26. Faith and Order Committee Report

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Resolution	26/1. The Conference receives the report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To provide a report on the work of the Faith and Order Committee
Main Points	• The work of the Faith and Order Committee 2021-2022 • Theology of online life • Liturgical and other resources

The Work of the Faith and Order Committee 2021-2022

1.   The Faith and Order Committee is appointed by, and directly accountable to, the Methodist Conference. On behalf of the Conference, it helps to ensure that what the Methodist Church in Britain says and does is true to its self-understanding, mission and purpose. It therefore seeks to encourage a deepening of theological understanding, engagement with the Methodist tradition, and shared critical reflection in order to help discern Methodist perspectives and responses in all aspects of the Church's life.

2.   This year the Faith and Order Committee has continued to look at its ways of working and has used an advertisement and recruitment process for new members of the main Committee and the Liturgy and Worship Sub-Committee. It has also considered its priorities amidst the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like other bodies in the Methodist Church it has experienced a heavy workload at a time when many people are already exhausted and feeling overwhelmed. Some work that was postponed during the pandemic has required attention and new questions for exploration have also emerged. The Committee's responses to several pieces of work directed by the Conference can be found below and elsewhere in the Agenda. The review of the criteria for Authorisations will now be reported to the 2023 Conference.

3.   **Theology of Online Life**

3.1.   In its report to the 2018 Conference the Faith and Order Committee committed itself to undertaking some work on the theology of online life "in order to support continued reflection on the particular questions relating to 'holy communion mediated through social media' and to enable theological exploration of the broader questions about the nature of online life and Christian experience."[1] The Committee undertook to work with those "who are already engaged in ministry in online spaces" to identify key areas for exploration and it has continued to work with others, identifying and discussing some of the resulting theological questions. Many of the early conversations were dominated by questions about online communion, and that work was reported to the 2021 Conference.

3.2.   The rapid social changes which took place since the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown began in March 2020 have also impacted this work. Internet access and electronic communications have long been an everyday, even essential aspect of life, but electronic communication became more familiar and more frequent to a wider range of people, and is now a regular feature of church life in a way that was not the case previously for many people. People have been able to 'stay in touch' whilst making new connections where physical proximity has been constrained, discovering new and creative ways in which to

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[1] *Faith and Order Committee Report,* 2018, 5.6.3

generate a sense of togetherness. At the same time, it may have become all the clearer how online communicating is unlike being together face-to-face with other people. These are different ways of communicating and relating. The immense social, ecclesial and personal change modified engagement with communications technologies and media platforms. Much else changed for many people, including how we relate to one another more generally, and our sense of an interconnected world

3.3.   The Faith and Order Committee hoped that the exploratory work on the theology of online life contributed to ongoing learning together about online communities and communicating, online worship and other presentations of faith, as it sought to understand and take account of a variety of ways in which people live and work online. The intention has been to help enrich conversations and everyday working practices as local faith communities and networks, linked as a connexion within a globally-connected church and world.

3.4.   Participants in these discussions were keen to foster and to resource an accessible conversation about online life across the Methodist Church, noting and celebrating the fact that many such conversations are already happening. Many of these matters are relevant not just in relation to online life, but more broadly to the corporate life, ministry and mission of the Methodist Church. The Committee felt that producing a report reflecting on the matters discussed would not be particularly useful, not least because experience and understanding continue to deepen and change as have the particular questions requiring attention. Rather, the Committee understood its task to be about ensuring that online activity is not overlooked whenever Methodist people think and talk together about following Christ.

3.5.   The Committee agreed that discussion of online life might be constructively and creatively shaped around the four themes of *Our Calling,* and possibly linked with *A Methodist Way of Life*. It has therefore produced some questions for individual or group reflection. These can be found in the Appendix and are available here: https://bit.ly/discipleship-online-life.

