

## **CALLED TO LOVE AND PRAISE (1999)**

### **The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice**

Christ, from whom all blessings flow,  
Perfecting the saints below,  
Hear us, who thy nature share,  
Who thy mystic body are.

Join us, in one spirit join,  
Let us still receive of thine;  
Still for more on thee we call,  
Thou who fillest all in all!

Closer knit to thee, our Head;  
Nourish us, O Christ, and feed;  
Let us daily growth receive,  
More and more in Jesus live.

Move, and actuate, and guide:  
Divers gifts to each divide;  
Placed according to thy will,  
Let us all our work fulfil;

Sweetly may we all agree,  
Touched with softest sympathy:  
Kindly for each other care;  
Every member feel its share.

Many are we now and one,  
We who Jesus have put on:  
There is neither bond nor free,  
Male nor female, Lord, in thee!

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,  
Rendered all distinctions void;  
Names, and sects, and parties fall:  
Thou, O Christ, art all in all!

*Charles Wesley*

## **CONTENTS**

### **Section I The Background, Purpose and Contents of the Statement**

### **Section II Perspectives From Scripture and Tradition**

1. The Triune God: God's Reign and Mission
2. The Covenant People
3. New Testament Unity and Diversity
4. 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic'

### **Section III 'That The World May Believe'**

1. Sharing in Unity
2. 'The Whole Gospel for the Whole World'

### **Section IV The Methodist Experience and Understanding of the Church – Distinctive Characteristics**

1. Introduction
2. From Society to Church
3. Worship and the Spiritual Life in Methodism
4. The Relationship of the Individual to the Church Community in Methodism
5. The Priesthood of All Believers and Ministry
6. The Connexional Principle
7. Methodist Ecclesiology and Church Structures

### **Conclusion**

### **Resolutions**

## **SECTION I: THE BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND CONTENTS OF THE STATEMENT**

- 1.1.1 What is the Church and what is it for? What are its origins, its defining characteristics and its boundaries? What distinctive features does the Methodist Church have? Questions such as these provide the agenda for this statement of Methodist ecclesiology.<sup>1</sup> It is now more than sixty years since the document, *The Nature of the Christian Church*,<sup>2</sup> was adopted by the British Methodist Conference in 1937. The very different situation of the Church in the 1990s warrants a new Statement. This does not mean that the earlier Statement must now be contradicted, but simply that there are new things to be said in a context very different from that of sixty years ago. We begin by looking briefly at that context.
- 1.2.1 In recent decades the world has undergone vast changes. In Britain and most of Western Europe, the Churches are part of fast-changing, pluralist societies, in which materialism and signs of both spiritual impoverishment and widespread interest in spiritual things can be seen. Most people are much better off materially than sixty years ago. This increased affluence, and its accompanying stress on individual freedom, has deeply shaped the ethos of western democracies, with results both good and bad. At the same time, substantial minorities have had little or no share in this greater prosperity.
- 1.2.2 Britain, like other European countries, has become much more racially mixed since the Second World War, with an increasing number of second-generation black and Asian people for whom this country is home. Minority ethnic groups are heavily represented among the economically disadvantaged. Institutionalized racism is a reality, and difficult to combat not least because the white majority often does not acknowledge it.
- 1.2.3 Traditional patterns of community life have changed. Life for most people has become more complex and fragmented. More people have left the communities where they were born and brought up, often losing their links with the Church in the process. Once-accepted patterns of marriage and family life are far less common than they were. Very many people now own televisions and cars, and this has profoundly affected patterns of life, leisure, and churchgoing. More recently, the invention of the micro-chip has had far-reaching effects on manufacturing industry and on communication and information. These, and many other factors, have helped to create a much more secular society and culture, in which religion, seen as the private, individual affair of a minority, is increasingly marginalized. The secularization process can be seen, for example, in the growing number of requests for 'secular' funerals, and for serious 'non-religious' weddings.
- 1.2.4 There have been still deeper, less tangible changes taking place. Our understanding of ourselves as human beings, of human history, and of society has been deeply influenced by thinkers such as Darwin, Marx and Freud. Even people who have not heard of them, or who disagree with what

they know of their thought, have been affected by them. But whereas 'modern' thought has been characterized by a confidence in the capacity of human reason, Darwin, Marx and Freud, along with others, have fed a contemporary scepticism about our human capacity to know and understand; and for some 'post-modernists' the only reality of which we have knowledge is the reality of our own thought, culture and language. Alongside such influences as these there has been a marked rise in religious fundamentalism, in many ways a response to modern scepticism and the contemporary loss of faith in reason.

- 1.2.5 In the last fifty years, too, other parts of the world have become more accessible for many, with revolutionary advances in travel and communication. Personal contacts across national boundaries have increased. Decisions about economic policies are now often made at a supra-national level. Yet within nations, and even more between nations, economic power is unequally shared. The level of material comfort and affluence which millions in the West take for granted depends on a system which contributes to the impoverishment and hunger of many more millions, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Nor is injustice the only problem. The very future of the human family is threatened by the consumer society's reckless, even greedy plundering of the earth's resources, and the destruction of the natural environment of human life. The threat, too, of nuclear war, although it has receded, still remains, and does so in a situation of increasing international instability. Co-operation between countries proceeds slowly and uneasily, often against the background of strident nationalism which, in more and more countries, faces the challenge and opportunity of making room for a multi-racial society. Tolerance and understanding between adherents of different religious faiths are also urgently, and increasingly, needed. In the midst of all this tumult and change Christians, called to respond to the Creator's concern for the healing and unity of the world, must ask what the Church is, and what it is for.
- 1.2.6 There are further reasons why a new Statement on ecclesiology is needed. The ecumenical situation has changed: co-operation and dialogue between Churches of many different traditions have increased, and continue to do so, despite setbacks such as the failure of schemes for Anglican-Methodist unity. These closer relations with other Churches have provided new insights into the nature and purpose of the Church, and, at the same time, enabled each Church to see itself, its history, and its own distinctive features in clearer perspective. At a time when the Christian Church is increasingly experienced as a community embracing not only different traditions, but also different races and cultures, Christian self-understanding can hardly remain unchanged and static.
- 1.2.7 Biblical scholarship has also continued to develop during the last sixty years. In particular, it has helped to highlight the rich diversity of the New Testament, sharpening our awareness of the distinctive contribution of each writer. Wider theological study and reflection have also continued. Black

Theology, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, and other perspectives have helped the prevailing theological traditions to be more self-critical, whilst at the same time contributing their own new insights and challenges.

- 1.2.8 This Statement assumes that what is said about the Church must be tested against Scripture. The *Deed of Union* (which sets out the purposes, doctrine, basis of membership and constitution of the Methodist Church) acknowledges ‘the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures’ to be ‘the supreme rule of faith and practice’. But each text, without exception, must be interpreted in the light of its context, and that is by no means a straightforward matter. There are differences of language, context and culture between the Biblical ‘world’ and our own, and our interpretation of the Bible in any case is shaped by tradition and by our experience, (both important resources to draw upon in a task such as this). In any case, the amount of relevant material in Scripture is too great to be quoted in one brief Statement. Texts cited in this Statement are usually examples representative of a wider number.
- 1.2.9 The relationship between Scripture and tradition must also be considered here. In the past, Protestant Christians have sometimes contrasted ‘tradition’ or ‘traditions’ unfavourably with Scripture. But whilst tradition may distort or be distorted, so also may our interpretation of Scripture. ‘Tradition’ (literally, ‘that which is handed on’<sup>3</sup>), means, above all, Christian faith, an experience, at once personal and corporate, a way of believing, praying, loving, sharing, which goes back to the beginnings of the Gospel. This means that Scripture and tradition are in dialogue: the tradition is the context which shapes our use of Scripture, and Scripture is the resource by which the tradition is deepened and purified. (On the subject of tradition, see also 2.4.7 and 3.1.16-17).
- 1.2.10 To recognize that Scripture used is always Scripture interpreted, and that our tradition, (and other factors) shape that interpretation, is to recognize that the question of authority is a complex, not a simple one. Three points may be made here. First, for the Christian the supreme authority is Christ, and to him there are vital, dependable witnesses, of which Scripture is the most important. Second, an eschatological perspective is vital: in this life we travel by faith, and faith is not the same as certainty, or it would not be faith. On such a journey absolute or infallible authorities are not immediately accessible. But, thirdly, our experience and discernment, nurtured, stimulated and corrected by the witness of Scripture and tradition help to confirm the truth that is in Christ. In such a way Christians may have ‘sufficient authority’<sup>4</sup>, or light, by which to travel.
- 1.3.1 The purpose of the Statement is fivefold. First, it is hoped that it will help the Methodist people, and perhaps others, to think more clearly about the nature and purpose of the Christian community, and to proceed from that to some constructive, if critical, self-examination about the structures, identity and purpose of the Church. In this way the Statement, drawing as it does on many recent dialogues and discussions both within Methodism and between

Methodism and other churches, may provide a useful reference-point at a time of rapid change.

- 1.3.2 Secondly, in view of recent, continuing and future ecumenical dialogues, the Statement might assist in promoting greater understanding between Methodists and Christians of other traditions. Thirdly, it is widely recognized that many people outside the Church find the Church more of a problem than Christianity, Christians less attractive (not surprisingly) than Christ. The Statement is intended to contribute towards the apologetic<sup>5</sup> task of explaining the nature and purpose of the Church. The fourth aim of the Statement is equally practical: to encourage the Methodist people to deeper discipleship, as reflection about the Church properly carries with it a review of our personal commitment to Christ and to the Kingdom of God.
- 1.3.3 Finally, this Statement is offered as the reply of the Conference to a Memorial presented to Conference in 1991 and referred to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration in the context of the present Statement:

‘The Medway Towns (4/20) Circuit Meeting (Present 49. Vote 42 for, 1 against, 6 neutral) requests that a review be made of the Church’s policy and Standing Orders concerning membership (Reception into Full Membership), considering: 1. the importance of baptism as being ‘received into the congregation of Christ’s flock’; 2. the contemporary understanding of the term ‘membership’ and the searching questions posed by non-Methodist Christians participating in our acts of worship; 3. the bearing of office and voting rights; 4. the importance of ecumenical co-operation and emphases (e.g. inclusion of members of other Christian denominations without ‘transfer’; 5. the questionable use of membership as a basis for statistics, assessments, finance, etc.; 6. that sharing in the Lord’s Supper (with counts and averages if need be) and/or baptism (with certification) would be more appropriate possible criteria.’

(Section 4.4 below is particularly relevant to this Memorial).

- 1.4.1 There are three further sections in the main body of this Statement. Section II focusses on God’s mission and kingdom, and what they mean for our understanding of the Church. The Synoptic Gospels’ understanding of the Kingdom of God<sup>6</sup>, and the Trinitarian understanding of God, implicit in the New Testament and developed in subsequent tradition, show how the Church is a community both of worship and of mission. Its mission and its worship (which is shared by the Church in heaven), are the response to God’s undeserved, unstinting love in Christ. So God’s mission and kingdom are the primary ‘givens’, from which all derives and on which all depends. As agent of God’s mission, the Church is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom (2.1).
- 1.4.2 This primary understanding of the Church was anticipated in many ways in the life of Israel, to which the Hebrew Scriptures/Christian Old Testament

bear witness. According to this witness, the gracious initiative of God was the starting-point of Israel's pilgrimage, and it remains a vital link between contemporary Judaism and Christianity (2.2). In the New Testament, the understanding of the Church's life and mission which derived from Jesus is developed in a rich variety of ways. This diversity is itself an important testimony to the multi-faceted nature of the Church; it does not, however, obscure the fundamental underlying unity (2.3).

- 1.4.3 The Trinitarian foundation of the Church also determines what is meant by the traditional 'notes' of the Church: 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' (2.4). These are not simply ideal attributes of the Church, since they are rooted in the reality and life of God himself. But the Church is very far from being wholly open to God, and consequently sounds the 'notes' of the Church very faintly. Nevertheless, the God-centred character of the Church, however imperfectly realized, makes it possible to see more clearly its distinctive life of worship and prayer, the sacramental character of everyday life as the natural context of Christian faith and practice, and, thirdly, the Church's vocation of suffering and service.
- 1.4.4 Section III explores the insights and questions arising from the growing co-operation and dialogue of the Christian Churches. Not only has the ecumenical movement highlighted the diversity and differences of Christian traditions; it has also underscored the common faith which they share. Here the rich New Testament word *koinonia* is helpful: our sharing in, or communion with, the life of the Triune God is inseparable from our sharing with each other (3.1). There has also been a deepening common awareness that the Church is a pilgrim Church, a characteristic reflected in the incompleteness of every Christian tradition. The Church has been brought to birth, but has not yet attained its fulness. It comprises a pilgrim people seeking to enter, and to help others enter, the fulness of God's kingdom. Today, when many richly different cultures co-exist, and many Christians have more contact with people of other faiths, this is a task which calls for great sensitivity (3.2).
- 1.4.5 In the fourth section the Statement looks at Methodism. This explicitly Methodist section is the longest, and, as such, requires some explanation. The length has been determined, not by the importance of this subject compared with others, but by the extent and difficulty of the questions presented by the contemporary situation. Two particular questions present themselves:
  - a. What distinctive or particular contribution, arising from its own history and experience, does the Methodist Church have to make to future ecumenical understandings of the Church?
  - b. Given the evolution of early Methodism from a connexion of 'societies' to a church, how are we to understand Church membership, and what should be the practical consequences which ensue from that understanding?

**Notes:**

- (1) Ecclesiology is usually defined as the theological study of the Church. On this see also 2.1.1.
- (2) Referred to in this Statement as NCC.
- (3) From the Latin *traditio* (cf. the Greek *paradosis*).
- (4) The concept of 'sufficient authority' is taken from R.E.Davies' *Religious Authority in an Age of Doubt* (Epworth 1968), pp.212ff.
- (5) 'Apologetic' in the sense of 'explaining' or 'defending', and deriving from the Greek *apologia* meaning 'defence'.
- (6) The expression 'the Kingdom of God', so central to the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, denotes, not so much an event or place, as God's sovereign being and action.

**SECTION II: PERSPECTIVES FROM SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION****2.1 The Triune God: God's Reign and Mission**

- 2.1.1 If we are to answer fundamental questions about the Church, it is necessary to reflect first on God's relation to the world and his presence in it. This is implied by the many different ways of understanding the Church: for example, the new people of God, the body of Christ, a communion in the Holy Spirit, a sacrament or sign of Christ's continuing presence in the world. Behind such descriptions lies the conviction that the Church is a community called into being by God. Our starting-point, therefore, for understanding the Church is the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- 2.1.2 According to the Bible, the mission of God to the world, that is God's outgoing, all-embracing love for his creation, began with the act of creation itself. In a 'fallen', divided world it was focussed on one nation whose ancestor was Abraham (Genesis 3; 11.1-9; 12.1-9). It continued through the many vicissitudes of Israel's history : storyteller, law-giver, prophet, men and women of wisdom – all were God's creative, often protesting agents in the story of the divine quest for a responsive people. Yet with Jesus this mission was focussed in a new and powerfully creative way. Jesus spoke to, and, literally, touched people no-one else could or would speak to and touch (Mark 1.41; 5.1-17). He visited their homes, even accepted their ministry (Luke 19.7; 7.44-46). Through his mission, sick people were made well, sinners were forgiven, and the prejudices of religious people exposed as never before.
- 2.1.3 Closely linked with the theme of God's mission is the theme of God's kingdom, the heart of Jesus' message. By 'Kingdom of God' the gospels mean the sovereign presence and activity of God, which already, before the coming of Jesus had been acknowledged as the ultimate reality from the beginning of time to its end (Psalm 145.13). But now Jesus not only

announced, but represented, even lived the Kingdom, in a way which was without precedent (Mark 1.15; Luke 7.22f; 11.20; 17.21). Already, in the here and now, the final salvation, that ultimate state of well-being intended by God for all humankind, was being experienced in many forms: in the restoration of health (Mark 5.34), in the quelling of the forces of chaos (Matthew 14.30-31), in forgiveness (Luke 7.47), in spiritual re-birth (Mark 10.15; John 3.8), in receiving the bread of God in the wilderness (Mark 6.35-44).

