

Methodist Academies and Schools Trust (MAST) and the Methodist Council

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| Contact Name and Details | The Revd David Deeks, Chair MAST |
| Status of Paper | Final |
| Action Required | For decision |
| Draft Resolutions | 95/1. The Council receives the report. |

1. On re-reading the Education Commission Report

1.1 The Education Commission reported to the 2012 Conference. Its resolutions were adopted and its recommendations were endorsed.

1.2 The section of the report on academies had no resolutions or recommendations attached to it which related directly to academies. The style of this section of the report was entirely descriptive. It noted the emerging government policy on academies but made no in-principle comment on them. The tone was that public policy on academisation would drive certain changes in some schools and that would inevitably affect a number of Methodist schools in the maintained sector.

1.3 This section of the Report did, however, commend the Methodist Council, and recommend that the Conference confirm the Council's decision, in establishing the Methodist Academies and Schools Trust (MAST). MAST was put in place to be the vehicle through which it was hoped Methodist schools would become academies if and when that became desirable or necessary. The primary concern of the Commission was that if and when a Methodist school became an academy, there was no loss of Methodist ethos and identity.

1.4 The Commission's only *opinion* on academies, as then conceived (an opinion for which the Commission sought no wider endorsement), was the following:

14.2.6 The Commission believes that wherever possible, any new Methodist academies should be focused upon the needs of poorer and disadvantaged communities. It also believes that any Methodist school which is deemed outstanding and is seeking academy status should agree to support a less effective school to raise its standards.

2. The Methodist Council and academies

2.1 The Council last debated MAST's policy on academies on 11 April 2015. Up to that point MAST had been involved in few conversations with its schools about becoming academies. It had declined to give any steer to schools about academisation. It took the stance that it would provide full and even-handed advice to any school exploring the academy option and any school compelled to become an academy; but it waited for the school to make the initial approach. The Council decided to maintain that position, though it was presented with a paper from MAST suggesting the time was ripe for MAST to adopt a more pro-active approach.

2.2 The downside of the way that MAST has been operating is that it has effectively been seen as an inactive academy provider. This means that people involved in forced academisations do not come to MAST – because it has no visibility or track record as a provider. Schools exploring the academy option do not come to MAST for a similar reason – and because MAST has not pitched to them, laying out its wares as a safe stronghold as the educational winds blow. Since the April meeting of Council (or just before), MAST has learned of at least 7 schools in the process of academisation, most having already made the decision to join other Academy Trusts. Usually this is because the local governors have invited to one of their meetings a representative of a neighbouring academy or academy trust, who have then shown how the school can benefit from becoming a part of their established academy group.

3. **Public policy and the changing culture**

3.1 One factor in the Council's thinking in April was that a General Election was imminent and it was at that time unclear how the potential outcomes would affect the academies programme. That situation has now been clarified. The current government has now made clear its intention to make all schools into academies.

3.2 MAST therefore comes before the Council to share its conviction that time is of the essence - and resources are of the essence - to initiate conversations with schools about a number of patterns by which their future as academies can be structured so that they can retain and nourish their Christian and Methodist ethos. Such conversations need also to make as clear as possible some sense of danger: there are some ways forward for Methodist schools to become academies that would dilute or remove their distinct identity and witness as Christian and Methodist institutions. That would be an outcome that the Conference would regret.

(In two appendices to this paper there is a short theological reflection on the Church's approach to changing administrative structures in the public world; and a historical note about the Church's involvement in the changing educational scene).

3.3 One factor of pivotal importance is helping schools to be good enough to retain their freedom of manoeuvre about when and in partnership with whom they become academies. The government, in its laudable aim of providing for every child the very best outcomes from primary and secondary education, continually puts pressure on schools to improve and never to 'coast' in their expectations and delivery of student outcomes.

