

# 17. The Faith and Order Committee

This report will offer a brief overview of the work of the Committee before focussing more closely on a number of items. In order to focus on the work of the Committee, supporting papers have been included in an appendix to this report where necessary and only summaries are included in the main report.

**Section A:** an overview of the work of the Committee in terms of scrutiny of documents and theological consultation across the Connexion

**Appendix A:** Papers associated with Section A

**Section B:** specific work presented to the Conference for adoption or reception.

**Appendix B:** Papers associated with Section B

**Section C:** the final phase of developing the new structure for the Faith and Order Committee and its supporting network adopted by previous Conferences (2006 and 2007)

**Appendix C:** Papers associated with Section C

## SECTION A. SCRUTINY AND THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION

A1. *Equalities and Diversity* ('*The borders are the new centre*') – the paperwork for this report for the Conference in 2008 was available at various stages and in various forms throughout the year. A member of the Committee was asked to work with the project leader to develop the work further and there has been ongoing consultation between the project leader and the Secretary to the Committee throughout. It was felt that a full expression of the theological basis for the Equalities and Diversity documentation would not be possible until the Conference of 2009 and the Committee has been actively engaged in working with the project leader to provide a forum in which that theology can be developed. Joint proposals on the development of a group which will provide a distinctively Methodist contribution were submitted to the Methodist Council for approval.

A2. *Human Embryology and Early Human Life* ('*Created in God's Image*') – This project provided an excellent example of how the Faith and Order Committee seeks to interact with Conference working parties and the Connexional Team. As soon as this project was identified, the Connexional Team member with responsibility for the project contacted the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee to discuss ways in which the theological element of the report could be developed in partnership. This led to an interactive process in which Faith and Order could advise on membership of the group and be adequately represented from the outset. As it happened, a member of the Faith and Order Committee was asked to chair the group. An initial report was given to the Committee's autumn meeting, with a draft report presented to the spring Committee for comments which could then be fed back to the group for inclusion in their final Conference report. Further drafts have also been made available for comment prior to the report being submitted to the Conference.

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A3. *Youth Participation Strategy* – members of the Committee have been engaged with the working group preparing the Youth Participation Strategy since the initial debate at the 2007 Conference. This has included engagement with Youth Conference and an attempt at a participative process for developing a theology of participation. This process was interrupted. The current thinking among staff in the Team is that that theological reflection will best emerge as the strategy unfolds. The Faith and Order Committee is open to engaging with the key staff in the new Team to support the preferred option whilst remaining keen that a clear focus on this challenge is sustained.

A4. *Stationing Review Group* – the Committee discussed papers made available at various points during the year both at the autumn meeting of the full Committee and the January Executive. Comments were submitted to the Stationing Review Group. Further drafts were made available to Faith and Order subsequent to the main Committee meetings and further comments were submitted to the Group via the Secretary.

A5. *Joint Implementation Commission Interim Report, 'Living God's Covenant'* - the Committee held a discussion about this report at the main autumn meeting, prepared for by particular members of the Committee. A draft report was prepared subsequent to this discussion and, after further amendment, comments were submitted to JIC. Overall the Faith and Order Committee welcomed the content and tone of the report while highlighting the need for further conversations on several issues. We have been pleased to note JIC's inclusion of some of our recommendations in its final report to the Conference.

The points included:

- Agreement that a successor body is needed to carry the process on into the future.
- Awareness that the issue of episcopacy remains unresolved, that more listening is needed on both sides of the argument and that “it is clear that there is an ongoing reluctance for elements of both Churches to take the Covenant ‘into the bloodstream’”.
- Anticipation of JIC's continued encouragement to move forward in the spirit of the Covenant and in expressing practical ways in which we might encourage the Churches to embrace the Covenant more firmly.
- Appreciation of the dialogical and essentially missional approach to the discussion on *Church, State and Establishment*. Faith and Order commended the joint initiatives in this area and encouraged JIC to point a way forward towards an increased engagement in the public life of the nations in which we live.
- Welcome for the helpful manner in which lay ministry is addressed, encouraging even closer developments in the expression of lay ministries within both Churches.
- Recognition that further conversation is needed both between the Churches and within the Methodist Church about the place of the Eucharist, Methodism's common practice of the ‘open table’, the use of ‘Extended Communion’ and latent pressure within the Methodist Church to explore further the possibility of Lay Presidency.