- 2.1.4 The mission of Jesus reached its climax in his journey to Jerusalem, and his consequent death by crucifixion outside that city. Historically speaking, both his message and mission were put in doubt by his death (Luke 24.21). For this reason, the testimony of the Church to the resurrection of Jesus lies at the very heart of its life and message. According to Christian faith, the resurrection vindicated Jesus – his life, his message, even his death. Indeed, because that death was now seen as the climax and fulfilment of his life, the cross became a powerful statement of the healing, forgiving love of God (John 13.1; 19.28; Romans 5.8; 1 Corinthians 1.18). In the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians saw both the completion of God's mission and the decisive evidence that God reigns – in and through the love which allowed itself to be crucified for the sake of the world.
- 2.1.5 It is not possible to pinpoint the exact moment when the Church came into being. For some, Jesus' calling of the twelve disciples and the particular charge to Peter, (which takes different forms in different gospels, Matthew 16.16-18; Luke 22.31-4; John 21.15-19) inaugurates, or at least anticipates the Church. For others, the Resurrection marks the beginning of the Church (John 20.21-3), or, if the Resurrection and Pentecost are distinguished, as in the writings of Luke, Pentecost may be said to be the 'birthday' of the Church. The precise historical details are not fundamentally important. What matters is the unanimous apostolic testimony that the Church owes its being to the grace of God in Christ.
- 2.1.6 So a new community was created which experienced already a foretaste of the divine life, intended by God for all humankind. Sometimes this life was described as 'salvation', sometimes, especially in John's gospel (3.15), as 'eternal' life, the life of God's 'new age'. But the effects of God's salvation transcended the lives of individual people. Barriers which separated groups and communities from one another were broken down (Galatians 3.28; Ephesians 2.14-16; Revelation 7.9). In still wider terms, the mystery of God in Christ could even be spoken of as freeing the created universe itself from its bondage to decay, ushering in a new heaven and a new earth (Romans 8.20-23). For God's purpose is nothing less than to reconcile the whole universe to himself through Christ (Ephesians 1.10; Colossians 1.20).
- 2.1.7 From the very first the Church understood its true life to be Christ-centred, and therefore God-centred. The Lord who is now at God's right hand is the Church's head; its members, joined in the fellowship of that Holy Spirit

which is the Spirit of God and of Christ, are 'in Christ'; its message is the Word of God, namely Christ himself. In all this the Church is a witness to divine grace. In the calling of disciples and the giving of the Holy Spirit, God committed himself to working with his people (2 Corinthians 1.5-7; 6.1). The first Christians knew that they were called to participate in God's mission and to proclaim God's reign as Jesus had done (Luke 10.9,11; John 20.20-23). The worship of God through, and because of, the risen Jesus, characterized and created such a mission (e.g. Luke 24.53; John 20.28; Acts 2.46). The Church's calling remains the same. But the presence of the Holy Spirit alone makes possible the credibility of the Church as a witness and sign in the world of new life in Christ. As in the ministry of Jesus, deeds and words belong together, inviting trust and hope in the God who has poured out his life for the life of the world. Thus the Spirit enables the Church to share in God's mission (1 Corinthians 12.3; 2 Corinthians 3.17).

- 2.1.8 The Church, therefore, derives its very existence and purpose from God's reign and mission, exemplified in and established by Jesus. But what character does this bestow on the Church? Here it is necessary to explore further the Christian understanding of God.
- 2.1.9 In later Trinitarian doctrine, (anticipated in the New Testament), Christians, in differing ways, have also found a model for the life of the Church. For example, to speak of God as a loving communion of three co-equal 'persons' suggests that the Church should be a community of mutual support and love in which there is no superiority or inferiority. Or, we may speak, as the Nicene Creed does, of the Holy Spirit 'proceeding' from the Father (and the Son)<sup>1</sup>, indicating how the outgoing, all-embracing love of God for his creation flows through the Son and the Spirit. Such an understanding of the Trinity is authenticated when the Church shares in God's mission to the world. In whatever way we think of the Trinity, we cannot have an adequate ecclesiology without a proper Trinitarian doctrine, since the Church is called to mirror, at a finite level, the reality which God is in eternity.
- 2.1.10 A Christian way of living in anticipation of the coming reign of God remains difficult to sustain both for individuals and for the Church as an institution. This has been true from the beginning. The New Testament does not know of a perfect Christian community, and human sinfulness has not diminished with the passage of time. The life of the Church is continually eroded by it; its symptoms and results include fractured relationships, (both personal and communal), and discrimination on the grounds of sex, education, age and race. Seeking the true reign of God means facing the temptations which Jesus himself endured and triumphed over: the temptation to live for bread and not for the word of God; the temptation to test God, and require that God perform according to our wishes; to acquire power instead of to offer true worship. As the parables of the labourers in the vineyard and the prodigal son show

(Matthew 20.1-16; Luke 15.11-32), God's reign may offend our commonsense notions of how much should be given to whom, or who should come first. These, and other parables of the Kingdom shake us out of our self-deception that the reign and mission of God belong to the Church. Rather, the Church's vocation is to testify to God's reign and to share in his mission in our damaged, hurtful and often despairing society.

- 2.1.11 So the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus decisively established God's Kingdom and made possible the ultimate fulfilment of God's mission and purpose. But their full realization will come only at the end of time, and for that the Church must always be prepared (Matthew 25.1-13). Meanwhile, the Church, a pilgrim people journeying towards the End, must testify to, celebrate, and hope in the God who remains active in his creation, working out his purpose for its salvation (Isaiah 42.5; Colossians 1.15-16; Revelation 4.11).
- 2.1.12 In conclusion, God's reign and mission, focussed and expressed supremely in the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are the foundation of any authentically Christian understanding of the Church, and of the Church's participation in God's purpose for the world. In this task the Church is not an ideal community somehow separate from every local assembly of Christians. It was no accident that New Testament writers used the same word *ekklesia* both of the whole Church and, more often, of the local church. So each local church is, or may be, fully the Church. There is a close parallel to be drawn here between people and churches. A crowd is not more human than an individual simply because it is a crowd. This is true even when people and churches are imperfect. The Corinthian Church, for all its faults, was, for St. Paul, still 'the Church of God which is in Corinth' (1 Corinthians 1.2; 2 Corinthians 1.1).
- 2.1.13 But the parallel needs to be explored further. Human beings need each other. Indeed, we cannot really function or be human without each other. Similarly, although each local church contains within itself the fullness of the Church, its relationships with other churches are part of its lifeblood. (On this, see also 2.3.7 and 4.4). The practicalities of this will need to be considered in more detail. But there are other perspectives from Scripture and tradition to be explored first, beginning with the continuity of the Church with the people of God of the Old Testament.

**Note:**

- (1) The Nicene Creed, as finally agreed at the Council of Constantinople in 381, affirmed that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father'. The Western Church later added 'and the Son' – the so-called 'filioque' clause. The Eastern Church has never accepted this addition, objecting to the unilateral alteration of a creed originally agreed by representatives of the whole of Christendom. The British Methodist Conference of 1990 expressed a willingness, when there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church, to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by east and west in 381.

## 2.2 The Covenant People

- 2.2.1 The writers of the books of the New Testament<sup>1</sup> saw the Church developing from the life and worship of the children of Israel. Christians share Israel's faith in the One God, the Creator of all, the Lord of history, the Judge who upholds the rights of the poor and downtrodden. The 'Scriptures' of the early Christians were the Scriptures of the Jewish people – what later generations of Christians have come to call 'the Old Testament'. The early Christians believed that some of the events in the life of Jesus had been foretold in them, and they used concepts from the Scriptures to express their understanding of him. They spoke of the Church as a 'chosen race' a 'kingdom of priests', the 'people of God' to express their own self-understanding (1 Peter 2.9-10; Revelation 1.6) – titles which had been used for Israel. Even the word *ekklesia* ('church') was used first in the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, as it is in Acts 7.38, to refer to the assembly of Israel in the wilderness. The word may have 'caught on' also because of its secular usage in the wider Greek-speaking world as 'a town assembly' (as in Acts 19.32).
- 2.2.2 One of the central ideas in the Jewish Scriptures is that of 'Covenant': God made a covenant with the people of Israel when he called Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, revealing himself to them as the One God, and later rescued them from slavery in Egypt and gave them the Torah at Mount Sinai. ('Torah' is often translated 'law', but for the Jewish people it has a richer meaning, including also teaching, instruction). A covenant involves partnership and community. It is a legally binding commitment for a specific purpose: the giver of the covenant does so as an act of favour, an act of grace which calls for a responding commitment. Those accepting the covenant choose to do so, but the initiative is God's. In the Biblical understanding of covenant there is no suggestion that those with whom the covenant has been made are in any way better than others, nor that those who have not been chosen have been rejected. The covenant is made with some in order that all might ultimately benefit. The covenant God made with Abraham must be seen against the background of the covenant which the Jewish Scriptures said had been made earlier with Noah, and through Noah with every living creature on earth (Genesis 9.9-10). In being chosen for the Abrahamic covenant the Jews have no grounds for boasting. Such a privilege brings with it immense responsibilities. Obedience involves behaving in a way which reflects the character of God who gave the covenant – a loving response to what God has done. It involves both worshipping and serving God. (In Hebrew one word is used for both 'worship' and 'serve').
- 2.2.3 The Scriptures tell how over the centuries the children of Israel were often unfaithful. But God remained faithful and through the prophet Jeremiah said that he would institute a new covenant with them (Jeremiah 31.31-34). In speaking of a 'new covenant' Jeremiah did not mean that the old covenant was superseded. He saw the new covenant as an interiorization

of the Torah, not its replacement: 'I will set my Torah within them and write it on their hearts', (Jeremiah 31.33). The concept 'new covenant' is taken up in the New Testament and in the account of the institution of the Eucharist given by Paul and Luke the cup is said to be the new covenant sealed by Jesus' blood (1 Corinthians 11.23; Luke 22.20).

- 2.2.4 Jesus was critical of some of the teaching of the Jewish leaders of his day, but according to Matthew's gospel he came to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matthew 5.17). Paul, too, claimed continuity with Israel (Romans 3.31), arguing that his mission to the Gentiles, and its accompanying message of justification by faith, was foretold in Scripture. This meant the reconstitution of 'Israel', so that there was now discontinuity, as well as continuity, with the 'old' Israel. For example, Gentile Christians did not have to keep the whole of the law of Moses.
- 2.2.5 By the end of the New Testament period the majority of Christians were Gentiles, and in a number of places there had been fierce conflict between Christians and Jews. This conflict heavily influenced some of the New Testament accounts of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It is reflected in much of the polemic against the Pharisees<sup>2</sup>, and in what is said about 'the Jews', particularly in John and Acts. Recent scholarship, drawing on evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and work done by Jewish scholars, has shown that Judaism in the time of Jesus was far more varied than is apparent from the gospels, and that Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees, as reported in the gospels, have parallels with arguments amongst the Pharisees themselves.
- 2.2.6 Some passages in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 21.18-22; Hebrews 8.6-7, 13) suggest that when Jesus was rejected by some of the Jewish people of his day, Israel's election as the people of God and the covenant which God had made with Israel came to an end: the Church replaced Israel as God's covenant community. According to Hebrews 8, Jeremiah's words about a new covenant were fulfilled in Christ and in the community created by him. Other scholars, however have pointed to Romans 9-11, which states that, despite the rejection of Jesus by many of the Jews, God remains faithful to his promises and his covenant with the Jewish people still stands, and the Jews are still God's covenant people (Romans 9.4). The gifts of God and his calling are irrevocable (Romans 11.29). The tension between these two themes in the Biblical material still remains, and the Church must continue to seek a deeper understanding of the issues involved.
- 2.2.7 However the Biblical material is understood, the view that the Church has replaced the Jews as God's chosen people can never justify anti-Jewish feeling and the persecution of Jews by Christians. We have seen the tragic results of this in the Holocaust, and the failure of many churches to condemn anti-semitism. There is much of which the Church needs to repent.

- 2.2.8 For this reason any attempt to define the relationship of the Jewish people to the Church is a difficult, sensitive matter. Perhaps the very attempt is presumptuous. The Biblical witness to God's faithfulness to his people must not be ignored, and the Jews continue to be a dynamic, flourishing community, seeking to express their faithfulness to the Torah. But Jesus' own prophetic ministry to Israel cannot be set aside either. The new thing of which the New Testament speaks is not described as for Gentiles only. Rather, a new community has been established on non-racial lines, for in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek' (Galatians 3.28).
- 2.2.9 The idea of covenant has had a special place in the thinking of the Methodist people since John Wesley first urged them to renew their covenant with God. In the light of the emphasis on grace and obedience in the understanding of covenant, the distinctive Methodist emphases, on God's grace and on holiness, commitment and social action, place Methodism firmly within the tradition of the covenant people.
- 2.2.10 The Church is called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all peoples, including the Jews. With all people this must be done in a spirit of dialogue, seeking to learn from the other's understanding and experience of God, as well as witnessing to what God has done in Jesus. In view, however, of the anti-semitism which has marred much of the Church's relationship with the Jewish people in the past, there must be particular sensitivity in dialogue with them, with a humble recognition of past mistakes, recognizing and celebrating the integrity and validity of Jewish life and worship, being willing to learn from them, and with a recognition of the special place of the Jewish people in God's eternal plan. At the same time Jews and Christians, both sharing the heritage of the Hebrew prophets, have a common responsibility to work together to combat all forms of oppression, discrimination and exploitation, and to establish justice and peace.

**Notes:**

- (1) It is almost impossible to avoid using the phrase 'the New Testament', but in doing so it is important to recognize that it can wrongly suggest that the Old Testament is now out of date and has been superseded by the New Testament. In fixing the Christian canon as the Old and New Testaments, however, the early Church recognized that the Jewish Scriptures are still essential for the Church's life, worship and theology.
- (2) Christian preaching has frequently failed to allow for this, portraying Pharisees as hidebound, legalistic reactionaries. They were not, and part of the challenge and 'offence' of the Gospel is lost when 'the Pharisees' are caricatured in this way.

**2.3 New Testament Unity and Diversity**

- 2.3.1 There is an extraordinary range of images of the Church in the New Testament. The Church is salt, light, a vineyard, a letter from Christ, the bride of Christ, the Way. The Church is called Israel, a chosen race, a holy nation, a priesthood, a remnant. The Church is the Body of Christ, a new

creation. Christians are variously called the elect, the justified, the poor, the slaves and friends of Christ, the children and sons of God. All of these images express part of the truth. But we begin this section with a picture of a local church in New Testament times.