3.4 It is the responsibility for MAST, in the first instance, to be thoroughly alert to the achievements and the difficulties in delivering good outcomes of the 26 Methodist-only schools. The responsibility for the 39 Methodist/Anglican schools is formally shared with the several dioceses, who in reality share the major share of this. To sustain a culture of ever-rising standards and to help schools retain the freedom to choose academisation (as opposed to being in a situation when the Secretary of State requires it) demands much greater vigilance, speed of response, competence and skill at encouraging change than in earlier years. These new challenges now face MAST (acting on behalf of the Council).

3.5 Why should we put in significant effort to retain schools and academies that explicitly embody the Christian/Methodist ethos? It is to increase the breadth and range of provision in the maintained

sector. The Church has a duty to bear its witness in every sector of society. Particularly so when our values and our right to play our part in public life in schools is under challenge and threat. For instance, the lobby that wants to remove all faith-based education in the maintained sector is growing in confidence. Their argument that religious-based education is socially divisive could not be more mistaken when applied to Methodist schools. In addition, collective worship is deemed by secularists to be ill-conceived not to mention fantastical. In a similar vein, pressure groups are emerging to reduce Religious Education to ethics and philosophy. The Methodist Church must hold its place in the world of maintained education in order to demonstrate in practice how its embracing and inclusive ways of worship and its broadly-drawn curriculum of religious belief and practice (with explicit and confident Christian faith and practice at its core) make a major contribution to the common good. There is nothing here of a sectarian or proselytising nature. It is about signalling the depths of our shared humanity and our commitment to social cohesion. So there is everything to play for in nourishing a culture of values and convictions applicable to every child and adult that inspires personal development, an all-round educational curiosity and a growth in wisdom.

- 3.6 If the Methodist schools can become successful academies with a confident witness to the Christian/Methodist ethos at their core, with strong relationships with one another, with Methodist independent schools (where applicable) and with MAST (which must be suitably structured and resourced for the benefit of academies and maintained schools), the Church will be fulfilling its responsibilities to nourish and celebrate strong and productive schools.
- 3.7 To maintain a network of schools and academies with a Christian and Methodist ethos will not happen without investment now of additional resources. This is different from the way that the Methodist involvement in education was previously resourced because the role, the expectation and the accountability are considerably greater. However, it is consistent with the way that other religious groups fund their oversight of their schools. An accompanying paper distinguishes between the ongoing core costs of acting for the Council towards the schools; and the need for a one-off grant to invest in the additional work that now needs to be done and to assist the restructuring of MAST's work over a 2-year period.
- 3.8 **The primary purpose of this paper is to argue that it is not inconsistent with what the Conference has decided that MAST, with the blessing of the Council, now do all in its powers, within its resources, to support Methodist schools to achieve ever higher outcomes for children and to promote structures through which schools may become academies that help the Church to continue its distinctive and life-enhancing witness in the maintained sector.**

*****RESOLUTION**

95/1. The Council receives the report.

Appendix 1: The Church and Public Institutions

1. The role of Local Authorities in providing and resourcing schools in the maintained sector has a long history. In the memory of most Methodists, that has been the norm. The Church has got used to playing its part in such administrative arrangements, locally and at county level.
2. However, in the Christian mind, there is no privilege to be accorded to Local Authorities and their way of doing things. Local Authorities are not an inescapable part of the kingdom of God. The Church weighs up Local Authorities, as every other form of public administration and policy-making, and identifies strengths and weaknesses, judged against Christian values and the struggle of Churches to embody in their own institutional life the very life of the Spirit. By long practice of working alongside them, Churches have had no difficulty in general in affirming the contributions of Local Authorities to education. On the other hand, Churches can never be uncritical in their support - any more than a Church can be complacent about its own organisational culture. For all its strengths, for example, the Local Authority model has not extinguished 'post-code-linked' outcomes for children: children from disadvantaged areas often perform less well than children from well-resourced communities.
3. The Church, in principle, is open to alternative ways of administering and supporting education - eg academies. Academies, no more than Local Authorities, will not be an unqualified good in enabling all children to flourish in their education. The Church will suspect in advance that the academy system, while constantly evolving to improve outcomes, will likely throw up new strengths indeed but also new weaknesses.