A6. *Ministerial Nomenclature (MC/07/84)* – comments were submitted to the General Secretary following discussion at the autumn Committee.

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A7. *Pastoral Care and Confidentiality* ('*With Integrity and Skill*') – just before the Spring meeting of the Committee, we were asked to review materials being prepared for a report on this issue for the Conference of 2008. After an initial discussion about a draft theological section of the report, further drafts of the report were made available for comment to the Pastoral Issues Resource Group of the Faith and Order Committee which was asked to begin its work early to meet the required deadline. Comments were received by the working group and have been integrated into the report.

A8. *Environmental Policy* – in a process similar to the development of the *Human Embryology and Early Human Life* documentation, the Faith and Order Committee was asked at an early stage to be involved in the development of the theological basis to the new Environmental Policy. Two members of the Committee, both experts in this field, have agreed to work with the group developing this paperwork for Conference 2009.

A9. *The Diaconal Conversations* – in the light of a request from the Joint Implementation Commission to the Faith and Order Committee, the Methodist Diaconal Order and the Church of England's Faith and Order Advisory Group, a small group representing these bodies has had two meetings to discuss recent reports on the diaconate and to discuss preliminary issues relating to the expression of diaconal ministry in both Churches. The group explored *Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, *What is a Deacon* and also the Ordination Services for Deacons in both Churches. It is expected that further conversations will be initiated as part of the next phase of the Covenant process.

A10. *Worship Leaders' Course* – the Committee has begun to work with the group preparing this resource. The decision was taken to pre-empt the *New Ways of Working* proposals and two resource groups are piloting an agreed process of scrutiny and review.

A11. *Authorisation of Hymnody* - in connection with the work on the *Statement on the Status of Liturgical Texts* (see Section B3 of this report), the Committee spent some time with the Music Resource Group exploring previous Conference reports preparing for the preparation of the new hymn resource. Proposals for collaboration between the Music Resource Group and the Worship and Liturgy Resource Group/Faith and Order Committee were agreed by both parties and have been implemented to enable the appropriate processes for authorisation for new material.

A12. *Fresh Ways of Being Church/Fresh Expressions of Church* – a number of items on the agenda of the Faith and Order Committee throughout this year have centred on the development of theological resources concerning *Fresh Expressions of Church* and, specifically, the *Fresh Ways Working Party* set up by the Conference in 2007. At the autumn meeting of the Committee, we had an extended discussion of this area of the Church's mission and agreed to work with the *Fresh Ways Working Party* and other areas of the Church in order to provide appropriate resourcing:

- The Committee has had opportunity to be involved in the drafting of the theological foundations for the *Fresh Ways* Report to the Conference 2008 and of commenting on this section of that report. The Secretary of

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the Committee and a number of members of the new resource groups are also members of the working party and have been able to comment throughout.

- The Committee was asked to write a paper on the opportunities within the history and polity of the Methodist Circuit for the development of *Fresh Ways of Being Church*. The subsequent paper, *The Missional Nature of the Circuit*, was discussed and amended at the spring meeting of the Committee. The paper is included, for information, in the appendix to this section of this report (Appendix AI).
- The Committee was also asked to write a paper on team ministry. This task has not been completed and work will continue. The Faith and Order Committee notes that the need to complete a similar task is also mentioned within the report of the Stationing Review Group.
- The Committee agreed to work with the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England in the development of an important working party exploring 'Fresh Expressions and Ecclesiology'. It is hoped that the work of this small group will begin in early summer with a final report being submitted for the Conference in 2010.

A13. Finally, the Committee has noted the developments in the Ecumenical Review. This is an important area of the Committee's remit in Standing Orders and, in the terms of reference for *New Ways of Working*, all members of the Network will be reminded of the key Faith and Order conviction of working with partner Churches, and relevant structures within those Churches, to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the Churches to the goal of visible unity. The Committee welcomes the opportunities of close partnership with the ecumenical resources within the new Connexional Team.