- 2.3.2 The church at Corinth met, it seems, in the home of Gaius, (Romans 16.23). So it cannot have been large, even though Gaius was probably one of the better-off members, with a bigger house than most. Sub-groups, or cells, of Christians may also have met in other, smaller houses in the city (Romans 16.5). The enthusiasm and religious experience of the Corinthians were not in doubt. They enjoyed, perhaps to the point of indulgence, the gifts of the Spirit. They included in their number not only relatively poor people, but also the well-to-do and influential. Their social differences were sadly in evidence at their celebrations of the Lord's Supper. The identification of different groups within the church with particular apostles was clearly divisive. But of communities such as these Paul and other New Testament writers used remarkable language: they were the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the household or family of God. What held them together? What was their mission, their way of life, their understanding of ministry?
- 2.3.3 In recent years Biblical scholarship has greatly enlarged our understanding of the early Christian communities, and especially so by its exploration of the rich diversity of the New Testament. Even in the gospels, where the word 'church' is rarely found, (only at Matthew 16.18 and 18.17), the living experience of the Christian communities out of which the gospels emerged has shaped the narratives, and much can be learned about the Church from them. It is very clear that there is no single model of the Church which can be labelled the Biblical model. Indeed, the New Testament's diversity implies that diversity – and a sometimes untidy, unharmonious diversity at that – is the norm. Nevertheless, the underlying unity of the New Testament should not be overlooked, since that, too, is vital. St. Paul's own passion for unity within and between churches finds expression at many points, (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12.4-31; Romans 15.25-27).
- 2.3.4 The unity of the New Testament witness about the Church has three aspects. First, its writers share the conviction that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit, determine the identity, constitute the message, and empower the mission of the Church. Second, the Church and Israel share a common historical, theological and spiritual heritage. Third, the life of faith which Christians share in the Spirit expresses itself in thankfulness, fellowship, love and hope, in worship to the glory of God, and in mission and service to the world. Thus, the New Testament offers confessional, historical, spiritual and ethical norms to help the Church discern when its essential life and witness are seriously threatened or compromised.
- 2.3.5 First, although the New Testament provides no full or detailed picture of early Christian worship (apart from Paul's brief discussions of the

problems at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14), there are enough hints and details as well as more general references to worship and praise to allow some important observations. The first Christians worshipped God through Jesus in the Spirit's power (e.g. Romans 8.15; 1 Corinthians 3.11,16); such worship was characterized by thanksgiving and praise (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5.18; 1 Corinthians 11.24), by an awareness that their worship looked forward to, and even celebrated in advance, the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes (e.g. Philippians 2.5-11; Ephesians 2.5-8), and, not least by a strong corporate identity which was, nevertheless, not exclusive (e.g. Acts 2.42-47; 1 Corinthians 4.24-25).

- 2.3.6 The unity of the New Testament precludes the view that 'anything goes', whether in belief or in practice. Conversely, the diversity of the New Testament precludes a narrow rigidity which attempts to impose a uniform pattern upon the Church. Examples of diversity are given below, indicating distinctive characteristics, rather than exhaustive summaries, of what different writers have to say about the Church.
- 2.3.7 Second, the mission of the Church is to live and proclaim God's kingdom and God's love as they were revealed in Jesus. But the New Testament offers a variety of perspectives on this fundamental task. The gospel of John speaks of the mission of the Father and the Son, and of the mission of the Church which flows from that (e.g. John 3.16; 20.21). Luke's gospel and Acts emphasize the place of the marginalized and the outcast in the Church: Jesus' acceptance of women, the lepers, Samaritans and others prefigures the mission to the (unclean) Gentiles in Acts. Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed the first great conflict arising out of the Gentile mission: should Gentile converts be required to be the same kind of Christian (i.e. Jewish) as their spiritual forbears? Paul insisted that they were 'justified by faith', not by becoming Jews. Here Scripture testifies to a vital distinction between evangelism (i.e. representing and proclaiming Jesus) and that kind of proselytizing which, in effect, means making Christians in our own image. Even the exclusive-sounding language of 1 Peter, ('You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood . . .')(2.9), is in fact applying an Old Testament description of Israel to Gentiles. The 'chosen race', therefore, potentially includes everyone.
- 2.3.8 Third, the New Testament gives a variety of insights into and models of the unity and interdependence of all churches. The 1937 Statement (p.15) describes this fellowship of the Spirit as 'the essence of the Church'. According to Acts, the first Christians in Jerusalem shared all their possessions, ensuring that none of their number was left in need. Paul, drawing on the analogy of the human body, teaches that all Christians are 'members' of Christ, and 'members' of each other (1 Corinthians 12.12; Romans 12.5). Thus each local church is, in a sense, a complete entity. But just as human beings function and flourish only in relationship with others, so also do churches. As in Acts, this interdependence found practical expression: Paul organized a 'collection' to relieve the poverty of

the Christians in Judaea, and, at the same time, to represent the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians (e.g. Romans 15.25-7). This unity, in the view of the writer of John's gospel, is modelled on and rooted in the unity of the Father and the Son (e.g. 17.21).

- 2.3.9 Some parts of Scripture, notably the gospel of John (e.g. 5.24), testify to what the Church already enjoys. But New Testament writers also reflect, in differing ways, that towards which the Church still moves. According to the letter to the Hebrews, this epoch is the time of the wandering, (with the risk of getting lost) (4.9-11), of the people of God. To have faith is to journey on; to loiter behind is to sin. Luke's writings similarly stress the need for endurance in the Christian life (e.g. Luke 8.15; Acts 14.22). Paul speaks about the Holy Spirit as the 'first instalment' of salvation (2 Corinthians 1.22; Romans 8.23), indicating that the work of salvation has been begun, but is not yet finished. So there emerges a picture of a Church, as yet incomplete, but moving forward to the great climax of God's creative purpose, when the Church itself will be perfected in the fulness of Christ (Ephesians 4.13; 5.27), and when, mysteriously connected with this final perfecting, creation itself will be finally liberated from suffering (Romans 8.19-21).
- 2.3.10 But the pilgrim character of the Church did not mean that the churches of the New Testament were detached from their social and economic context, their eyes fixed firmly on the hereafter. In John's language, Christians, though not 'of the world' (meaning that the source of their real life comes from elsewhere), are still 'in the world'. Thus the letter to the Ephesians can combine the most exalted language about the Church with very down to earth, practical advice to Christians about their everyday lives (2.5-7; 5.21-6.9). 'The process of claiming for Christ every activity of the Christian . . . and redeeming every department of the corporate life of the world began in those New Testament days' (NCC p.16).
- 2.3.11 Being 'in the world, but not of the world' almost inevitably led to, and still leads to, conflict with the world, and therefore, suffering. (The word 'world' is used here with the meaning it normally carries in John's gospel: the world organizing its life apart from God). The synoptic gospels repeatedly stress that disciples must take up their cross. Mark especially, suggests that reluctance or failure to do so is the failure of the Church, which thus becomes the unwitting tool of Satan (Mark 8.33). The gospel of John recognizes the temptation of Christians to avoid suffering by remaining anonymous (e.g. John 12.41-2). But, in the words of a twentieth century Christian, 'A church which wishes to be invisible is no longer a church of disciples'<sup>1</sup>.
- 2.3.12 Such suffering may involve social marginalization, as some of the language of 1 Peter implies. Sometimes, as in the situation addressed by the Book of Revelation, it will have a political dimension. Even in Acts, in some ways the most positive New Testament document towards the wider world, suffering is an inescapable part of the Church's vocation (Acts

14.22). Always, the Church as the Body of Christ will bear the marks of 'the dying of Jesus' (2 Corinthians 4.10), so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in that Body at the same time. Paul is describing his life as an apostle in 2 Corinthians 4.7-12, but his teaching elsewhere, especially his understanding of baptism as a dying with Christ (Romans 6.1-11), shows that his words apply to the whole Christian community. As there were wounds in the risen body of Christ, and Thomas recognized him by them, so suffering remains part of the Church's vocation, and a sign of its authenticity.

- 2.3.13 The varied testimony of Scripture to the Church's suffering belongs closely with its emphasis on joy, power and praise. For Matthew, it seems, the boat from which Jesus stills the storm has become a symbol of the Church, tossed about in the turbulence of the world, but possessing the peace of Christ (Matthew 8.23-27). The gospel of John predicts suffering and promises joy for disciples (John 16.33; 15.11). As for Paul, both his physical affliction (2 Corinthians 12.7b-10), and the deprivations and hardships he accepted for the sake of the gospel, (e.g. 1 Corinthians 2.1-5; 2 Corinthians 11.30) show that in his experience 'weakness' is the context in which the divine power is displayed.
- 2.3.14 As with other themes, different writers contribute different perspectives on the subject of ministry. According to Paul, ministry belongs to all, in that all receive a charisma of the Spirit, such gifts being richly varied, (Romans 12.4-7; 1 Corinthians 12.4-28). The churches reflected in Matthew's and John's gospels may not have had an organized ministry, although in Matthew the Twelve are clearly a special group: Matthew's church was probably a 'brotherhood' (e.g. 23.8), whilst according to John everyone is a disciple or brother, a friend of Jesus (e.g. 15.14). Spiritual authority 'resides in the Church as a whole, in so far as the Church is indwelt by the divine Spirit' (Matthew 16.19; 18.18; John 20.22-3). Even in those documents which refer to recognized leaders in the Church, leadership seems always to be exercised by a group of leaders, not by an individual. For example, 'presbyters', or elders, were the leaders of at least some local churches (Acts 14.23), a model of leadership deriving probably from the Jewish synagogue. The letter to the Hebrews, although emerging from a church with recognized leaders (13.7), argues, in effect, that a distinct order of priesthood within the people of the new covenant is no longer necessary. (On this point, see also 4.5.2. below).
- 2.3.15 In the writings of Luke, (his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles), the apostles were a unique, authoritative group as companions of the earthly Jesus and witnesses to the resurrection (Luke 22.28; Acts 3.15). (Paul and Barnabas are exceptions – Acts 14.4). In the letters of Paul the apostles seem to have been a wider group: it included, for example, Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16.7). (It is much more probable that the female name Junia, rather than the male name Junias, lies behind the particular form of the name in the Greek in this verse. If this is so, then the apostles were

clearly not an exclusively male group). In later writers the apostles are seen as the foundation of the Church (Ephesians 2.20<sup>3</sup>; Revelation 21.14), as the first commissioned witnesses of faith and to faith.

- 2.3.16 A more structured ministry is beginning to emerge in the letters to Timothy and Titus, (widely, though not universally, thought to be written by a disciple of Paul attributing his work to the apostle). These three letters, the 'Pastoral' Epistles, more clearly than any other writings, except, perhaps, Acts, bear witness to the developing organization of the Church (e.g. 1 Timothy 3.1-13; 5.1-22). Their pattern of ministry appears to resemble the later 'three-fold ministry' of bishop, presbyter and deacon, but, as we have seen, it is far from being the only pattern of ministry according to the New Testament. And, at this stage, it cannot yet be called the three-fold ministry: Titus 1.5-7 shows that an 'overseer' is a 'presbyter', ('overseer' denoting the function, 'presbyter', or 'elder', denoting the office) (See also 4.5.5. below).
- 2.3.17 Beneath the diverse patterns of ministry in the New Testament, however, some fundamental themes may be discerned. 'The ministry of the whole people of God' can be discerned in the recurring insistence that each has a gift (Romans 12.3-5; Ephesians 4.7; 1 Peter 4.10). (On this, see also 4.5 below). The interdependence of all within the body of Christ issues in corporate forms of leadership (e.g. 1 Peter 5.1-2); even strong individual leaders such as Paul engaged in collaborative ministry (as the frequency of the word 'fellow-worker' in his letters shows, e.g. Romans 16.3,9,21).
- 2.3.18 This diversity of Scripture is particularly relevant for our ecumenical age, since we need to learn what our fellow-Christians of other traditions find in the Bible. What we find is inevitably influenced by our differing traditions. To adapt the words of an English Puritan writer, 'Tell me what you see in your Bible, and I will tell you to which Christian tradition you belong'. Ecumenical dialogue is thus important, since no denomination can do justice, in its faith, life and practice, to the diversity of the New Testament. For, in the end, the ecclesiology of the New Testament is not a mass of conflicting ecclesiologies, but a rich variety, and that very variety is the norm by which the life of the whole Church is to be directed, purified and enriched.
- 2.3.19 In this respect the Bible itself warns against a narrow Biblicism. Its varying pictures and models of the Church suggest that diversity, development, and new responses to changing situations and context are the norm. But in all situations, the underlying truth of the Church's nature and purpose remains the same: by its life and witness the Church points towards, by its sharing and worship it anticipates, and through its mission it is an instrument of the ultimate reality of the Kingdom of God, actualized in Jesus Christ.

**Notes:**

- (1) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in *Berufen, Beschenkt, Beauftrag* (3.1.1.), an Ecclesiology Report produced by the Evangelisch-Methodiste Kirche of Germany.
- (2) A Greek word used in the New Testament, closely related to the word *charis* ('grace'), and meaning a gift of the Spirit.
- (3) Some scholars regard the letter to the Ephesians as a letter written by a disciple of Paul, writing in Paul's name.

**2.4 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic'**

- 2.4.1 Since tradition is 'the vital companion of Scripture' (1.1.9), we cannot develop our understanding of the Church without regard for the long centuries which have elapsed between the New Testament era and our own. The Nicene Creed of the fourth century describes the Church as 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'. All four of these traditional 'notes' of the Church express a vital aspect of its life and identity, and so in this section we explore the meaning of each of them.
- 2.4.2 We begin with the first 'note' of the Church. The Church is one because God is one. This is not simply an aspiration, but a God-given reality<sup>1</sup>. The Church, however, reflects the oneness of God most fully when its search for unity with God goes hand in hand with the search for and realization of unity within its own life. Indeed, one of the tests of the Church's unity with God is the unity which the Church enjoys within its own life. Conversely, because the basis of the Church's unity is God's own being and grace, that unity contains within itself a very rich diversity.
- 2.4.3 Second, the Church is holy because it belongs to God who is holy. Here, too, the Church is entirely dependent on God's gift of his Spirit. The 'holiness' of the Church has two dimensions. First, it denotes the Church's standing before God. Just as the expression 'the holy ones' in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 1.7) did not refer primarily to the character of Christians, but rather to their privileged, wholly undeserved membership of God's people, so the Church is holy simply because it belongs to God. This is why the praise of God is the Church's fundamental vocation and characteristic activity. But the word 'holy' would soon be a very hollow-sounding one if it did not also have a second dimension of meaning. The marks of holiness which the Church is called to show are those which can be seen in the life of Jesus, the holy one of God. So holiness is not an otherworldly characteristic; it is a Christlike one, deriving from the God whose very being was 'imprinted' on Jesus (Hebrews 1.3). In Methodist tradition, Christian holiness has been defined as 'perfect love', and such an understanding makes clear both the inner dynamic and the outward expression of the Church's life. Like unity, it is both gift and aspiration<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.4.4 Third, the Church is catholic because there is one universal God, who has declared his love for all creation in Jesus Christ. So the Church embraces all nations and all peoples without regard to human distinctions of class or

tribe, colour or race, gender or sexuality, poverty or riches. Yet there is another sense in which we need to speak of the 'Catholic' Church. From earliest times the Church has sought answers to contentious questions by discovering the mind of the whole people of Christ. This was so in apostolic times; it was so in the long debate about which writings should make up the Christian Scriptures. A writing was accepted when, and only when, it found acceptance throughout the Church. By these means the catholic – i.e. authentic – faith of the Church was established and preserved. So the two meanings of 'catholic', 'universal' and 'authentic', are closely related. They are not, however, to be totally identified; the result, if they were, would be a monolithic, unchanging Church. First, it must be acknowledged that discovering, or achieving, a common mind amongst all the faithful (*consensus fidelium*) may, as in the formation of the New Testament canon, take a very long time. Second, such a consensus still need not preclude a remarkable diversity. (For example, Roman Catholics regard the Apocrypha as part of their canon of Scripture; Protestants do not). Third, it does not follow that the authentic faith cannot, or should not develop, even though 'progress', however defined, is neither unilinear nor inevitable. But it does seem that the Spirit of God seeks constantly to move the Church on. A new consensus on new questions, or even a new consensus on an old question, (notably the changed attitude to slavery), can emerge.