It would be wrong to imagine, as it is sometimes portrayed, that academisation leads to a large number of isolated academies, all immediately accountable to the Secretary of State. Academies are more typically clustered in small groups (under a Multi-Academy Trust) and encouraged to help one another. Regional structures of support and accountability are also being put in place: the Schools Commissioner's office has been regionalised and in each region the Commissioner works with a Headteacher panel (appointed on educational grounds, which is a shift away from local political appointments).

Local authorities retain their responsibility for school place planning. In some areas local authorities have set up imaginative support structures for schools and academies - which however are costly for those schools that choose to belong. Where local authorities have not made these changes, their provision (traditionally funded by a 10% top-slice from school budgets) has become unsustainable as an efficient and comprehensive support for schools.

4. The only reason why the Church, on theological grounds, would hesitate to throw in its lot with academy structures would be that:
 - it could be reasonably demonstrated that actual harm to children's education and well-being would probably result; or
 - they would advance tyranny in the pursuit of knowledge; or
 - some manifest injustice was built into its finances.

(In fact, the government is almost alert to all this: within certain fixed parameters, it wants a variety of educational provision - free schools, for example, as well as academies - once the Local

Authority model has been scaled down and eventually removed. But a mixed model is open to a number of foreseeable consequences that might challenge fairness of provision).

5. The Church needs to remain true to its tradition of working with the opportunities in public life that are available at any particular time, always determined to make its distinctive contribution. It will surely embrace with enthusiasm the opportunity not only to work with the academy structures but also of sharpening its critical reflection on their operation. All this is integral to our public witness.

Appendix 2: The Methodist Church and Education - a historical note

1. The provision of school education for children and young people has been part of the Methodist story since its very earliest years. John Wesley established schools in his first bases at The Foundry and in Bristol, because he was moved by the power of education to bring people closer to 'life in all its fullness'. In his enthusiasm for liberal educational values, he was ahead of his time. His lifelong interest in his schools shows a dual motivation: a concern for the nature of the education which children experience as well as the provision of schools. The ideals which drove Wesley have remained powerful amongst Methodists throughout our history. Conference documents from the 1830s and 40s, for example, reflect lively debate about what learning should be like and how Methodists can be involved in making it available through setting up schools at grassroots level. Congregations were prolific in taking up the challenge of this work.
2. Looking back at the story of Methodist schooling is instructive because it reminds us that Methodists have always built our significant presence in the national educational scene by making the most of opportunities in a continually changing political world. Wesley himself was committed to offering something distinctive alongside other providers at a time when the state believed it should not be concerned with education. In the 1840s, as the state was making its first forays into 'education', Conference responded quickly - committing to exploiting the financial opportunities of a close relationship with the state while holding fast to the distinctiveness of the Methodist offer. In the late 19th century, Methodist educationalists adapted to yet another major shift in the educational policy framework as did our colleagues the last century, when deciding how to place Methodism in the government's new distinction between community, Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools.
3. Contemporary Methodism finds itself once again having to respond to a once in a generation policy shift of the state with regard to education. For maybe the last 50 years, the church has become accustomed to a particular way of working with its schools: at local level, they have been run by the Heads and richly supported by local congregations. Indeed, several of our Heads in the most challenging contexts say that their schools would not be able to run were it not for the input of their Methodist church family. However, in recent years, the expectations on schools have changed and, consequently, the expectations on educational providers such as the churches. The push to drive up standards has meant that not only the schools themselves have been put under a spotlight of greater accountability but also, increasingly, the educational providers themselves. The challenge for all providers, including those referred to by the Department for Education as 'Faith Providers' (among whom the Methodist Church is included), is to be recognised as credible in this new way of working. For the last 50 years, our role as an education provider has been largely passive, involved mainly in the spiritual ethos delivered largely at local level. That is no longer what the DofE requires of us, as the state has moved the goal posts again. However, adapting and evolving enables Methodist Education not only to continue to operate in this new world but also, importantly, to influence policy at the tables of Government and to shape how it is experienced in our schools.