### Links

A14. The Committee has maintained its active links with many other bodies internal and external to the Methodist Church (Church of England Liturgical Commission, Committee for Local Ecumenical Development/Local Unity Panel, Churches Together in England - Theology and Unity Group, European Methodist Theological Commission, Faith and Order Advisory Group [of the Church of England], Four Nations Ecumenical Reference Group, Joint Liturgical Group, Methodist Publishing House) and the URC's Doctrine, Pastoral and Worship (DPW) Group, currently under reformation.

The Faith and Order Committee is grateful to those members of the Committee who will be moving into the various resource groups and so leaving the actual Committee at the launch of the new Network. Some members are leaving the network altogether. It is clear that all have offered their time freely to what is often detailed and difficult work. We look forward to the launch of the new Network and for the incorporation of a host of new names alongside such experience into the Faith and Order work of the Connexion.

### \*\*\*RESOLUTION

17/1. The Conference receives the report as a summary of recent Faith and Order work.

**Appendix A:**

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### AI: The Missional Nature of the Circuit

#### Section 1: The purpose of this paper

1.1 This paper arises from a specific context related to the adoption and promotion of fresh ways of being Church/fresh expressions within the life of the Methodist Connexion and was requested by the Conference-appointed working party on 'Fresh Ways of Being Church', partly in response to Conference's endorsement of the report *Changing Church for a Changing World* (2007). As such, this paper addresses some aspects of the life of the Circuit, although it is not, at this stage, a comprehensive document about the work of the Circuit. As the title makes clear, this paper explores the *missional nature* of the Circuit within Methodist history and polity.

1.2 Clearly the paper also centres on *the Circuit*. It would be possible to start with other more general and equally pressing concerns, such as "What is the mission of God in this place?", or with the role of the local church within the mission of God, or the role of individual members of the Methodist Church in that mission. However, since the Circuit is the primary unit of mission in the British Methodist Church and since the working party requested that we focus on the Circuit, that is what this paper concentrates on.

1.3 In recent years, the Methodist Conference has adopted a number of Faith and Order Committee papers drawing together the Methodist theology of ordained ministry. This has resulted in the production of a series of "What is a..." papers: *What is a Presbyterian?* (2002), *What is a Deacon?* (2004), *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* (2005), *What is a District Chair?* (2006). During this same period, the Conference has also agreed major statements about the identity of the Methodist Church, a full expression of its ecclesiology and the principle of Connexionalism, in *Called to Love and Praise* (1999) and its priorities and purposes in *Our Calling* (2000) and *Priorities of the Methodist Church* (2004). The Conference has also made statements on its understanding of oversight within the Connexion in *The Nature of Oversight* (2005).

1.4 Within these papers, a good deal has already been said about the role of the Circuit within the Methodist Church. The Circuits have been an important part of the Methodist Church from its very earliest history and the interaction between the concept of the Circuit and the mission of the Church has always been central to our understanding of how we organise ourselves. Moreover, Section 50 of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (CPD) sets out the Standing Orders relating to the organisation and management of the Circuits (S.O. 500-575), specifically the role of the Circuit in the deployment of resources for mission.

1.5 This paper offers an overview of the role of the Circuit in the context of fresh ways of being Church, and in order to re-assert the central role which Circuits have in the development of the mission of the Church as a response to the mission of God – the missional nature of the Circuit. Similar discussions have been prompted in discussions of the Anglican-

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Methodist Covenant and in the further exploration of the important Anglican report *Mission-Shaped Church*.

1.6 This paper explores the role of the Circuit within contemporary Methodism by looking first at our ecclesiology as expressed in *Called to Love and Praise* (1999). It then moves to an exploration of the development of the Circuit in early Methodism and of Section 50 of *CPD*. The paper will then summarise the central conclusions of this exploration.

### **Section 2 Called to Love and Praise**

2.1 The Conference statement on the nature of the Christian Church in Methodist experience and practice, *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), sets out the current understanding of both the role of a Circuit and the expression of the Connexional principle:

#### **4.7 Methodist Ecclesiology and Church Structures**

4.7.1 It will have become apparent by now that Methodist ecclesiology, whilst having much in common with that of other Christian Churches, has some distinctive emphases. These are essentially threefold: first, an emphasis on ‘relatedness’ as essential to the concept of ‘church’, finding expression in ‘the connexional principle’; second, an emphasis, stemming from Methodism’s societal past, on fellowship and shared discipline, exercised through small groups, and, third, the conviction that the Church should be structured for mission, and able to respond pragmatically, when new needs or opportunities arise. In this section of this Statement we review the existing structures of the British Methodist Church in the light of these convictions.