- 2.4.5 The Church is apostolic, insofar as it sustains a continuity with Jesus through his apostles and their successors, for God expressed himself through Jesus who sent out his apostles to preach and live the gospel message. The concept of 'apostolic succession' gives rise to many questions, and for this reason it will be useful to examine more closely the nature of the continuity both given to and required of the Church.
- 2.4.6 The continuity has several aspects: the continuity of the Church's loyalty to Christ, of its mission as agent of God's love and proclaimer of the Gospel, and of Christian experience in the fellowship of the Spirit. But such continuity is not dependent upon, nor guaranteed by an unbroken succession of ministers, whether presbyters or bishops, from the apostolic period. It is secured by faithfulness to Christ and his Gospel. As the 1937 Statement put it, 'the office is contingent on the Word, and not the Word on the office'. But continuity of ministry can be a valuable sign; the Methodist Church acknowledges this in its own practice, and in its response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, states that 'we await the occasion when it would be appropriate "to recover the sign of the episcopal succession"'.
- 2.4.7 More recently, there has been a growing ecumenical consensus about 'the apostolic tradition', reflected, for example, in the report so named from the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, (Fifth Series 1986-91), and in *Baptism, Eucharist and*

*Ministry* (BEM), the so-called Lima text, published by the World Council of Churches in 1982. Thus,

apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each. (BEM M34)<sup>3</sup>.

- 2.4.8 Debate continues between Churches about the characteristics which are essential to the Church<sup>4</sup>. Methodists 'recognize the centrality of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. They proclaim in word and sign the whole Gospel of creation and redemption'<sup>5</sup>. Both are powerful expressions of the Gospel of Christ. Both anticipate and celebrate in the life of an individual and of the Church God's purpose of salvation for all people. As such, they are neither private rites, nor social customs, but acts of worship and thanksgiving on behalf of and in solidarity with the whole world<sup>6</sup>. The Eucharist, in particular, focusses and expresses both the ongoing and the future life of the Church. As many liturgies, both ancient and modern, imply, it prefigures and images the life of the kingdom of God. Christian people, in all their diversity, come together regularly to meet around the Lord's table, celebrating in word and deed the risen presence of the Christ who gave his life, and sharing in a joint commitment to him in the world. In this typical act of Christian worship the Eucharist strengthens, and, in a sense, makes the Church. Tragically, there is division, notably between Catholics and Protestants, about the nature and extent of the community which can properly meet around the Lord's table. Thus a rite which powerfully expresses unity has become a source of disagreement. But ideally the Eucharist represents a high point in a dynamic life in Christ which itself is 'eucharistic' – that is, permeated throughout by thankfulness to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2.4.9 Defining the Church and determining its boundaries are important, but difficult tasks. When is a body rightly called 'a Church'? Who belongs, and who does not? In the history of the Church many answers to these questions have been attempted. Some, notably in the Catholic tradition, have defined the Church and its boundaries with reference to a particular ministerial order: the Church is a body of people in communion with the Pope, or with the bishops. Many in the Reformation tradition have defined the Church as 'wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution'<sup>7</sup>. Others, again, have considered the Church to be the community of the baptized. There are difficulties with all these views. Many Methodists will find the Reformation view attractive, provided it emphasizes, as it has not always done, that conduct, as well as belief, help to define the Church.

There still, however, remains the question: how is ‘the Word of God’ to be defined? There is something to be said for a specific, but less tightly drawn criterion: wherever people join together to respond to Christ as Lord – there is the Church. Methodists, it may be added, have generally been reluctant to unchurch any body of professedly Christian believers, even where they may lack certain elements – for example, the celebration of the two gospel sacraments – which Methodists consider normative for the Church<sup>8</sup>.

- 2.4.10 Visible boundaries are not unimportant. The Church is a visible, as well as a spiritual reality. As such, it needs to know, if not with total precision, who belongs and on what grounds. Moreover, commitment to the search for goodness and truth demands as much rigour as possible in formulating standards of belief and practice for the Church. But, however useful, or even necessary, it may be for a denomination to determine its own boundaries, it is a mistake to define too precisely the boundaries of the Church as a whole. In the last resort, only God knows who are members of the body of Christ, and so we need to retain a strong sense of the provisionality of humanly-drawn boundaries. Such a perspective may help the Church to be more sensitive both to the ways of God in the whole of his world, and to the way in which Christ seeks to lead his divided Church into the fulness of catholicity.
- 2.4.11 The Methodist Church’s self-understanding in this context is clearly set out in the *Deed of Union* to which reference was made in Section I. ‘The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation.’ (We return to the distinctive features and history of Methodism in Section IV.)
- 2.4.12 What, then, is to be said about the Church in the light of the traditional description ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’? First, these four ‘notes’ can be better understood if the familiar contrast between the Church and ‘the world’ is properly conceived. God’s purpose is the reconciliation and renewal of humankind, not solely or primarily the creation of the Church, although the vocation of the Church is to anticipate that renewal in its life and worship. The Church, then, is called to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic in and for the world, and at the same time over against the world. Second, the Church continually fails. Often, these characteristics are barely discernible in the Church’s life, and repentance is an ever-present requirement. But, third, the promises given to the Church should not be forgotten (Matthew 16.18, 18.20, 28.20). These Scriptural promises are the basis for what Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians call the ‘indefectibility’ of the Church. This concept, properly understood, is an expression of confidence not in the Church, but in the God who continually calls his Church to repentance, offering forgiveness and renewal. It finds expression in Charles Wesley’s lines:

‘Fortified by power divine,  
The Church can never fail’.

Such belief in the ‘indefectibility’ of the Church does not mean believing that it already has that ‘perfection without spot and wrinkle’ (Ephesians 5.27), which belongs only to the end of time. It means believing in a God who perseveres in re-creation, and who provides the essential means of grace in word and sacrament.

- 2.4.13 These four traditional ‘notes’ of the Church find their fullest expression in the communion of all the saints, in heaven and on earth. This company ‘which no-one can number’ is united by its common thanksgiving to God. The saints on earth remain on pilgrimage, journeying towards and praying for an ever fuller expression of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The saints in heaven are their unseen friends, divided temporarily by death, but united in faith, love, thanksgiving and praise. For Christians in this life the four notes of the Church are both an invitation to thank and to trust God, and at the same time, a reminder that the Church is always in need of reform. In a word, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are what God gives to, and requires of his Church.

**Notes:**

- (1) On this see also 3.1.1-2 below.
- (2) On this see also 4.3.6 and 4.3.7 below.
- (3) On ‘tradition’, see also 1.2.8 and 3.1.16-17.
- (4) 3.1.12 and 13.
- (5) Taken from the response of the Methodist Church of Great Britain and Ireland to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (*Churches Respond to BEM*, WCC 1986, Volume II, p.215).
- (6) On Baptism, see also 4.4.1.-3.
- (7) Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9. Compare also Article XIX of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England.
- (8) On this see also 3.1.12.

### **SECTION III: ‘THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE’**

#### **3.1 Sharing In Unity**

- 3.1.1 Throughout the twentieth century, most of the Churches in Britain, including now the Roman Catholic Church, have come slowly to a new appreciation of Christian unity. The prayer of Jesus that ‘all may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you...’ (John 17.21) indicates that this unity is modelled on the unity of the Father and the Son. That means that it involves the closest possible communion, a unity of will, character, purpose, function, and love. It is unrealistic to imagine that a unity of this kind would not be expressed in a visible and structural union. The

Anglican-Methodist Union Scheme, for example, saw its final goal as one Church united for mission and service.

- 3.1.2 But we must begin from the premiss that the prayer of Jesus has been heard. So his prayer creates unity: Churches are already one in Christ, and their unity is the gift of God, not the end-product of human effort. Yet the responsibility remains of responding to the prayer of Jesus, since divisions – and denominations – are a visible denial of that fundamental unity. Divisions, or the rise of a new denomination, are not always sinful, but the Gospel means that they are not the norm, nor inevitable.
- 3.1.3 As we have seen (Section 2.3), the New Testament provides ample evidence that Christian unity included diversity. It was a natural consequence of its catholic mission to peoples of all races, languages and cultures. Indeed, one of the first great conflicts of the early churches centred on this very issue. Gentile Christians, it was eventually decided, did not have to observe the law of Moses, as most of their fellow Jewish Christians continued to do. Thus they would have worked on the sabbath, eaten pork, and so on. Diversity, with all its consequent tensions, (see, e.g. Romans 14.1-15.7) and unity were the pattern.
- 3.1.4 Many other factors have made for diversity. In any situation in which the Church finds itself, there will be powerful social, cultural, economic and psychological, or temperamental, forces at work. These factors partly, though not wholly, explain the rise of denominations, which usually originate out of a complex mixture of theological and non-theological factors. From this perspective, ‘denominations’ may be seen as an inevitable expression of human diversity. But need differences mean division? Should ‘denominations’ be separate entities within the Church, each with its own theology justifying its separation?
- 3.1.5 Many denominations have often begun with the aim of preserving, or recovering, an important aspect of Christian truth. Yet the ecumenical vision arises out of a growing awareness that in our separation we are incomplete. Indeed, ecumenism is increasingly providing a vision, purpose and unity which transcends denominations. In this process, more and more Christians are becoming aware of the riches which God has given to traditions other than their own.
- 3.1.6 The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches from its inception has perceived the essential nature of the Church as *koinonia*. This New Testament word denotes both communion with the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 1.9; 2 Corinthians 13.13), and fellowship with and ministry to each other (Acts 2.42; Romans 15.26). The 1927 Conference in Lausanne referred to ‘the communion of believers in Christ Jesus’. The Evanston Assembly of 1954 recognized that the fellowship of the Church is not simply human fellowship: ‘it is fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and fellowship with the saints, in the Church triumphant’.

3.1.7 A recent statement of the same WCC Commission<sup>1</sup> continues the same emphasis:

The divine gift of *koinonia* is both a gift and a calling. The dynamic activity of God drawing us into communion also entails the calling of Christians and Christian communities to manifest *koinonia* as a sign and foretaste of God's intention for humankind.

The statement goes on:

The dynamic process of *koinonia* involves the recognition of the complementarity of human beings. As individuals and as communities, we are confronted by the others in their otherness, e.g., theologically, ethnically, culturally. *Koinonia* requires respect for the other and a willingness to listen to the other and to seek to understand them.

3.1.8 *Koinonia*, then, denotes both what Christians share, and also that sharing is at the heart of Christian faith. Such *koinonia* involves a mutual sharing of spiritual and material resources, working together, and learning from one another. It is fundamental to the environment in which the Christian pilgrimage is undertaken. It implies togetherness, mutuality and reciprocity, requiring mutual recognition and a common acceptance of each other's identity. The contemporary Inter-Church Process in Great Britain, involving as it does a commitment to explore together the experience of fellowship on pilgrimage, reflects this Scriptural understanding of *koinonia*. Co-existence alone is not enough. *Koinonia*, and therefore ecumenism too, means a shared existence. And what is true of inter-Church relations is true also of the fellowship of each individual church: injustice and inequality based, for example, on race, gender or age have no place here.

3.1.9 *Koinonia*, then, is fundamentally an experience, belonging to the whole people of God, not an abstract concept deriving from remote schemes for Christian unity. As such, it is 'more important than any particular model of Church union that we are yet able to propose... For believers it involves both communion and community'<sup>2</sup>.

3.1.10 The growing consensus amongst the Churches about *koinonia* is reflected particularly in the 1982 Lima Document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, and in the Churches' responses to it. Different aspects of the Church tend to be emphasized by different traditions, and these need to be held together in balance. The Church is both the creation of the Word of God, and also the 'mystery' or 'sacrament' of God's love for the world. The Church is both the pilgrim people of God, and also the servant and prophetic sign of God's coming kingdom. All these aspects of the Church are complementary, and together provide an agenda for 'Churches together' to continue to explore.

- 3.1.11 Further work needs to be done on the question of the characteristics necessary for the unity of the Church. The statement on unity by the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1991) was called significantly, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*:

The unity of the Church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in: the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to all people to the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation.

- 3.1.12 Some Christian bodies, such as the Society of Friends and the Salvation Army, do not celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Methodists have always been reluctant to unchurch other denominations, and for this reason, whilst affirming these sacraments as 'of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation' (*Deed of Union*), would probably wish to say that they are normative, and even essential for the whole Church, but not necessarily for every part of it. Such an agreement would make possible the co-existence within one Church of both sacramental and non-sacramental traditions. This would be an important instance of diversity within a commonly accepted Church order or structure. (The Methodist understanding of connexionalism may be able to contribute here – see Sections 4.6 and 4.7).
- 3.1.13 The reference in the Canberra Statement to 'serving the whole of creation' makes a point fundamental for the proper understanding of the 'ecumenical' movement. (The word 'ecumenical' derives from the Greek *oikoumene*, meaning 'the whole inhabited world'). The drive towards the unity of the Church and the renewal of the world belong together. (On this see also 2.1, 2.4.8 and 2.4.9.). Love is fundamentally one, and the more closely Christians draw to each other in true *koinonia*, the more fully will they be drawn into mission and service in the world.
- 3.1.14 Because of this growing mutual understanding, co-operation between Churches continues to increase. For instance, the new ecumenical instruments were set up in 1990 in Great Britain and Ireland to enable and facilitate the Churches' work together in all areas of Church life, public affairs, international affairs, mission, racial justice, inter-faith relations and youth matters, as well as in 'traditional' ecumenical areas such as local ecumenism and unity in prayer. The work of the Joint Liturgical Group also continues; it has helped a growing number of Christians to feel increasingly at home in traditions other than their own.
- 3.1.15 Much work remains to be done on church structures. The Church, in common with other social organizations, has an organic structure to be administered, managed and maintained. Yet, if the Incarnation is taken seriously, theology has to be related to institutions, as well as to beliefs,

faith, relations and prayers. Thus the cooperation and greater understanding between churches, outlined in this section, cannot render organic union either unnecessary or undesirable. But there is a particular challenge here in the handling of inter-denominational tensions or conflicts, so that they become a creative force in the life of the Church, rather than an impediment to its unity. A beginning has been made in the establishment of ecumenical bodies in the British Isles for precisely this task<sup>3</sup>, even though authority rests finally with autonomous denominations.

- 3.1.16 Finally, despite widespread and growing agreement about the nature of apostolic tradition (2.4. above), differing understandings of tradition remain. All are agreed that no religious body could exist without some kind of tradition, yet Christians use the word itself in different ways. Some, particularly the Catholic and Orthodox, use the word 'Tradition' to mean the whole of Christian faith and practice. Others, including Methodists, have tended to refer to 'traditions' more critically, influenced perhaps by Scripture passages such as Mark 7, with its reference to 'human tradition'. Difficult questions undoubtedly remain, not least that of distinguishing tradition (in this positive sense) from distortions of it. Nevertheless, in the words of the Montreal Faith and Order Statement of 1963:

We exist as Christians by the Tradition of the gospel . . . testified in scripture, transmitted in and by the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the word, in the administration of the sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christians by the lives of the members of the Church.

(On this subject, compare the quotation in 2.4.7). Thus, whilst the episcopal succession may be appreciated as 'a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church', 'it is increasingly recognized that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been preserved in Churches which have not retained the form of historic episcopate'. (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* M37-8)

- 3.1.17 Methodists can welcome the recent ecumenical emphasis on tradition as dynamic, rather than static, as a shared, 'lived experience', rather than simply a deposit of doctrine. In fact, far more than doctrine is passed on in this living tradition; sanctity and spirituality are also transmitted by all holy men and women throughout the ages, not simply or even primarily by Church leaders.
- 3.1.18 More recently, the member churches of Churches Together in England agreed to participate in 'Called to Be One', a five-year process to help the churches together to consider the meaning of Christian unity, and to discern the next steps to closer unity. At the same time the World Methodist Council/Anglican Consultative Council Report, *Sharing in the Apostolic*

*Communion*, invited both churches 'to test if there is sufficient agreement for our churches to engage themselves together more fully in faith, mission and sacramental life'. Even more recently, new sets of conversations began, involving the Methodist Church in England, Scotland and Wales with our ecumenical partners. Thus, at national and international levels, churches are being challenged to make a deeper commitment to one another in faith and life.