3.6.   The Committee is keenly aware that a range of issues will not be adequately addressed within the framework offered, and need to be pursued elsewhere. Only some of the questions for reflection are relevant to those who are unable, or do not find it easy, to access the internet, and it is also important to hear and reflect on their experiences. There also may be particular questions relating to the faith and order of the Methodist Church that in due course the Committee will need to consider. It is hoped, however, that the resource will help foster discussion and reflection as part of ongoing discipleship.

4.   **Liturgical and Other Resources**
4.1.   The Committee has been working on several resources including a resource for those with authorisations to preside at the Lord's Supper (www.methodist.org.uk/authorisations-to-preside/) and a list of biblical resources to help resource ongoing reflection on marriage, relationships and human sexuality (https://bit.ly/GILUU-Biblical-Resources). It intends to produce a short resource on *Forgiveness*, following the 2021 *Theology of Safeguarding* report.

4.2.   **Changing Scenes**
         The 2019 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to review the provision of liturgical resources in the light of the *God in Love Unites Us* report, including "the preparation of a draft service of celebration for civil partnerships" and liturgical resources for use at the ending of a marriage (Resolutions 10/4 and 10/5). Given that civil partnerships take many forms, the Committee decided instead to produce a small book of resources for the beginning and ending of relationships which would also encompass divorce and civil partnerships, something similar to the previous *Vows and Partings* publication (2002). This new resource will be called *Changing Scenes* and it is hoped that it will be available later in 2022. The Committee would particularly like to thank all those who have submitted prayers and liturgies for this resource and the group that has worked on this.

4.3. **A new set of orders for the Lord's Supper**
An additional set of orders for the Lord's Supper will also be available later this year. These additional orders offer services that are deliberately simpler than those in the *Methodist Worship Book*, although they retain the same structure and theological emphasis as existing Methodist orders for the Lord's Supper. They are an additional resource, authorised by the Faith and Order Committee. They have been produced also with the intention of helping to deepen understanding of the theology and practice of Holy Communion. Notes have been provided alongside each part of the text to help explain the different components of the service.   Attention may occasionally be drawn to these notes during worship, they may be used in Confirmation or Church Membership preparation groups, or they may help individual reflection and learning.

5. **Holy Communion and Online Worship**
The Conference adopted a period of discernment during which presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are permitted to lead celebrations of Holy Communion in which some or all of the worshippers gather together through electronic means. This period of discernment is in place until 31 August 2024. The Conference also directed the Faith and Order Committee to receive feedback on the period of discernment and report to the Conference of 2024 with further recommendations. Those participating in online Holy Communion were also encouraged to reflect on this sacrament and some questions for reflection can be found in section 8 of that report ([Conference 2021 Agenda Volume 2 (methodist.org.uk)](#)). The Committee would be grateful for feedback to be encouraged. It can be sent to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee at onlinecommunion@methodistchurch.org.uk by 31 January 2023.

6. **Orders for Marriage and the Blessing of a Marriage**
The Conference has commended the liturgy for the *Marriage of any two persons* and the liturgy for the *Blessing of a Marriage of any two persons previously solemnized* to Local Churches and Circuits for experimental use in accordance with SO 330(9). Feedback on these draft liturgies would be welcome and may be sent to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee at marriageservicefeedback@methodistchurch.org.uk by 3 January 2023 to enable the 2023 Conference to make a decision about their formal authorisation.

7. **Work being brought to Conference in 2023**:
Review of criteria for authorisations to preside at the Lord's Supper
Report on the services of marriage

***RESOLUTION

26/1.   The Conference received the Report.

APPENDIX
Discipleship and Online Life: questions for reflection

Worship / Spirituality
- Technologies can enhance living, in practical and artistic ways. Technologies can assist our creating and cultivating. In what ways is this true in your experience?

- Which online resources or groups have helped you pray regularly? Have any expanded your prayer language or ways of praying? Do any give you a sense of praying with others, even if you are alone?

- How has the internet expanded your participation in corporate worship?

- How do you select helpful resources?