4.7.3 First, 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. Such outreach may, in effect, be an exchange, since the local church receives, as well as gives. But in the local church something akin to the principle of subsidiarity operates: the more local the issue, problem or opportunity, the more local the jurisdiction which applies to it. The various committees of the local church, supervised by the Church Council, reflect at their best the interdependence and collaboration of the whole Church in the fulfilment of its task. This does not mean that majority decisions are always, and minority views never, correct (particularly if the structures of a church exclude those already marginalized). But this essentially collaborative character of ministry is all the greater in the Methodist Church because an ordained presbyteral minister normally has responsibility for more than one church. This, together with the itinerancy of the majority of ministers, makes all the more necessary the partnership between laypeople and ordained ministers, whether presbyteral or diaconal, which is implicit in the Methodist understanding of the Church.

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- 4.7.4 The grouping of local churches in Circuits reflects the Methodist belief that no local church is an autonomous unit complete in itself. Rather, it is linked essentially and structurally to the wider Church. Circuit structures represent interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility and submission to mutual jurisdiction. Indeed, the Circuit, rather than the local church, has been the primary church unit in British Methodism. The appointment of Superintendent Ministers, with overall responsibility for the sharing within the Circuit of pastoral work, and for the preaching plan indicates the corporate, interdependent character of the Church. The Circuit system also makes possible the deployment of resources in an area wider than that of the local church. Here the original emphasis of Methodism can become very weak. Yet a renewed experience of interdependence, (not necessarily within Methodism alone), a more collaborative understanding of ministry, and readiness to use the gifts of ordained and lay people alike where the needs are greatest can breathe new life into semi-redundant structures. Thus, what is often impossible for the individual local church (e.g. church planting, effective work in educational institutions, industry etc.) becomes more practicable on a Circuit basis.
- 4.7.5 Just as local churches are formed into Circuits ‘for mutual encouragement and help’, so Circuits are arranged in Districts ‘in like manner’. Districts make possible what cannot be achieved by Circuits, because they are too small, or by the connexion, because it is too large. A District, under the leadership of a presbyteral minister, also provides a further structural link with the wider Church. Its boundaries are best determined by ecclesiological, rather than financial factors. That means, a District exists to foster interdependence between churches, to promote fellowship, exchanges and cooperation between churches sharing similar problems, opportunities, and, sometimes, a distinctive culture. In practice, this may often mean that District boundaries will coincide with local authority ones, but not necessarily so.
- 4.7.11 Not without self-criticism, therefore, the Methodist Church, pointing to its own origins, and to Scripture, holds to the conviction that the Holy Spirit leads the Church to adapt its structures as it faces new situations and challenges. This flexibility is itself an important principle, rooted in Scripture, theology and experience. Methodists, therefore, should not feel the need resolutely to defend the structures of the Methodist Church. This is true of much, if not all, traditional Methodist terminology, including ‘Circuit’ and ‘Connexion’. The underlying principles, however, of interdependence and relatedness, reflected in appropriate local, district, and national structures, of small-group fellowship and discipline, and of a flexibility which enables the Church to be more effectively structured for mission, will, it is hoped, be contributed by Methodism to a larger whole.

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2.2 This section of *Called to Love and Praise* provides the clearest contemporary understanding of the principles that lie behind the Circuit model in British Methodism.

2.3 Underlying the notion of interdependence which is at the heart of the Circuit is a desire to express the bonds of communion central to Christian fellowship. This is true not only within a circuit boundary, but across the whole Church of Christ and has variously found expression in the historical development of the Circuit in British Methodism.

### Section 3. The Development of Circuits<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1 Interconnexion

3.1.1 In the summer of 1729 Charles Wesley formed his first religious society, known by others as the ‘Holy Club’, at Oxford, which his brother John joined that autumn. As the society became known by the title ‘Methodist’, so the subsequent, independent, local societies connected with the Wesley brothers in other places were also given that title.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1740s those societies which looked to John Wesley as their ‘Father in God’ were asking to be placed under his spiritual authority; the first ‘United Society’ had been accommodated at the New Room in Bristol. In 1743, Wesley published his *Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, King’s-wood, and Newcastle upon Tyne*, and in 1749 the London Society was recognised as the parent society.