**Notes:**

- (1) *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness* (WCC Commission on Faith and Order, 1993), pp. 8-9.
- (2) *Towards A Statement on the Church*, a report of the Joint Commission Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, (1982-1986 Fourth Series), IV 23.
- (3) The Church Representatives' Meeting at Britain and Ireland level, its equivalents in Scotland, Wales and England, and ecumenical bodies at county or intermediate level provide for this.

## **3.2 The Whole Gospel for the Whole World**

- 3.2.1 The unity of the Church and its mission are closely related, since the Triune God who commissions the Church is One, seeking to reconcile and to bring the world itself into a unity in Christ. In this mission, the Church's vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument of God's Kingdom. This involves both evangelism and social action, and, in our day especially, engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths.
- 3.2.2 To evangelize is to share with others the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It is to make known by word and deed the love of the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that people may find their lives renewed through faith in Christ as their Saviour, and give themselves in obedient service to him in the Church and the world. Evangelism in every context requires sensitivity as well as commitment. An authentically Christian evangelism reflects the nature of God. It will be vulnerable, patient, loving. Jesus himself and his apostle Paul are the outstanding examples in Scripture.
- 3.2.3 To make numerical growth the primary objective of evangelism is to distort the nature of the Christian mission. The growth of the Church is the normal, though not inevitable, byproduct of evangelistic work. The designation of the final decade of the twentieth century as a 'Decade of Evangelism' highlights the importance and urgency of the task.
- 3.2.4 The Gospel has to be both spoken and lived. The gospels show that 'good news and good works are inseparable'<sup>1</sup>, and that to preach the Kingdom of God involves a commitment to justice and peace. So although Christians may differ in their respective commitments to evangelism and social justice, the two tasks belong together. The Church is called both to 'make

disciples' and to work for a loving, just and peaceful society which anticipates the Kingdom of God. This involves identifying with those who suffer, sharing their burdens, and speaking out with them against the injustice they experience. The precise nature of this task will vary as circumstances vary. Urgent contemporary tasks include according dignity, equality and justice to women as well as men, to people of all races, and to the many deprived of adequate food, drinking water, and homes. The growing threat to the natural environment presents another compelling task for a community concerned with and committed to the renewal of the earth.

- 3.2.5 The Church's commitment to justice need not, and must not mean conforming to the culture or society in which it is set. The Church's agenda, including its social and political concerns, derives ultimately, not from the world, but from the loving, disturbing, peace-making God revealed in Jesus. Sometimes, as history shows, the contemporary concerns of society at large have reminded the Church of facets of the Kingdom which it has neglected. But the Church's response in all these things must be determined by its fundamental obedience to God.
- 3.2.6 This solidarity with God, who creates and redeems, governs all the ethical thinking of the Church. The opening stories of the Bible make two fundamental affirmations about creation: first, it is the work of God, and is therefore good, and, second, wilful human beings have marred that creation. In a world which is both essentially good and 'fallen', the Church's vocation is clear: to reflect the life and image of the creating, redeeming God, to anticipate in its worship and life the vision of God's kingdom, to reverence and show compassionate love for human beings created in the divine image, and to care for God's creation. In this task the Church will need both the moral courage of the prophet and the gentleness of Christ.
- 3.2.7 The Church will live and speak the Gospel, therefore, only if it remains a worshipping, praying community. The goal of all Christian life, and the primary purpose of the Church, is oneness with God. Such a goal is both a personal and a corporate one. Individual Christians pray, worship and suffer because they belong to a community whose hallmarks include praying, worshipping and suffering. The quality of the Christian's and the Church's life depends upon the extent to which they share God's life, and their witness will make it easier, or, tragically, harder for others to believe in the God of whom they speak. Worship and prayers are shallow, even idolatrous, if they do not, however gradually, imprint the character of God on the lives of those who worship and pray. 'The Church of Christ proclaims Christ even more by what it is than by what it says.'<sup>2</sup>
- 3.2.8 Two particular opportunities today call for special mention here. The relationship between the Christian faith and the many, richly-varied cultures of the world calls for careful work and sensitive co-operation. The gospel has to be expressed within each culture in a way appropriate to that culture; Christians all over the world are rightly developing an

interpretation of the Gospel and patterns of Church life appropriate to their culture. For most, if not all, that will mean re-discovering the Gospel within each culture, since 'all language, even that in Scripture and creed, is inculturated'<sup>3</sup>. This process of exploration is an especially sensitive one when a culture is a religious one. Nevertheless, all cultures, even so-called Christian ones, need to be transformed in the spirit of the Gospel.

- 3.2.9 There is another area of concern. Countless people other than Christians have a deep concern for spiritual matters. Some, professing no religion, hunger for a different life-style. Aware of an emptiness which material possessions cannot satisfy, they protest against the aimlessness of much of modern life, and the increasing devastation of the planet. Others, also outside the churches, try to link prayer and politics, reflection and action. Many more are adherents of world religions other than Christianity, and no consideration of ecclesiology can be adequate which does not consider the Church's relationship with them.
- 3.2.10 Christians from the beginning have encountered people of other faiths, and wrestled with the theological questions raised by those encounters. But during the last fifty years people of other faiths have come to live in Britain in far greater numbers than before. Conversely, more people than in the past from Europe and North America have had the opportunity to visit countries in which people of other faiths are in the majority. Consequently, many Christians have come to recognize in these people a deep appreciation of the importance of the spiritual life, and an awareness both of God's presence and of their relationship with God. Those who have engaged in dialogue with them have often found that their understanding of God and his purposes, and of the Christian faith, has been deepened and enriched.
- 3.2.11 The Church's understanding of the significance of other faiths cannot be determined by appealing to individual texts in the Bible. Some (e.g. John 14.6) sound exclusive; others (e.g. Acts 10.34-5) sound inclusive. All without exception must be interpreted in the light of their historical and literary context. The Bible as a whole bears witness to the one triune God whose covenant with Noah, preceding his covenant with Israel, was a covenant with all creation. The glory of this Creator God fills the whole earth. According to the New Testament, the world was created through the Logos, the eternal Son of God incarnate in Jesus (e.g. John 1.3,10; Hebrews 1.2). This has close links with what the Old Testament says about the Wisdom of God (e.g. Proverbs 8.22). So it is not surprising that Biblical writers, whilst acknowledging a widespread ignorance of God, also recognize a widespread knowledge of God (e.g. Romans 1.19-20; Acts 17.26-28). Christians, therefore, may gladly affirm of other faiths that 'where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, and love and holiness in their living, this, like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit'<sup>4</sup>.

3.2.12 The Church's task is to participate in God's mission. That involves dialogue – not only sharing the Christian faith, but listening to the understanding which others have of God, life and salvation. It involves working with them for justice and peace. Such co-operation and dialogue are fruitful only if they are entered into in a spirit of openness, for 'authentic dialogue opens both partners to a deeper conversion to the God who speaks to each through the other'<sup>5</sup>. In this way, Christians can come to a deeper understanding of God, the Christian faith, and of what it means to be the Church, and at the same time contribute to God's eternal purpose of bringing all things into a unity in Christ.

3.2.13 In this new situation, Christians have many kinds of opportunities for contact with people of other faiths. Neighbours or friends who may share a common concern, colleagues who may be engaged in a joint project, members of a conference on multi-faith issues may be drawn to pray together. Christians may have the opportunity to visit a mosque, a Hindu temple, a Sikh gurdwara during an act of worship, or people of another faith may be invited to a Christian service. Civic or national multi-faith services may take place in which prayers, hymns, and readings from different faiths are used. It is particularly important that those sharing in such acts of worship do not feel they are compromising their own beliefs. For such prayer and worship to be authentic it must be entered into for its own sake and not as a means to an end. But it can be a way of enabling people of different faiths to come to a deeper understanding of one another. Guidelines prepared by the British Council of Churches, *Can We Pray Together?*, recognize the difficulties, but state that:

When participants in an inter-faith service know and trust one another and are acquainted with their respective religious convictions, and when such a venture is an optional extra to the regular diet of worship which each enjoys in his or her own religious community, then the experience has an authenticity of its very own, and participants ought to be allowed to express themselves enthusiastically about its effect.<sup>6</sup>

3.2.14 Methodists have often been in the forefront of those exploring closer relationships between different denominations and people of different faiths. This probably owes much to John and Charles Wesley's emphasis that God is lovingly at work amongst all people, and that Christ died for all. It may also be partly due to the influence of John Wesley's call for a 'catholic spirit':

Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.<sup>7</sup>

- 3.2.15 In his sermon on the Catholic spirit, Wesley spoke only of Christians being drawn together in this way. His strong belief in original sin and the total depravity of human beings led him, in general, to speak of people of other faiths as 'utter strangers to true religion'. But at the same time, when faced with individual examples of faith, he could come to a different conclusion. He said that some of his Jewish parishioners 'seem nearer the mind that was in Christ than many of those who call Him Lord'<sup>8</sup> and in a sermon on faith he asserted that a Muslim writing, *The Life of Hai Ebn Yokdan*, 'contains all the principles of pure religion and undefiled'<sup>9</sup>. In the light of these strands within Methodist tradition, it is natural that many Methodists today should be concerned to explore opportunities for fellowship with people of other faiths, both to learn from them about their experience of God and to share with them what God has revealed in Christ.
- 3.2.16 Christians of all traditions are at the beginning of a long period of growing dialogue with people of other faiths. To refuse opportunities for such dialogue would be a denial of both tolerance and Christian love. To predict, at this point in time, the outcome of such dialogue would be presumptuous or faithless; Christians may enter such dialogues in the faith that God will give them deeper insight into the truth of Christ. People of other faiths can hardly be said to belong to the Church. But the Church has to be understood in a way which does not deny the signs of God in their midst.

**Notes:**

- (1) The Manila manifesto of 1989.
- (2) NCC p.20.
- (3) WCC Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela 1993), *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, (Faith and Order Paper no.164, WCC 1993), p.18.
- (4) *Religious Plurality: Theological Perspectives and Affirmations*, (a document prepared by the Dialogue sub-unit of the WCC), p.2.
- (5) *Religious Plurality*, p.4.
- (6) *Can We Pray Together?*, (BCC 1983), p.6.
- (7) *The Forty Four Sermons*, (Epworth 1944), pp.443-4.
- (8) John Wesley's *Journal*, Monday, April 4th, 1737.
- (9) *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3, Sermons III, 71-114, (Abingdon Press 1986), pp.494-5.

## **SECTION IV: THE METHODIST EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH – DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

4.1.1 The Methodist Church has always understood itself to be part of the whole Church of Christ. This conviction is the starting-point for this section of the present Statement. It follows, therefore, that the preceding sections are integrally related with this one. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are the context in which the Methodist Church must continue to live out its calling in the world, and to offer its distinctive contribution to the wider Church. It does so with the theological framework provided by Scripture and tradition, and in the knowledge that it is a pilgrim Church, travelling with many others of different traditions, but united in the one faith. It is within this wider framework and ecumenical spirit that Methodism's distinctive experience and contribution are explored here.

### **4.2 From Society to Church**

4.2.1 'John Wesley regarded the movement which he led as raised up by God to "spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the land"' (NCC, p.37). His urgent mission to preach God's love and to call people to a new life of holiness created a 'connexion' of 'societies' within the Church. Such religious societies were a common devotional device of that time – not a substitute for the parish church, but a supplement, providing a disciplined framework for religious devotion. 'Society', in fact, became the universal term for a local group of Methodists. A 'connexion' (and Wesley's was to be the largest of several in the eighteenth century) united such societies under a common banner of doctrine and discipline. The travelling preachers were also said to be 'in connexion with Mr Wesley', and this was probably the origin of the wider use of the word 'connexion'. Wesley was criticized, however, for not seeking episcopal supervision for his new organization. The problem, not uncommon in Christian history, was that of integrating a movement within an already existing structure. In the end, Wesley tried to hold together convictions which proved irreconcilable. He was deeply committed to the Church of England, but was prepared to be innovative and adaptable in his mission, impelled as it was by an 'Arminianism of the heart', the passionate conviction that the Gospel was for all. So, although he intended that the Societies which he had organized should be closely linked with the Church of England, they were never an integral part of it.

4.2.2 Wesley's call to personal faith and to holiness reflected a concern for justice and integrity in everyday life, and also an optimism about what the grace of God could accomplish in human lives. Members of the societies were committed to a common discipline of Christian life, gave each other support, and acted as a task force for the Church in witness and social action. They resembled a religious order, with their annual Conference acting like a 'chapter' for the itinerant 'order of preachers'. Like the friars

of St. Francis in an earlier age, Wesley's movement found ways to 'fill the gaps' at a time when the old parish system was failing to keep up with rapid population growth in Britain's new industrial areas.

- 4.2.3 The exclusion of Wesley from many Church of England pulpits and the refusal of Holy Communion to Methodists in the parish churches because they were 'not of this parish' alienated some Methodists. Wesley's ordination in 1784 of two men as deacons and presbyters, and his 'setting apart' or 'ordination' (Wesley's word) of Thomas Coke, already a priest in the Church of England, as Superintendent of the American Methodists made a final break much more likely. (Wesley also appointed Francis Asbury, with Coke, as Joint Superintendent in America, Coke later ordaining Asbury as deacon, elder and Superintendent.) Charles Wesley was sure that 'ordination was separation', though it was rather more complex than that. Some Methodists were never members of the Church of England; others had little love for the established Church. Wesley himself claimed that the emphases of Methodist societies were entirely consonant with the Scriptures, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Thirty Nine Articles, and the *Homilies*. But the style of the Wesleyan movement, and the religious culture to which it gave rise, made integration within the Hanoverian Church difficult.
- 4.2.4 Over the years, Methodism changed from a connexion of United Societies into a denomination or Church. The movement's self-understanding altered as it grew into an independent organization with its own identity and structures. Societies were sub-divided into 'classes'. Preaching meetings, love-feasts, Watchnight and Covenant services nurtured their members. For these, separate Methodist buildings were erected and, though most Methodists did not wish to be thought of as 'Dissenters', the buildings were registered under the Toleration Act to prevent mob violence. Officers such as stewards and class leaders were appointed to manage the societies' affairs. Lay people were permitted to preach as 'extraordinary messengers' though Wesley always took the view that they had no right to preside at Holy Communion. The Conference, having begun as informal 'conversation upon the work of God', was given legal continuity by the Deed of Declaration of 1784, establishing the 'Legal Hundred' which became the corporate *episcopate* after Wesley's death. Wesley ordained ministers for America in 1784, for Scotland in 1785 and, under pressure from the Societies, for England in 1788.
- 4.2.5 So the process of separation of Methodism from the Church of England was gradual and untidy. It was a reality for some of Wesley's followers before he acknowledged it himself. For example, despite his warnings, Methodist preachers were sometimes referred to as ministers, and societies as 'churches'. Or again, in spite of Wesley's promptings, some Methodists, whether for cultural or theological reasons, were reluctant to receive communion in their parish church. (Sometimes the issue was what they perceived to be the 'impurity' of the parish priest). For them society

meetings were more than a mere supplement to the local church. Thus by the time of Wesley's death in 1791, Methodism was virtually an independent denomination, (though some wished it not to be so). The breach was constitutionally, if not practically, complete after the 'Plan of Pacification' in 1795, when the itinerant preachers were allowed to preside at the Lord's Supper if majority opinion in a local society so wished. (Rites of passage, however, were, even then, normally at the parish church until the Marriage Act of 1836). The Methodist New Connexion (1797), the Primitive Methodists (1811), and the Bible Christians (1815) always considered themselves Dissenters from the Church of England. By the time the other groups who later made up the United Methodist Church broke away from Wesleyanism, the break with the established Church was complete.