- Where are how do you have the kinds of intimate, open and trusting conversations about the life of faith sometimes described in Wesleyan ways as 'in band'? Is it possible to have this kind of conversation online?

- Can spiritual practices take seriously the impact of digital exhaustion, overstimulation and distraction – practices such as a 'dopamine fast' or (offline) forest worship?

- Are stillness, silence and contemplation actually possible when online? If yes, how are they experienced? If not, how does this matter?

- Is our online presence true? How does it speak of integrity? Or virtues such as humility?

- How has the internet expanded your sense of the God of Jesus Christ?

- Worship online is (or needs to be) unlike worship offline. Good connections can lead to good collaboration as ideas, experience and resources are shared. How do we stay focused on God and assist one another's worship of God, whilst making the most of available resources and connections?

Learning and caring
- Have you found online sources which encourage and support regular Bible reading and study?

- Are you using online sources of information about Christian faith? Do you participate in informative online conversations about Christian faith? How do you discern which are reliable and fruitful sources, consistent with your Methodist heritage?

- Do we address one another online any differently than we would address one another face to face? Do we care for the stranger who may read what we write?

- In what ways can we engage with pastoral and health issues directly related to online activity: issues of esteem, trust, depression, control, deception and so on?

- In shared or 'church' online spaces, do we have good safeguarding habits as we would in physical shared church spaces?

- Are internet-led relationships consistent with our understanding of good interpersonal relationships?

- Communication technologies can connect us with experiences of people (and other creatures) we would never meet and may not otherwise know about. In relation to these connections, how is our sense of wonder and relatedness enhanced? How might this wonder and relatedness modify our ways of behaving?

- Have differences in internet and device access separated people from one another, or heightened differences between privileged and disenfranchised people? Can we respond to inequalities with practical and effective care?

- With a technology designed to connect us with like-minded people who share our lifestyle, how do we counteract 'echo chambers' and pay attention to people unlike ourselves? How, in

practice, do we value diversity? Are we extending or diminishing our capacity to relate as fully human beings?

- Could this meeting or resource be more accessible to people with learning difficulties, or sensory limitations? If not, what alternative interactions do we maintain?

- How much can we learn about one another and our circumstances online? Do we need to supplement that learning with other ways of being together?

Service
- Humans adapted to using other technologies without losing a full-bodied sense of our place in the world, so how do online communications relate to other (offline) ways in which we perform aspects of our identity and relating? How does it matter that we cannot touch at a distance? What does it mean to be 'in touch'?

- 'Our devices can connect us to others, but they can blind us to the person sitting next to us.' (Detweiler, p.212). Am I loving my neighbour?

- How are we building meaningful, healthy, mutual relationships online?

- Have we been persuaded that newer, faster, smaller means better? If so, what is the impact on our capacity or willingness to conserve that which is life-giving?

- Regarding the created world, have we lost wilderness, and its restorative effect? How can our connectness counter this?

- Digital networks are not passive, but often persuasive and pervasive. Do we recognise cultural and social trends which seem contrary to the kingdom of God or what it is to be the Body of Christ?

Evangelism
- What are the online impressions we create, and do they speak of God's love in Christ?

- Is our evangelising relational and personal, or directed towards an unknown 'public'?

- How is 'recordability' enhancing or stultifying our communicating?

- Are experiences of forgiveness and redemption, sanctification and change, challenged by the fact that things I wrote in the past remain accessible?

- How are 'good news' and 'new creation' and so on described and understood in a technologically-saturated culture?

- If fear of dying is about oblivion and being forgotten, are people comforted by creating a digital legacy? How, then, do we speak of 'eternal life', particularly at funerals?

- Is technology driving our culture and values? In what ways?

- How are we evangelising people whose devices are 'always on and always on them'?

- How are we engaging people in Christian thinking if they have learned to depend on devices and internet for inquiry and opinion?

- Is it easy for people to find trustworthy sources for accessing and learning about the Bible and Christian belief and practice?