3.1.2 Thus we see the beginnings of interdependence, or connexionalism, societies united by a common discipline and single authority, and functioning in their respective cities as the local focus of a regular preaching Circuit. Wesley’s own itinerancy was undertaken to ensure the unity of his Connexion, and he was to insist on it for his own preachers, both among the Circuits and within the Circuits. By 1766, Wesley expected each Circuit to be represented at the Conference.

#### 3.2 Circuit Preaching

3.2.1 The first ‘Circuit’ of societies was perhaps that undertaken by Wesley as he travelled around various London Religious Societies in September 1738. His purpose was to encourage them to adopt a new, common, set of regulations, based on those he had encountered during his recent visit to the Moravians in Herrnhut, and codified in December 1738 in the *Rules of the Band-Societies*. He noted in March 1739 that ‘I was fully employed, between our own society in Fetter Lane and many others where I was continually desired to expound’. He also undertook a regular weekly Circuit of preaching duties in Bristol between April and May of that year.

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1 Greater detail may be found in Frank Baker, ‘The People Called Methodists 3. Polity’ in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Vol.1 Eds. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, 211-55.

2 There were other ‘Methodists’ in the 1740s who were not connected with the Wesleys – e.g. George Whitefield and his Societies. As with the name ‘Holy Club’ the Wesleys did not coin the term ‘Methodist’ nor did they welcome it.

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3.2.2 By 1746 there were seven Circuits – London (and the Home Counties), Bristol (and the south-west), Cornwall, Evesham (and the Midlands), Yorkshire (‘which includes Cheshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Rutlandshire, Lincolnshire’), Newcastle, and Wales. By 1750, the 49 Circuits in Britain and Ireland were joined by Circuit 50 – ‘America’. Within a year of his death Wesley wrote ‘I wish we had no Circuit with fewer than three preachers in it or less than four hundred miles’ riding in four weeks.’ (*Letters*, VIII, 206).

3.2.3 Wesley appointed a full-time travelling preacher in each Circuit (called the ‘Assistant’, later the ‘Superintendent’), who was charged with visiting the Bands and Societies in the Circuit and watching over the ‘Helpers’ (i.e. preachers) in the Circuit. The first ‘quarterly day for meeting the local preachers’ (*Journal*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1789) appears to have been on the Isle of Man in 1780; the 1796 Conference regularized this meeting in every Circuit. The Assistants initially changed their Circuit every month, though this had become an annual change by 1758.

3.2.4 Wesley believed in using a variety of preachers, speaking of ‘the hurt it did both to them and the people for any one preacher to stay six or eight weeks together in one place. Neither can he find matter for preaching every morning and evening, nor will the people come to hear him.’ (*Journal*, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1784). He acknowledged, ‘I know, were I myself to preach one whole year in one place, I should preach both myself and most of my congregation asleep.’ (*Letters* III.195). The first preaching plans were produced in 1754 by Wesley for the London Circuit, and the practice spread across the country.

### 3.3 Governance and Assessment

3.3.1 Quarterly meetings in each *society* having proved successful, the first *Circuit* Quarterly Meeting took place in Todmorden in 1748 – and the Conference of 1749 introduced this practice in all Circuits, under the chairmanship of the Assistant. Such gatherings (of stewards and leaders from the various societies) coordinated the accounts, the activities, and the spiritual oversight of the whole Circuit, and included worship and fellowship – and often the Quarterly Meeting dinner.

3.3.2 The Assistant, responsible under Wesley for the conduct and finances of the Circuit, normally deputed this responsibility to special ‘general’ stewards, chosen from the ‘particular’ stewards of the various societies. The spiritual oversight of the Circuit was not deputed, but remained the Assistant’s responsibility.

3.3.3 The trustees for local preaching-houses included non-local Methodists, who were frequently trustees of several buildings. Wesley’s model trust deed of 1746 retained connexional control over the use of the buildings, and the trustees were constrained to only permit the use of the preaching-house by ‘such persons as shall be appointed at the yearly Conference of the people called Methodists’, and for those persons to ‘preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr Wesley’s *Notes upon the New Testament*, and four volumes of Sermons.’ (*Large Minutes* of 1763).