- 4.2.6 The change from society to denomination can be traced in various ways. First, the ministry changed from an extraordinary mission of travelling preachers to a settled pastorate, providing the connexion with a uniform style of ministry. At first, itinerants were said to be 'ordained in essence' by their 'reception into full connexion' (a phrase still used today). This reception was said to be virtual ordination. However, ordination by the laying-on of hands was introduced, first, for those going overseas, and very occasionally for others, and then in Britain by the Wesleyans in 1836. Extensive debates about the ministry continued in the nineteenth century. In the process the laity claimed and eventually gained a larger share in church government, notably in the admission of laypeople to the Wesleyan Conference in 1878.
- 4.2.7 The evolution from society to denomination could also be seen in the development of the understanding of membership. The first members of Methodist societies were admitted for their 'desire to be saved from the wrath to come'. Admission was not by a statement of faith as in the 'gathered churches' of orthodox dissent, but by entry on a 'class book' and acceptance of the rules of the society. At this stage, exclusion from the society was certainly not tantamount to excommunication. But as a society grows and new generations are recruited to it, its membership tends to be understood more as membership of 'a church'. Thus in 1837, the Wesleyan Conference urged parents to have their children baptized into 'the Church'; in 1846 it recommended 'catechumen classes', and by 1878 Junior Society classes were to be created for the training of new members. An order for the 'Recognition of New Members' was added to the Book of Offices in 1894, (though the term 'Confirmation' was not used until 1962). In spite of this development, Wesleyanism did not officially use the title 'church' until 1897, although its schools – at one time 912 of them – were said to be connected to Wesleyan Methodism as a branch of 'the visible Church of Christ'. (The instruction to these schools to use both the Wesleyan hymnbook, a societary concept, and the Catechism, a church symbol, demonstrates the ambiguity latent in Methodist origins).

- 4.2.8 Primitive Methodism is an almost perfect example of the development of a 'society' or 'conversionist sect' into a denomination. From its beginnings in small groups in the Potteries in 1811, a growing church consciousness can be seen in the late Victorian period. The title 'church' rather than 'connexion' appeared on class tickets in 1902, and denominational headquarters were built in London in 1912. But the ethos of the Primitive Methodists was different, combining as it did a simple, almost Quakerly style with a deep concern for social justice derived from the struggle for workers' rights in mining and agricultural labour. The various groups which formed the United Methodist Church of 1907 can be shown to have experienced similar developments. Of these, some, such as the Bible Christians, had originated in revival movements, others in disputes over church order and church government. They often represented a 'local' rather than a 'connexional' style, and disliked heartily any apparent centralized Conference or clerical domination.
- 4.2.9 The origins of Methodism have left their mark. Indeed, some of the distinctive characteristics of the Methodist Church derive from its societary origins. Methodist hymnody, the preaching service, the use of Wesley's *Forty-Four Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament* as a 'subordinate standard' of belief, the distinctive liturgy of the Covenant service, and the importance of 'membership', with the annual or quarterly issue of a ticket of membership to each member (which early in the Wesleyan tradition authorized admission to Holy Communion) – all point to the 'societary' past. An especially valuable part of this earlier societary tradition is the role of the laity in worship and church government: this belongs to the fulness of the Church.
- 4.2.10 The past, however, can trap a church in denominationalism and make it a prisoner of its own cultural identity. A 'society' can be a group dominated by its boundaries, rather than an open community, or an effective pressure group in a wider society. Methodist history has revealed those perils. The use of familiar terminology, familiar hymns and familiar forms of worship can nurture a cosy sectarianism. On the other hand vital theological emphases could be lost to the wider Church if Methodism were to allow Charles Wesley's hymns to disappear. Again, when membership is the basis for financial assessment, the judgement that a member has 'ceased to be a member' can be driven by financial rather than pastoral concerns (4.4.9-10).
- 4.2.11 During the nineteenth century, the intense style of personal discipline, inherited from Wesley and illustrated in his rules for members and preachers, was combined with the pietistic evangelicalism of that period. The result was a tendency to highlight individual moral issues, such as drinking and gambling, rather than the complexities of poverty, urban deprivation, unemployment, homelessness and imperialism. Of course, it would have been foolish to neglect matters of individual conduct which also concerned people's well-being and happiness. The self-educated, self-

controlled, self-possessed men and women who were moulded by Methodism could produce social betterment both for themselves and for others through the early trade unions, Friendly Societies, Sunday Schools and Liberalism, especially in local government. But this life-style could also produce a self-righteousness with little sympathy for the 'undeserving poor'.

- 4.2.12 The flexibility which enabled Methodism to become a powerful evangelical tool tended to become stereotyped. Some apparent cooling down may be inevitable when a movement begins to be more settled, developing its own patterns and traditions. For example, the ordained ministry of Methodism evolved from an 'extraordinary mission' of full-time, lay itinerant evangelists. The itinerant system, designed for evangelism, and to enable men of rather limited abilities not to overreach themselves and 'burn out', helped to weave a close-knit connexion, giving British Methodism a powerful sense of 'family'. But too much power in the hands of the rather immature itinerants was one cause of the splits which led to the formation of the United Methodist Free Churches.
- 4.2.13 In many ways, the heart of the matter was the class meeting. Here, too, the powerful, intimate relationships between recent converts subsided, and the meetings themselves became formalized. Newer members did not always find them helpful, and the early spiritual power and effectiveness diminished. In the place of the class meeting the institutional Church developed, although the class system was revived in a modern form in the University and College Methodist Societies ('Methsocs') before and after the Second World War.
- 4.2.14 Great discernment is needed in order to distinguish between those features of Methodist history and tradition which should be cherished and handed on to the wider Church, and those which need to be abandoned, or adapted, because they no longer contribute creatively to contemporary Christian life. In such a task, it is helpful to look nearer the core, and not just at the trappings of 'tradition'. The commitments and styles that flow from Methodism's beginnings as a society offer insights into ways of being the Church which challenge us for the future. We can offer these insights as part of Methodism's distinctive contribution to the wider Church, whilst, at the same time, acknowledging our own incompleteness and the danger of being hide-bound by our heritage. Fellowship was the spiritual cement of early Methodism, bonding and building both the local societies and relations within the connexion. The quest for holiness was not solitary but drew people together closely in a discipleship which embraced devotion, discipline and social action. A pragmatism and a flexibility which developed structures to facilitate mission characterized church growth. The significance of these themes for Methodism today, in an ecumenical context, will be explored in the sections which follow.

### **4.3 Worship and the Spiritual Life in Methodism**

- 4.3.1 If Methodist ecclesiology is to be fully understood, it is important to explore the distinctive features of its spiritual life and worship. These, together with its history, the understanding of church membership and of ministry which derive from that history, and its distinctive structures<sup>1</sup>, are especially revealing of what Methodism is about.
- 4.3.2 From the earliest days, Methodists have sung their faith. This celebratory, even lyrical, character of Methodist worship is rooted in the experience of the unmerited, unstinting grace of God. Worship 'begins with God's offering of himself to us'. It is 'first the celebration of God's love to us, not the presentation of our offering to him'<sup>2</sup>. Worship is then, and only then, about the offering and transformation of ourselves. Thus worship has a twofold intention: first, adoration and praise, and, second, our transformation by the grace and power of God<sup>3</sup>. Worship, then, is prior to mission, yet mission is the natural, even inevitable consequence of worship.
- 4.3.3 This understanding of worship is, of course, not unique to Methodism. But Methodist origins and history have given its worship a distinctive character. This stems partly from the fact that the early Methodist societies existed within and alongside the Church of England, their own freer forms of worship and more intimate fellowship supplementing the liturgy of the local parish church. In the long run this gave Methodist worship a 'both-and' quality: formal and informal elements were combined, both fellowship and evangelism were emphasized, and services were led by laypeople, often more frequently than by ministers. Similarly, Methodists value the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (as it has traditionally been called in Methodism). Through this Sacrament Methodists experience the real presence of Christ. John Wesley declared it to be not only a confirming but a converting ordinance. At the same time Methodists also set great store by preaching, which can challenge, confirm and convert. Worship at its best has reflected Methodism's understanding of the Church as a gathering of believers, or would-be believers, called to holiness in response both to the apostolic tradition and their own fresh, developing Christian experience.
- 4.3.4 The word 'experience' is important in the Methodist tradition (1.2.9). Two words or themes, prominent in the hymns of Wesley, illustrate this emphasis. The first is the sense of wonder at the undeserved grace of God, as in the opening line of the Wesleys' conversion hymn of 1738, 'Where shall my wondering soul begin...?', a note sounded in other well-known hymns such as 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'. Second, the frequency of the word 'prove' (normally used, in its common eighteenth century sense, to mean 'test') is noteworthy. The believer proves (tests) in her or his own experience the truth of the Gospel, the dependability of God's promises, and so on. This theme is especially prominent in hymns about holiness: for example,

O that I now from sin released,  
Thy word may to the utmost prove . . .

4.3.5 Other distinctive characteristics of Methodist life and teaching also derive from Methodist origins. The setting up of small Christian cells, or societies, within the larger Church<sup>4</sup> was marked by an emphasis on fellowship, discipline, and a rootedness of Christian living in daily life. These tightly-knit ‘class meetings’, as they were called, so typical of eighteenth and much nineteenth century Methodism, are now rare. (Their decline began in the last century; a Wesleyan Conference report of 1889 made a significant admission in declaring that ministers were not to insist that failures to attend one’s class meeting warranted loss of membership.) Many factors, spiritual, theological and sociological, have contributed to their widespread, though by no means complete, demise. There can be little doubt that the Church is the poorer for it.

4.3.6 Charles Wesley’s hymns remain the best guide to the Methodist understanding of the Christian life. First, it is a shared experience, a vital part of which is the mutual support of the small group:

Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other’s cross to bear,  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother’s care.

Second, Christian experience and daily life belong inextricably together. Life ‘in the Spirit’ has to be lived out at work, in the home, and whatever circumstances Christian disciples find themselves in.

This finds expression in the hymn,

Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,  
My daily labour to pursue,  
Thee, only thee, resolved to know,  
In all I think, or speak, or do.

Third, although less demonstrable from hymns, the Methodist emphasis on discipline should not be overlooked. In reading and hearing the Word of God, in attendance at the sacraments of the church, in private and corporate prayer, Methodists share disciplines practised by most other Christians. But in their structured class-meetings Methodist discipline was distinctive.

4.3.7 Such an emphasis on close fellowship can become less than Christian. The Church is a mission<sup>5</sup>, as well as a fellowship, and many Methodist groups and churches must plead guilty over the years to becoming ‘closed shops’. Methodism’s understanding of its particular mission, however, has always been closely connected with its concern for holiness. As the *Deed of Union* puts it, the Methodist Church has cherished the belief that ‘in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the land...’

4.3.8 Wesley's own understanding of holiness was formed by earlier Christian writers and saints, as well as by his close observation of the early Methodists. It was, therefore, rooted in catholic tradition and contemporary experience. But his teaching on holiness was criticized and perhaps misunderstood both in his lifetime and subsequently. Wesley emphasized that holiness was not an 'absolute perfection', which permitted no further growth in grace or which made a person immune to error. The holiness which he believed was attainable in this life was far deeper than the absence of 'wilful transgressions of a known law' (his definition of actual sin). Rather, perfection meant perfect love, including freedom not just from evil actions, but evil thoughts and 'tempers'. Wesley has been criticized for ambiguity: in fact, he taught holiness both as the ultimate goal of Christian living, and also as an experience possible now. (The frequency of the word 'now' in Charles Wesley's hymns of Christian experience is very striking, as in the line 'O that I now from sin released...'). The two strands of Wesley's teaching gave rise to two later traditions in Methodism, the one emphasizing growth in holiness, the other instant holiness. Wesley also taught that people could know that they had been perfected. This, too, has been criticized, and not without justification, although Wesley was careful to stress that people could fall away from the state of holiness.

4.3.9 The emphasis on holiness is not unique to Methodism. The Catholic, Orthodox and Pentecostal traditions, for example, share it. It is also present in the Black-led Churches. But the Wesleyan emphasis on holiness as perfect love gave Methodist spirituality its own distinctive character, and, at the same time, a proper ecclesiological context. First, holiness was never understood as an individualistic affair: in Wesley's own words, 'the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness'. The societal and connexional character of early Methodism helped to prevent the idea that any Christian could be 'an island entire unto itself', an emphasis to be re-affirmed in a society where there is a strong tendency to regard religion as a private, purely 'spiritual' affair<sup>6</sup>. And since love is the real test of holiness, such holiness finds its natural milieu in, and not apart from, Christian fellowship. Second, (and here the influence of Methodist origins can be seen) holiness is an experience given to, rather than achieved by ordinary Christians, not a select few set apart from the rough and tumble of daily life.

4.3.10 Two quotations from John Wesley may serve to conclude, and to summarize, this brief discussion of Methodist teaching on holiness. The first comes from his *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity* (1753). Writing of the Christian, Wesley writes:

Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbour: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship,

or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works’.

In his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley writes in similar vein:

It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this: the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for any thing but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, have you received this or that blessing? If you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart; that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of Corinthians. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried into Abraham’s bosom.

There is nothing here with which members of any Christian tradition would wish to disagree. But Wesley’s words in many ways express the heart of Methodist ecclesiology.

**Notes:**

- (1) The Methodist understanding of Church membership and of ministry within the Church are discussed in sections 4.4 and 4.5 respectively. Sections 4.6 and 4.7 deal with Methodist structures.
- (2) Worship Commission Report to Conference, 1988, p.8.
- (3) Worship Commission Report, pp.22-3.
- (4) See section 4.2.1.
- (5) See sections 2.1 and 2.3.6.
- (6) See section 1.1.4. On this, see also 4.4.

**4.4 The Relationship of the Individual to the Church Community in Methodism**

- 4.4.1 Baptism and confirmation are discussed at this point in the Statement, not because the Methodist Church differs radically from other Churches on these matters, but because there are particular questions for Methodism stemming from its origins as a connexion of societies. It will be seen, in fact, that the Methodist Church shares many convictions common to other Churches<sup>1</sup>.
- 4.4.2 The New Testament conveys a powerful sense that the first century Christians belonged together and gladly recognized as much. Their belonging stemmed not just from a voluntary agreement, nor merely the

need for mutual support, but from the mutual obligation arising out of the nature of the community to which they belonged. Christian believing and living are essentially societary in nature. This is true both for individuals and local church communities.

- 4.4.3 It follows that the individual's response to God of belief in Christ for salvation means being incorporated into Christ and his people. Baptism, which, like the Lord's Supper, the Methodist Church recognizes as 'of divine appointment and perpetual obligation' (*Deed of Union*), is the sign of this. In a mission situation such as the earliest period of the Church, believers' baptism will be normative, but the practice of baptizing the children of believers probably began in New Testament times precisely because belonging to the Christian community was so fundamental. So infant baptism is no less incorporation into the Body of Christ. By it the Christian community recognizes the primacy of God's grace, seen in the community, and continued through the Christian's development in childhood, the time of her or his own active response in Christian commitment, and the remainder of the Christian pilgrimage. This primacy of grace is true whether or not a person chooses actively to take up her or his place in the body of believers; God's offer of grace is not conditional on human response. The initiative is from God, and the Church's rites of Christian initiation are both its embodiment and the Church's response.
- 4.4.4 In infant baptism, the response of faith is expressed by the church community, which looks forward to and prays for that response in the infant. This practice recognizes that all that baptism signifies need not be present in the ritual moment. It is, after all, a rite of initiation. In infant baptism the norm will be the baptism of the children of Christian parents. But in a post-Christian age in which many families' hold on the Christian faith and experience of Christian worship come through the occasional offices of baptism, marriage and the funeral service, the pastoral practice of this understanding of infant baptism is not easy.
- 4.4.5 But individual Christian decision remains important. Confirmation is a milestone in a Christian's pilgrimage, an act of public worship in which we declare our repentance and commitment to Christ, profess the faith into which we were baptized, are received with a prayer of invocation for the gift of the Holy Spirit, welcomed as committed Church members, and share with the whole church present in an act of dedication. It was only in the last years of the nineteenth century that this was formalized within Methodism in an act of worship. Hitherto, all the varied strands of Methodism operated a formal procedure whereby people became members in their absence by the decision of the Leaders' Meeting, (in some respects the precursor of the Church Council). The emphasis now falls, as in other traditions, on an act of worship as the occasion of the reception of a committed member of the Methodist Church. But an important trait of Methodism's societary past is retained in the insistence that those to be received as members are those 'approved by the Church Council' (*Deed of*

*Union*). Another societal tradition continues in the entering of new members' names in a class book. This places them under the care of a pastoral visitor or class leader, who is usually a layperson.

