Methodist presbyters would in effect no longer be expected to subscribe to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

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Furthermore, to drop the requirement for presbyters to 'administer our discipline', as the memorial proposes, would also have serious consequences. As authorised public representatives of the Methodist Church, presbyters have a duty to administer 'our discipline' for the sake of the peace and good order of the church. As sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God, the Church is subject to the rule of Jesus Christ to which the polity of the Methodist Church seeks to bear witness, however imperfect and in need of constant reform it may be.

Importantly, the Annual Inquiry does not require presbyters to subscribe to an understanding that marriage may be between two persons of the same sex, any more than it imposes a particular theology of atonement or of the sacraments. It should be noted that the doctrinal standards say nothing about marriage. Therefore presbyters may express varied theological understandings of marriage and practise those in their ministry while still affirming the Annual Inquiry: indeed our discipline (as expressed in Standing Orders) makes explicit provision for the different understandings of marriage held within the Methodist Church, including the understanding that marriage is only between one man and one woman.

While the question raised by this memorial concerned the Presbyteral Session of the Synods and therefore the reply has addressed the affirmations made by presbyters, the Conference notes that similar affirmations are made each year by deacons and that the same principles apply. The Conference reminds all its ministers of the positive intention of the Annual Inquiry as a way of affirming and renewing their commitment as ministers of the Methodist Church, alongside those with whom they share that ministry.

The Conference therefore declines the memorial.

M23 Data Protection

The Liverpool District Synod (Present: 47; Voting: 45 for, 0 against) is grateful for the work that TMCP have undertaken to ensure that churches, Circuits and Districts are complying with Data Protection. However, we realise that there is still some non-compliance amongst churches, which is difficult to track with the existing system.

The Synod requests the Conference to direct the connexional online suite team to work together with TMCP to bring the existing Data Protection Annual Checklist into the online suite. This would bring all annual reporting under one system and would allow Circuits to see the progress and offer support/help where required.

Reply

The Conference thanks the Liverpool District Synod for the memorial and for raising the concerns it contains.

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TMCP have welcomed the Circuit's suggestions and have agreed to work with the Connexional Team to explore ways in which the Checklist might be brought into the Online Suite.

The Conference, therefore, by way of interim reply, refers this memorial to the Council to investigate with the Connexional IT team and TMCP what options might be available to make the completion of the Data Protection Checklist easier for managing trustees, and to report back to the Conference of 2024.