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3.3.4 By 1744, the Assistants were supported by the weekly class-money of one penny and the quarterly ‘ticket-money’ of one shilling per member. Most Societies also took four annual collections for Connexional funds. The general, or Circuit, stewards, were responsible for paying the Assistant’s stipend from 1749. In 1788 the £12 a year clothing allowance was to be supplemented by a food allowance, some preachers having been left in a state of involuntary fasting! Wives were given an allowance of £10 to care for their family while their husbands were touring the Circuit (and hence some Circuits tried to avoid having married preachers).

### **3.4 Methodism after the Wesleys**

The Methodist movement did not stand still after the death of Charles (1788) and John Wesley (1791). Over the next 150 years, the original Connexion split into half a dozen denominations, most of which were reunited in the processes culminating in the union of 1932. The nineteenth century witnessed considerable debate and conflict, unparalleled numerical growth and significant institutional development within all the branches of divided Methodism. It is noteworthy, however, that the Circuit retained a place in the polity of each group, and the elements of interconnexion, itinerant preaching, governance and assessment may be found across the board. There were differences: the United Methodist Free Churches, for example, particularly emphasized local autonomy at the expense of Connexional authority, and were criticized for quasi-congregationalism: it was suggested that the acronym ‘UMFC’ really stood for ‘Usually Missing From Circuit’. Most of the non-Wesleyan Connexions asserted the rights of lay leadership in the Circuits: the exclusive prerogatives claimed by Wesleyan Superintendents to make the Plan, chair all official meetings and nominate (or appoint) key officers were all contested by other Methodist traditions. The post-1932 Methodist Church of Great Britain is therefore heir to different understandings of what it means to be Methodist and of how to operate ‘our’ polity in practice. Methodist history encourages experimentation, diversity and attention to missional context.

### **3.5 Future Development**

3.5.1 In 2007, there were some 570 Circuits in Britain, of great variety. Some areas (including parts of England) are untouched by Methodist presence; in others Methodism is virtually the ‘established’ church. Some Circuits are small: having one presbyter or even a non-resident ‘titular’ Superintendent or covering a tiny geographical area; others have large numbers of staff, cover several hundred square miles, or encompass a whole city. Yet others share a geographical area. Circuits may have many buildings from which to operate, or just one chapel, or own no buildings of their own. Yet in each case, they are seeking an authentic local expression of the essence of a Methodist Circuit.

3.5.2 In preparing for his report to the 2006 Conference, the General Secretary submitted to the Methodist Council a paper entitled *Mapping a Way Forward* (MC/06/103). The paper explores the change processes which are enveloping Methodism as it seeks to develop its identity and

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further its mission to contemporary society. One section of this paper (section 6) focuses on the need to develop the identity of the Circuit as the primary unit of mission. This does not undermine the role of the local church in mission, nor of the District. However, as in early Methodism, the paper acknowledges that Circuits need to develop in line with their mission objective and calls for thorough-going Circuit reviews focused not so much on geographical or financial imperatives but on missional imperatives. The paper advocates larger units of mission – “for the sake of an *effective strategy for mission*, medium-term viability, and to enable a richer mix of resources to be shared flexibly across a Circuit on innovative projects”. The goal of such a process “is not simply fewer and larger Circuits, but *fresh expressions of Circuit*”.

3.5.3. *Mapping a Way Forward* has launched a process throughout Methodism which is reviewing the Circuits in terms of their fitness for mission and, in consequence, their relative size and boundaries. Throughout Methodism, Circuit reviews are being undertaken with varying results - single station Circuits are being merged into multiple-station Circuits; in some areas Circuits are being merged into large city-wide gatherings of Methodist resources with separated or group superintendencies; in others circuit boundaries are being re-drawn to enhance opportunities for mission and service. It is clear that this process is creating a rich diversity of circuit life within Methodism. There seems to be no limit to the size of a Circuit or to the specific roles of individuals within the ministry-structures within those Circuits. While this may raise concerns for some within Methodism, for others it reflects the historical and missional nature of the Circuit – a means of effectively deploying resources for mission rather than a set structure.