- 4.4.6 It would thus appear that the Methodist Church makes no practical distinction between confirmation, seen as a milestone of personal faith, and becoming a committed Church member, which emphasizes the corporate nature of what is done. This is not entirely so. The use of the word 'membership' in this context derives from Methodism's origins, and means, in effect, 'committed' membership, (there is no intention to deny the reality of membership conferred by infant baptism). This is why, in the Methodist tradition, people have been removed from membership, (and may subsequently be re-admitted to membership), without this being understood to mean that somehow their baptism or confirmation was being repudiated, and would at some future date have to be repeated<sup>2</sup>.
- 4.4.7 Confirmation is often the time when a new member, especially if younger in years, becomes a communicant. But practice varies a great deal, as in other traditions, and in Methodism particularly so. Three groups of people, though not confirmed members of the Methodist Church, are especially welcome at the Lord's Table. First, the 1987 Conference encouraged the practice of children receiving communion, even before confirmation, subject to certain conditions (notably, instruction and the support of a worshipping community). Second, 'communicant members of other Churches whose discipline so permits'<sup>3</sup> are welcomed. Third, because the Lord's Supper is regarded both as a confirming and a converting ordinance, the Methodist Church welcomes others to communion who wish thus to express their real or dawning faith in Christ, even though they are not members; if they do so regularly, it will be the minister's responsibility to invite them to consider becoming members. The welcome at the Lord's Table and 'reception into membership' together indicate how the individual's commitment to Christ is surrounded by, and relates to, that of the whole Church – first the local 'society', but essentially linked through Circuit, District and Conference into a web of inter-dependence in which gifts, decisions and responsibilities are shared. Indeed, membership is understood to be of the whole Church, and is transferable on removal.
- 4.4.8 In practice, a regular worshipper at a Methodist church may not be a confirmed member of the local church. This has often happened in the past as well, but in the Methodist understanding this is something of an anomaly. An individual's commitment to Christ can truly be realized only in full participation in the worship, witness and service of the Christian community, and this is normally best achieved through the local church and the web of its relationships with others. Thus it is normally only members who are eligible to hold office in the local church. (If this seems an unnecessary requirement of someone, now worshipping in a Methodist congregation, who is a confirmed member of another Christian church, it should be emphasized that a commitment to the Methodist Church need not

involve repudiating one's standing within, or even commitment to, another Christian tradition.) The logic of this understanding of membership can be seen in the way in which a member of one local church may hold office in another, if there are practical reasons for it. This illustrates the Methodist conviction that belonging to Christ in his Church is much more than a local matter.

- 4.4.9 The names of those who are not members, but nevertheless attend, should be recorded on the community roll in the hope that the link may develop, when appropriate, into membership. Thus a regular attender at Methodist worship who is not yet a member may be invited to consider confirmation, or, if unbaptized, baptism. In this way the period of sharing in the life of the Church as an 'adherent' is understood to be one in which a person is gradually finding her or his way into full membership of the Church. After a period of training in Christian faith and living (historically known as the catechumenate), such a person is able, after the approval of the Church Council, to take the step of confirmation, and so be able to play a full part in the life, work, witness and decision-making of the Church at all levels.
- 4.4.10 Sometimes members do not take up fully the privileges and responsibilities of membership. Some are able to do so only as far as their health or circumstances allow, (although they may still minister in various ways, not least by their prayers). In such cases the strong sense of mutual belonging should mean that the local church community maintains contact and offers pastoral care. Others may begin to attend a church of another tradition, and their membership may be transferred to their new denomination. Others will simply lapse. They may not have ceased to believe, but for some reason they have stopped attending their local Methodist church. There may be good reason for this, but even if that appears not to be so, local pastoral care needs to be properly informed, understanding and sympathetic. After visiting by their class leader and minister, 'the name of any such person who by such prolonged absence severs himself or herself from Christian fellowship shall be removed from the class book by the Pastoral Committee and he or she shall thereupon cease to be a member of the Methodist Church' (Clause 10, *Deed of Union*). In this way the Church recognizes that these members no longer stand where they once did. The community roll, however, provides a way for the local church to remain in contact: 'the name of a person who has ceased to be a member . . . shall be retained on the community roll unless he or she requests that this shall not be so.' (S.O. 054). The removal of their names from the list of church members is a way of stating that membership, by definition, involves commitment (however faltering or imperfect); what it cannot do is to determine whether such people continue to be part of the body of Christ, or to question the validity of their baptism, which, by its very nature, cannot be repeated. In such a way Methodist discipline indicates that Church membership calls for our continuing obedience, and that the Church must take proper care of its people, and keep count of its resources if it is to worship, witness and work effectively.

- 4.4.11 This procedure has caused much heart-searching and heartache. The Pastoral Committee's motive for removing someone's name from the membership roll may not in practice always be purely pastoral, as it should be. They may be oppressed by financial considerations, aware that their local church's contribution to Circuit finances may be related to its quoted membership total (although churches are increasingly finding better and fairer ways of assessing financial contributions than solely by reference to membership figures). But despite doubts and occasional misuse of the practice of removing the names of lapsed members from the membership roll, this discipline is an important testimony to the belief that a non-practising Christian is a contradiction in terms.
- 4.4.12 In recent years, the ecumenical movement, a more mobile population, and a readiness to worship in the local church, even when that church is not of one's own denomination, have all helped to make Christians more familiar with the practice of traditions other than their own. Christians who come to Methodism from other churches often find the close care of its members, (as described in 4.4.8-9), both attractive and questionable. It is attractive because it can be pastorally very effective when, for example, people move home or students leave home for college. But it is more questionable when it leads Methodists to exaggerate the importance of membership figures, especially in estimating a church's strength. The practice of recording members as having 'ceased to meet' can also be easily misunderstood, particularly by those who do not fully understand Methodism's societal origin and background, or who find it hard to appreciate the value of it for our life together in the Church today.
- 4.4.13 Amongst Methodists at large an important debate continues. Some hold that the evolution from a society to a denomination was and is both desirable and inevitable, since now a 'societal' approach to Christianity dangerously over-simplifies what being a Christian is, especially in areas of social responsibility. Others believe that the New Testament churches were 'societies', and that an emphasis on discipline and accountability is a healthy corrective to nominal Christianity. What can hardly be denied is that the Methodist movement of the eighteenth century enabled the Methodist Church to discover that a denomination must have a web of primary groups – a society of friends – at its heart, and that to allow that to dissipate would be a dangerous mistake, and an immeasurable loss to the Church as a whole.

**Notes:**

- (1) See also 2.4.8.
- (2) On this subject see 4.4.9-10.
- (3) *The Methodist Service Book*, p. B1.

## **4.5 The Priesthood of All Believers and Ministry**

- 4.5.1 The *Deed of Union* declares that ‘the Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class...’. In this section we explore both the theological and historical background to this corporate priesthood of the whole people of God, and its practical implications for the life of the Methodist Church today.
- 4.5.2 First, it is necessary to recall some of the points made earlier in this Statement about the teaching of the New Testament on ministry<sup>1</sup>. (The early Christian communities had no separated and distinctive priesthood. Christ alone was High Priest, the mediator between God and humankind (Hebrews 9.1-2). The whole Church was ‘priestly’, continuing the ministry of Israel and her Messiah (1 Peter 2.9), but no one was ever called a priest in the sense of offering a cultic sacrifice. The old cultic language was transferred to the community and to daily life: a local church could be called ‘the temple of God’ (1 Corinthians 3.16), and the self-offering of Christians to God was their ‘sacrifice’ (Romans 12.1-2). This kind of ‘priesthood’, therefore, was not about who should preside at the Lord’s Supper, (about which the New Testament is silent), but focussed instead on the living of sacrificial lives.
- 4.5.3 It will be seen that the New Testament directs us to the priesthood of the body of believers, rather than the priesthood of every believer. This latter emphasis is not necessarily wrong, but it is much more individual-centred than the language of Scripture, which stresses the inter-dependence of believers. Nevertheless, in the churches to which Paul wrote, each person had a Spirit-endowed gift<sup>2</sup>. This did not mean that everyone could do everyone else’s task, but that everyone had both a gift and a task. Thus ministry was charismatic and functional.
- 4.5.4 In the light of this strong Scriptural testimony, Methodism continues strongly to affirm the ministry of the whole people of God. (The Greek word *laos*, from which ‘lay’ and ‘laity’ are derived, is used in the New Testament to refer to the whole Church as God’s people (Titus 2.14; 1 Peter 2.9-10). It hardly ever denotes ‘laypeople’ as distinct from ‘leaders’ or ‘presbyters’<sup>3</sup>. ‘The ministry of the people of God in the world is both the primary and the normative ministry of the Church’, for the Church is as much itself ‘in the world’ as it is ‘in church’<sup>4</sup>. This ministry in the wider world, outside explicitly ecclesiastical contexts, and away from church premises, is expressed in Christ-like living, in social action and in witness to the Christian Gospel. But the ministry of all Christians within the corporate life of the Church is also important. By their various gifts the members of Christ’s Body contribute to the health and growth of the Church. Indeed, the ministry of laypeople has been essential to the very functioning of Methodism from its earliest days. Far more Methodist services of worship are led by local preachers than by ordained ministers. The partnership of ordained and lay ministers remains vital to the work and

well-being of the Church<sup>5</sup>, even though this truth has often been lost sight of in the history of the Church.

- 4.5.5 After the time of St. Paul, leadership of churches by ‘overseers’ (*episcopoi*) or ‘elders’ (*presbyteroi*) seems to have become more common (2.3.14). Before long, as a matter of order, the presbyters began to preside at the Eucharist, as partners of the ‘overseer’ (or ‘bishop’) who probably emerged from their ranks. Final proof is difficult to sustain, but evidence from the late first century and early second century writings (Clement, Ignatius, the Didache, Justin Martyr) suggests such a development. The description of a presbyter as a ‘priest’ (*hierous*, a quite different word) came later, and is certainly found in the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian. Gradually the division into ‘lay people’ and ‘clergy’ became wider.
- 4.5.6 For the Reformers, all are priestly by baptism, all have the same standing before God, but not all have the same office. Office is given, first, by God’s call and then by the commission of the whole community. The Protestant reformers rejected the priestly style of presbyteral ministry. The presbyter, instead, is the representative minister of the Word. Even on the ‘left wing’ of the Reformation a pastor had normally to be called and commissioned before leading a service of Holy Communion. Wesley clearly espoused the general Reformed view in an Anglican form, which continued, with modifications, into the Wesleyan tradition of Methodism. The ‘itinerant preachers’ of early Methodism were an evangelical order with a unique mission to spread ‘Scriptural holiness’. Mission was seen as prior to church order, although Wesley saw the need for ordination before anyone might preside at Holy Communion – hence his ordinations for America, Scotland and England. After Wesley’s death the ‘itinerant preachers’ began to baptize, preside at communion, conduct burials etc., and evolved clearly and quickly into regular ministry. The call of a Wesleyan minister was tested at various levels of the Church before training, a period of ‘probationary’ ministry and, finally, ‘reception into full connexion’ and ordination at Conference. After 1836 laying-on of hands at ordination became the norm, in the Wesleyan, though not in most of the non-Wesleyan Methodist Churches.
- 4.5.7 Ordination at Conference distinguished the ordination of Methodist ministers from that of dissenting ministers<sup>6</sup>. This, and the distinct, yet complementary ‘reception into full connexion’ were features retained from Methodism’s origins as a ‘connexion’ of societies, and indicate that a minister is ordained to the whole Church, and not to a ‘title’ or ‘pastoral call’.
- 4.5.8 In other Methodist groups the distinction between the ‘itinerant preacher’ (who was paid and full-time) and the ‘local preacher’ was less clear-cut than in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. When needed, local preachers could preside at Holy Communion under the direction of the Superintendent Minister. Today when lay persons or deacons preside at the Lord’s Table, through pastoral deprivation or missionary emergency,

they do so with the full authority of the Conference, though they may only preside in the Circuits where they serve. This authorization is important, indicating that the Eucharist is not a private, or even simply a local matter, but a celebration of the whole Church. So it is appropriate that it should be celebrated under the authority of those who are representative of the whole Church. This authorization is thus an expression of connexionalism, and, also, as a response to a pressing local need, an expression of the Methodist view that Gospel imperatives determine church order.

4.5.9 The question of who may preside at Holy Communion is, of course, ecumenically important. Here the response of the Methodist Church in Britain to the ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*<sup>7</sup> is relevant:

. . . we acknowledge the need of the Church for persons who are called and set apart for leadership in pastoral care, preaching and intercessory prayer, and for presidency at the sacraments. Given this, the debate about the use of the word 'priest' is really a very subtle one. It turns upon the question whether the ordained minister contributes to the eucharist in his/her own person some essential element other than the right to preside at it. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister, then the word 'priest' is not appropriate. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister and specifically activated by the minister's presence, the word 'priest' is appropriate.

4.5.10 The earlier part of that quotation echoes the *Deed of Union*. The statement quoted earlier (4.5.1) continues: '. . . but in the exercise of the Church's corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required, and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized'. In the 1974 Report on *Ordination*, this understanding of the ordained ministry was set firmly within the call of the whole people of God to be the Body of Christ in the world:

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

4.5.11 Ordination thus does not confer any special priestly powers on the minister, who is neither more nor less a priest (as defined in 4.5.1.) than any other Christian. But ordination implies the total commitment of a life-long vocation, and is therefore rightly thought of as unrepeatable. The authority of a minister belongs to the office, which consists in enabling the Church's

whole ministry in such a way that Christ is effectively present in preaching, in the sacraments, in the Church's discipline and pastoral care.

- 4.5.12 It will be seen that the ordination of ministers to the whole Church, their appointment to Circuits rather than to a specific pastorate, and, thirdly, their stationing by Conference – all reflect the continuing connexional character of Methodism. In these respects the Methodist ministry resembles a 'religious order'; the pastoral sessions of Conference and District synods foster the same ethos. Finally, Methodism's connexionalism and corporate understanding of ministry and of *episcopate* can be seen in the way in which ministers are 'made':

Making a man or woman a minister is performed by the Methodist Conference, by standing vote in the reception into full connexion, and through its appointed representatives in the ordination service: it is not performed by individuals, or a group of individuals, acting in their own capacity'<sup>8</sup>

- 4.5.13 Patterns of ministry in the Methodist Church, as in other Churches, continue to change, and rightly so. The 'presbyteral' ministry now includes those who are itinerant and those who are in local appointments. Following the decisions of the 1998 Conference, full members of the Methodist Diaconal Order are in full connexion as deacons. This growing variety is to be welcomed as healthy and Scriptural. But it will be both these things only if it enables and expresses, rather than detracts from, the ministry and priesthood of the whole Church. It will be important, too, to retain the connexional character of Methodist ministries, not for narrow, denominational reasons, but because connexionalism, by whatever name, is an authentic expression of the interdependence which is such a vital feature of the life of the whole people of God.
- 4.5.14 Finally, but of fundamental importance, the Methodist Church unhesitatingly affirms its conviction that both the presbyteral and diaconal ministries are open to men and women. Some of Wesley's preachers were women who were semi-itinerant, although he did not consider them (or the men for that matter), to be presbyters. In Primitive Methodism and among the Bible Christians women were admitted as itinerants. But although the principle of the admission of women to the presbyterate was accepted in 1939, their acceptance was unfortunately postponed in 1948, and not until 1974 were women ordained as presbyters. Similarly in 1990, when the Methodist Diaconal Order celebrated a hundred years of service, Conference received both men and women into full membership of the Order for the first time. The ordination service was also held at Conference for the first time; previously, the President presided at an ordination service at Convocation. Methodism, therefore, fully endorses the equality of women and men in ministry, whilst recognizing that the distinctive contribution of women's ministry to the wholeness of the Church has yet to be fully explored and realized.