3.5.4 John Wesley emphasised that spiritual efficacy had priority over outward patterns of ecclesiastical organisation. Thus the shape of our Circuits today should be a response to the local and the contemporary mission of the Church. The 1990s saw an encouragement to Circuits to ‘do things differently’ in their own local response, rather than following a connexional blueprint. The nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Circuit should depend not primarily on cherished traditions, but on God’s call to engage with a changing world. As Circuits have never had rigid boundaries, so their development is limited only by their ability to respond to God’s call to engage in mission and ministry for God’s Kingdom.

3.5.5 So what, in essence, is that call? We now examine our contemporary practice.

### **Section 4 Constitutional Practice and Discipline**

4.1 The principles of the Circuit system which we saw outlined in *Called to Love and Praise* find their expression in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. Standing Order 500 offers a clear definition of the nature and purpose of a Circuit and gives practical expression to those principles;

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The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for the purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help. It is in the Circuit that minister, deacon and probationers are stationed and local preachers are trained and admitted and exercise their calling. The purpose of the Circuit include the effective deployment of the resources of ministry, which include people, property and finance, as they relate to the Methodist churches in the Circuit, to churches of other denominations and to participation in the life of the communities served by the Circuit, including local schools and colleges, and in ecumenical work in the area including, where appropriate the support of ecumenical Housing Associations.

4.2 Additionally, and due to the historic way in which membership of the Methodist Missionary Society is made up, the standing order places upon the Circuit the role of promotion of the work of the Society, ‘... to the end that every member may share actively in world mission.’ (S.O. 500(2)) This responsibility is a practical expression of the way in which Methodists are encouraged to see and understand not only connexionalism as it forms the basis for the British Methodist Church, but the wider communion in the body of Christ that unites Christians in each place.

4.3 The subsequent definition of the local church makes clear that each local church exercises the ministry of Christ where it is and shares in the ministry of the Church in the world (S.O. 600). In light of such a definition of the local church the role of the Circuit as a unit of church governance and fellowship has to be set in the context of ministry and mission. There is no constitutional definition of ministry at a Circuit level. In many respects this reflects the way in which Societies emerged in early Methodism; at another level it helps us to understand the Circuit not as a unit of mission in and of itself, for a Circuit only has an existence thorough the local churches. It does not and cannot exist over and above those who make up the practical expression of governance such as the Circuit Meeting. The Standing Orders make such provision as the Conference sees necessary for the co-ordination of resources and opportunities for fellowship that will better enable the local churches to exercise the ministry of Christ.

4.4 On a purely practical level most Methodists will have awareness of the Circuit set before them by virtue of the Circuit plan of preaching appointments (SO 521) and the subsequent encounter with presbyters, deacons and Local Preachers that a system of local itinerancy affords. In this regard the Circuit further provides the context for the training of local preachers. For presbyters and deacons the Circuit should be the most local expression of being in connexion with others. The Circuit, not the local church, is the unit to which presbyters and deacons are appointed by the Conference, and it is a Circuit ministry that they exercise (SO 520-529). This is not only expressed in the existence of a preaching plan but in the responsibilities of the Superintendent to visit the local churches (SO 522), and of the ministers and probationers to visit the classes at least once in each quarter (SO 526), and the provision of a benevolence fund for the relief of poverty and distress in the congregations and neighbourhood of the

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Circuit. These measures all contribute to an understanding of the supportive nature of a Circuit.

4.5 The document ‘What is a Superintendent?’ sets out a number of specific responsibilities that give a further expression to the role of the Circuit:

The Superintendent has a responsibility to ensure that the Circuit:

- (a) is helped to create a culture in which mission is the priority, growth a possibility and the grace of God the focus;
- (b) is helped to understand both the communities and institutions served by its churches, members and staff and also the nature and activity of God, so that it can decide on its mission priorities, articulate realistic objectives and formulate appropriate strategies;
- (c) is encouraged and enabled to review its existing organisation and resources so that it can create structures which enable the mission objectives to be achieved (this includes helping people to have the confidence to tackle long-term issues associated with such matters as staffing levels, redundant churches, ecumenical opportunities, the demographic structures of some congregations and church planting opportunities);
- (d) is helped to open itself to the energy of the Holy Spirit, confronting oppressive traditions and protecting itself from any inappropriate demands made upon it.