**Notes:**

- (1) See 2.3.13-15.
- (2) See 2.3.12.
- (3) Acts 6.12 is a rare exception.
- (4) *The Ministry of the People of God in the World* (Methodist Conference Agenda, pp.539,540, 1990).
- (5) 4.7.3.
- (6) That is, ministers of nonconformist churches, such as Baptist and Congregationalist ministers. Methodism has often tended to see itself as a 'half-way house' between the Established Church and these 'dissenting' traditions.
- (7) See 3.1.10.
- (8) *Ministry, Baptism and Membership in the Methodist Church* 1962, p.15.

**4.6 The Connexional Principle**

- 4.6.1 The connexional principle, as we have seen, has been intrinsic to Methodism since its origins. Although this principle has not always come to expression in a complete or balanced way in Methodist structures and practice, it enshrines a vital truth about the nature of the Church. It witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God himself. Whether the word 'connexion' is retained or not, the principle is fundamental.
- 4.6.2 How is this 'connexional principle' effected? First, at all levels of the Church, the structures of fellowship, consultation, government and oversight express the interdependence of all churches, and help to point up, at all levels, necessary priorities in mission and service. Second, alongside this, as the natural corollary of connexionalism, local churches, Circuits and Districts exercise the greatest possible degree of autonomy. This is necessary if they are to express their own cultural identity and to respond to local calls of mission and service in an appropriate way. But their dependence on the larger whole is also necessary for their own continuing vitality and well-being. Such local autonomy may also need to be limited from time to time in the light of the needs of the whole Church.
- 4.6.3 If we ask how this complementarity of connexionalism and local autonomy are to be justified theologically, the answer lies in the way in which the New Testament speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ, (Ephesians 4.12 referring to the whole Church, 1 Corinthians 12.12-27 to the local church). Every organ or limb has its own distinctive function, but belongs to a living whole. Similarly, neither individual Christians nor individual churches function effectively in isolation, but are dependent on a larger whole. And what is true of individual Christians and churches is true also of regional and national Churches. The Church of Christ is an interdependent whole, because ultimately there is 'one Lord, one faith, one

baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Ephesians 4.5-6).

- 4.6.4 The connexional principle, as we have already observed, was integral to Methodism from its beginning. Wesley's preachers were itinerant; that is, they were available to be sent wherever they were most needed. The stationing of presbyteral ministers today by Conference is an acknowledgement that the ministry as a whole is at the disposal of the entire connexion, and not just a part of it. More generally, the Methodist sense of 'belonging', at its best, derives from a consciousness that all Christians are related at all levels of the Church to each other. Thus the unbroken link of Christians serving overseas with those at home was expressed in lines such as 'Inseparably joined in heart, the friends of Jesus are'. Many others of Wesley's hymns testify to this deep sense of mutual interdependence.
- 4.6.5 The essence of connexionalism is implied in the practice of the apostolic Church. From the earliest days the apostles travelled, and with other Christians conferred regularly on matters of common concern in mission. Both the needs and the virtues of particular churches were commended to others, and examples held up for imitation. Sectarianism was condemned because it destroyed *koinonia*, and individual churches were reminded of the foundation in Christ of their local *koinonia* within the universal: 'All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's' (1 Corinthians 3.23). Such teaching points to the privilege and duty of each local church to adhere to, to draw from and to contribute to the riches of life in Christ.
- 4.6.6 The Methodist understanding of authority and Church government derive from the character of Methodism as a 'connexional' Church. The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. Insofar as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. In terms of the contemporary missionary strategy of the Church, authority is vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities. Within the structures of decision-making the Church gives a special place to those who are its ordained representative persons; it also listens, where relevant, with especial attentiveness both to ordained persons and to laypersons who serve it with special expertise, but it is ultimately the whole people of God, who, through the relevant decision-making bodies, express their affirmation, or otherwise, of the strategies placed before them.
- 4.6.7 In terms both of Methodist tradition and the law of the land, supreme authority is vested within the Conference, which meets annually. The Conference is the final arbiter on matters of policy and doctrine. The *Deed of Union* states that:

the Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

A special responsibility for doctrine lies with the Faith and Order Committee, appointed by and responsible to the Conference. The authority of the Conference in secular law rests upon the provisions of the Methodist Church Union Act of 1929, later replaced by the Methodist Church Act of 1976, which gave Conference the right to alter, after due consultation, the doctrinal clause of the *Deed of Union*<sup>1</sup>.

- 4.6.8 Methodism continues to adhere to the connexional principle as a vital structural expression of the interdependence of all its churches. At a time of ecumenical dialogue it commends this principle to other churches, at the same time acknowledging that connexionalism is compatible with the patterns of ministry treasured by other traditions. For example, the Methodist Church has already, in many joint ventures with the United Reformed Church, entered into the tradition of lay eldership, recognizing its affinity with the Methodist tradition of lay class leadership.
- 4.6.9 Connexionalism has other ecumenical implications. A connexional understanding of the Church recognizes the need for ministries of unity and oversight (*episcopate*) within the universal fellowship of believers. In the Anglican-Methodist Conversations, and in the subsequent Covenanting Proposals, the British Methodist Church expressed a readiness to accept *episcopate* in the form of bishops. The Conference of 1982 agreed that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate Methodist doctrinal standards, provided that bishops, like everyone else, were subject to Conference. If in practice episcopacy serves to reinforce the unity and *koinonia* of the whole Church, it is to be welcomed<sup>2</sup>. Thus episcopacy can be a valuable witness, (though not the only witness) to continuity in and faithfulness to the apostolic tradition.
- 4.6.10 In practice, Methodism has found that this ministry of 'oversight' may be exercised by corporate bodies as well as by individuals. In British Methodism the annual Conference has ultimate oversight; in Districts and Circuits Chairmen and Superintendents exercise that ministry. In American Methodism bishops and the local and general Conferences complement each other in this work.
- 4.6.11 A similar point may be made, in the light of the connexional principle, about a universal primacy such as the papacy. In the national and international dialogues of recent decades between Methodists and Roman Catholics, Methodists have affirmed that, if it could be shown that such a ministry was essential to the unity of the Church, then, by that token it must be part of God's will for the Church. In the Methodist view, such a ministry would need to be exercised in partnership and consultation with the whole people of God. At present, Roman Catholics and Methodists are not entirely agreed on what is 'essential' for the whole Church. Is the

papacy essential, or desirable for the reasons already given? Methodists could not accept all aspects of papal ministry as it is currently exercised, but would be more open to a universal primacy understood as a ministry of service and unity rather than primarily as a seat of authority. In effect, Methodists rule out no development compatible with our ethos which strengthens the unity and effectiveness in mission of the Church.

**Notes:**

- (1) On the subject of authority see also 1.2.9 and 2.4.5-6.
- (2) Two comments in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* should be noted in this context: whilst the episcopal succession may be appreciated as 'a sign, though not a guarantee of the continuity and unity of the Church', 'It is increasingly recognized that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been preserved in churches which have not retained the form of historic episcopate'. From this it follows that such churches, including of course, the Methodist Church, 'cannot accept any suggestion that the ministry exercised in their own tradition should be invalid until the moment that it enters into an existing line of episcopal succession' (BEM M37-8).

For a fuller understanding of recent Methodist thinking about episcopacy the following Conference reports should be consulted: *Methodism and Episcopacy* (1978), *Episcopacy in the Methodist Church* (1981), *Episcopacy and Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (1982) and *Episcopacy* (1998).

## **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.
- 4.7.2 In the last half century, the context in which our structures have been operated has changed enormously<sup>1</sup>. In particular, the numerical decline of the British Methodist Church has meant that some Circuits, and perhaps some Districts, no longer constitute meaningful or workable units, even though many Circuits have been amalgamated and Districts have been reorganized. Closer ecumenical ties have meant that, in many places, Methodist churches have closer links with churches of other Christian traditions than with other Methodist churches. In view of these considerations, what can be said about our structures?
- 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<sup>2</sup>: 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<sup>3</sup>.

- 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’<sup>4</sup>. 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.

- 4.7.6 At both district and connexional level the relatedness of the whole Church requires the deployment of resources, including ministers, in areas of greatest need. Methodist land and buildings, therefore, are held on the 'Model Trusts' for which the custodian trustees are a connexional body, with local Church Councils, Circuit Meetings and District Trustees being the managing trustees. On the same principle, the Conference assesses each District for contributions, and allocates the money to assist in the work of the wider Church. (The Districts assess Circuits for these contributions, and the local churches provide the financial resources for the Circuits). Finally, the connexional character of the church can be seen in the various ways in which the Conference, or the President of the Conference, seeks to lead, or to express the mind of the whole Church.
- 4.7.7 The financial implications of this understanding of the Church are far-reaching, as the New Testament itself makes clear. Here it must be acknowledged that human self-centredness often weakens the interdependence of the Church. Many people find their interest and loyalty are concentrated on their local church; the sense of belonging to a Circuit is not strong – to say nothing of belonging to a District or a Connexion. The need for Connexional funds and officers may be questioned, or the importance of some areas of the Church's life compared unfavourably with others. Inadequate consultation or communication may be a further problem, hindering understanding between local churches and the Connexion. Such tensions inevitably make it more difficult to allocate resources in the best way for the mission and life of the Church. But to acknowledge the imperfections of the Church must lead, not to cynicism or despair, but to continuing repentance.
- 4.7.8 The nature of the Church as an international community properly finds expression in international structures. Until two or three decades ago, the connexion of the British Methodist Church also included most of the overseas Methodist Churches founded by missionaries sent out from Britain. Most of these are now autonomous Churches in independent countries, but British Methodism still maintains strong links with them through prayer, the sharing of information, the sending and receiving of personnel and cross-representation at Conference level. Methodist Churches throughout the world are represented on the World Methodist Council, which has no authority over member bodies, but provides opportunities for fellowship and consultation. Regional or continental structures may also be needed to bridge the gap between British and World Methodism<sup>4</sup>. At this international level, the connexional principle propels Methodist Churches towards a sharing of resources which crosses both denominational and national boundaries.
- 4.7.9 From its beginnings, Methodism has been pragmatic in its approach to questions of church structure and order. Its own order and discipline emerged largely as the result of a series of *ad hoc* experiments. They were created in the 'missionary' situation of the eighteenth century, and the

legacy of this has been a tendency to subordinate church order to, and to deploy church resources in response to, the missionary needs of the Church. This is, or should be, a particular strength of a 'connexional' Church, in which there is a common recognition that all are parts of a larger whole.

- 4.7.10 But there are challenges to be faced and warnings to be heeded. Here three in particular may be mentioned. First, Methodist origins invite the question whether the Church's structures help its members to grow in holiness. If the class meeting has largely gone, what has taken its place? Second, the Methodist Church, like others, faces the danger of becoming ponderous and inflexible; structures adapted to one missionary situation become perpetuated as hindrances to missionary activity in another. Third, in replacing those structures, there is the danger of being guided exclusively by the pastoral needs of settled congregations turned in on themselves.
- 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 to the Church to be more effectively structured for mission, will, it is hoped, be contributed by Methodism to a larger whole.

**Notes:**

- (1) See 1.2.1-6.
- (2) See 4.6.2.
- (3) See also 4.5.4.
- (4) *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Vol. 2, p.228.

**CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 This Statement has been written at a time uncongenial in many ways to the life and growth of the Churches of Western Europe. They face a time of rapid change in cultures which are profoundly individualistic, secular and materialistic. But in such a context the fundamental questions of human life remain: to what values and goals are we human beings to give our absolute allegiance? In what kind of society do human beings best flourish? How may a person find true fulfilment and happiness? Why should, and how can, justice be established on earth? Is there an ultimate

reality who/which gives final meaning and purpose to creation? As members of the Methodist Church we affirm our faith that the fundamental answer to questions such as these lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

- 5.2 At the heart of this Gospel is the revelation that God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, embraces the world, each member of the human race, and every living creature, with a love which not only creates, but re-creates and heals in the face of humankind's tragic, self-centred fragmentation. This is God's 'mission' to the world: God does not exist in isolation or detachment from creation, but with the passionate care of a father or mother engages with it, inviting humankind to find its lasting centre and home in the divine love. This love is the ultimate, inescapable centre and framework of all things. For this reason the Bible bears witness to the 'Kingdom' of God, for God, in spite of the dark abysses of human history, suffering and even death, 'reigns'. The climax to the Biblical testimony to both the mission and kingdom of God is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – God's ultimate act of solidarity with and sacrifice for the world, and God's definitive victory over evil. Out of this Gospel, the Church gladly acknowledges its vocation to celebrate the love of God in its worship, to share his life in its fellowship, and to be the agent of his generosity and compassion in a needy world.
- 5.3 The Church has always been unworthy to be the bearer of such good news. It has not always been evident that Christian faith makes people more, not less human, more, not less loving. But in spite of its tragic, continuing failure, the Church remains called to live and proclaim the Gospel in the power of the Spirit, above all by reflecting in itself the suffering and love, life and hope which were focussed supremely in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. That also means, Christians are called to express their God-given unity in a world whose several parts are closer than ever before, yet still deeply divided.
- 5.4 The Church for which this Statement is primarily written, the British Methodist Church, may cease to exist as a separate Church entity during the twenty-first century, if continuing progress towards Christian unity is made. If that happens, it is to be hoped that Methodism will be able to contribute some of the riches of its own distinctive history to any future Church. Whatever the future holds, it is vital that a vision for the Church – and for each local church – should be inspired and maintained by Scripture and tradition, by contemporary experience and need, and, not least, by the Holy Spirit firing imagination, mind and heart.
- 5.5 What kind of community, then, might a church be?
- A community which celebrates and proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in the power of the Holy Spirit.
  - A community of all ages, different races, varying backgrounds and occupations – richly diverse, but united around the Lord's Table.

- A community which praises God.
- A community nourished each week by great songs of faith, by prayers steeped in the wealth of the Christian tradition and contemporary experience, and by preaching which engages with contemporary life and with the Bible at depth and with integrity.
- A community whose warm fellowship is matched by the warmth of its welcome, offering ‘ a home from home for all’,<sup>1</sup> who will come.
- A community bearing, but not bowed down by, particular acts of service to which it has been called in its particular time and place.
- A community resilient with the hope inspired by a vision of God’s kingdom.
- A community committed to working for justice and peace.
- A community the daily lives of whose members make it easier for others to believe in the goodness of God.
- A community gentle with each others’ failures, as each sustains and is sustained by others through forgiveness, love and prayer.
- A community characterized by joy.

5.6 The challenge remains for this Church, as for other Churches, to journey on in faith, love and hope. It is called to live by faith in the God whose undeserved generosity remains the alpha and omega of the Church’s very existence. It is challenged to live in love, the mark of holiness, for God and for people made in his image. It is upheld by the hope that, because of God, nothing is inevitable, neither the decline of the Church, nor the self-destruction of the world, in the midst of which the Church continues to testify to God’s loving purposes.

5.7 Hope, in fact, is the note on which a Statement such as this should end. For nothing of the Church’s life, worship and mission can be properly understood, unless it is seen in the light of the final fulfilment of God’s purposes. Time and history are not absolutes, and the Church, traveller through time and history, has a provisionality which it all too easily forgets. In the meantime, in the providence of God, it must hold to Christ, seeking renewal, remaining with and for the world, and join its praises with the Church in heaven as it awaits the coming Kingdom.

**Note:**

- (1) A phrase taken from Roger McGough’s poem written for the opening of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral.

**RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts *Called to Love and Praise* as a Conference Statement.

(Agenda 1999, pp.157-215)