### Section 5 What is a Circuit?

5.1 Methodism cherishes its identity as a Connexion and the Circuit is central to this understanding, as expressed in S.O. 500: “The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for the purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help.” While the connexional focus of our ecclesiology does not undermine the role of the local church as a unit of mission nor the role of the District in expressing that mission, it does mean that Methodism is not a congregational denomination, as emphasised in *Called to Love and Praise*. We govern ourselves and manage our resources through our interconnection and collaboration with other Methodist churches in our Circuit and our Circuits are governed and managed by their connexional relationships with Districts and ultimately with the Conference. This connexional principle represents “interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility and submission to mutual jurisdiction” (*Called to Love and Praise*, 4.7.4). Therefore, the Circuit is the primary church unit in British Methodism.

5.2 The Circuit is supported in its work locally, and is helped to have a wider, regional perspective by the District. It is through the Circuits that the District’s primary purpose of advancing the mission of the Church in a region is put into effect. It is through the District’s encouragement that this mission is facilitated within and between the Circuits by the offering of resources and expertise which may not be available locally. The District offers to the Circuit support, training, deployment and oversight of the

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various ministries of the Circuit. It also oversees the use of resources - buildings, money and personnel - within the Circuit. The District enables a Circuit to engage with the wider society of the region as a whole and address its concerns. The District also enables a local Circuit to fulfil Conference policy and to relate the Circuit's work to other work within the Connexion.

5.3 This paper highlights key insights into the missional nature of the Circuit. These insights are summarised below in no specific order of priority:

- a. The Circuit is the primary church unit in the British Methodist Connexion.
- b. The Circuit is the primary unit of mission in the British Methodist Connexion.
- c. The Circuit gathers together the local churches for the purpose of mission, mutual encouragement and help.
- d. As such, the Circuit, under the leadership of the Superintendent Minister, deploys available resources to meet the purposes outlined above, including deployment of people (lay and ordained), property and finance.
- e. As all Circuit members are also members of the Methodist Missionary Society, the Circuit is actively engaged in the task of world mission.
- f. Circuits are not immutable units, but rather each Circuit must engage flexibly with its missional context in order to be more effectively structured for mission.

5.4 In the terms of fresh ways of being church, Circuits have a central role in developing, managing and overseeing fresh expressions of Church. Indeed, since Circuits are the primary unit of mission, it may be the role of the Circuit to resource and manage fresh expressions rather than local churches – for a Circuit to decide together how it can respond to local or context-based missional needs and develop the ministry of the Circuit in appropriate ways. This could be in the form of new congregations or classes (S.O. 605), networks, meeting places, training programmes, or practical expressions of mission, or the releasing of presbyters from maintaining traditional work in 'sections' or settled congregations. Fresh expressions of church do not need to be limited to congregational expressions of church and, indeed, in many cases they are not.

5.5 It must be noted, of course, that one major issue for Methodist ecclesiology is that whilst the Circuit may be Methodism's primary church unit, it is not the primary unit of ecumenical engagement. Often, ecumenical work is initiated and developed at local church level, or at District level, or at national level. Whilst there are a variety of examples of Ecumenical Areas in a number of parts of the Connexion, it is clear that these do not provide the normal pattern for ecumenical engagement. However, that is not to say that the Circuit can be ignored when considering ecumenical developments. In some cases, boundaries present a problem. Whilst this is true at district level, at the more local level of the Circuit, the problems can easily become a distraction to the mission opportunities

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ecumenism should be supporting and enabling. This raises questions about the extent to which a Circuit is, in principle, able to adapt so that it can more effectively facilitate unity in mission.

5.6 The role of the Circuit is expected to be dynamic and changing, as outlined in the section looking at early Methodist history and in the responsibilities of the Superintendent Minister. Circuits are to be open “to the energy of the Spirit” and “their development is limited only by their ability to respond to God’s call to engage in mission and ministry for God’s kingdom”. This constant reflection on and reaction to the mission of God in the world will mean that the role and identity of the Circuit will need to be flexible and fluid, developing appropriate expressions of Methodist Connexional identity within the principles outlined in Standing Orders and *Called to Love and Praise*. Such appropriate expressions can only be achieved by dialogue with the needs of our contemporary situation and, in accordance with God’s will, responding to it.

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3 John Hull, *Mission-shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006) and Roland Riem, ‘Mission-shaped Church: An Emerging Critique’, *Ecclesiology* 3.1 (2006), pp.125-139