

29. Methodist Membership in the 21st Century

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Resolutions	29/1. The Conference receives the Report. 29/2. The Conference encourages Local Churches to think about how they nurture growth in holiness, how members support each other's discipleship, and how these might be re-prioritised within Local Church life. 29/3. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to consider the matters described in paragraph 5.3 of this Report and report to the 2024 Conference.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To provide a report on the understanding of membership in the Methodist Church.
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction• Membership of the Methodist Church• Main challenges and questions• A Methodist Way of Life• The nature and extent of further work

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The 2019 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to “explore issues of membership in the Methodist Church and bring a report to the 2021 Conference, which outlines the Methodist understanding of membership in the 21st century”. Amidst the various changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this work was deferred, and the Faith and Order Committee has further reflected on the nature of the work that might be expected. A thorough review of membership is likely to require robust consultation which itself requires time and resources at a time when there are many competing priorities.
- 1.2. Membership in the Methodist Church has been the subject of reports on several occasions, particularly *Methodist Membership and Christian Discipleship* (1999), *Discipleship and Church Membership* (2002) and the *Report of the Membership Working Party of the Faith and Order Committee* (2010). Similar questions about membership and belonging seem to arise from time to time, albeit in different forms. Despite the amount of previous reflection, it is clear that there is a lack of understanding about what membership in the Methodist Church means. Various misassumptions can be made, especially because the term ‘membership’ is used and understood differently in different contexts, cultures and communities. Sometimes, for example, membership of the Methodist Church might be equated with membership of a political party, or charitable organisation, but these analogies are not particularly helpful, not least because they fail to convey that

membership is primarily about faith and discipleship.

- 1.3. This report, therefore, describes the Methodist Church's current understanding of membership, addresses some of the myths and misunderstandings about its essential nature and purpose, and identifies the main challenges and questions. Suggestions are made as to the extent and nature of any further work so that the Conference can decide what is most useful and what should be prioritised at this time.

2. Membership of the Methodist Church

- 2.1. Membership of the Methodist Church is primarily about growth in grace and holiness. As the Methodist *Deed of Union* says, "All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as members of the Methodist Church".¹ The early Methodists became members of societies because they desired salvation, and "to that end were prepared to accept the discipline of the rules of the society to work out what salvation and living a Christian life might entail."² 'They belonged to a company of people who would pray together, "receive the word of exhortation" and "watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."³ This continues to be the primary purpose of membership. For example, reflection on how Methodists view and experience membership has noted the prominence given to discipleship.⁴

- 2.2. It is the "privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church, to avail themselves of the two sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper" and to cultivate fellowship "in every possible way".⁵ These privileges and duties of membership, and those set out in the Standing Orders, are "commitments by each member to Christian discipleship within the Methodist Church, and to acceptance of its discipline, and by the Church to provision of the means by which that discipleship may be fully expressed, including pastoral care and oversight. Membership is therefore a covenant relationship between the member and the Church, freely entered into by the grace of God."⁶ It offers the possibilities of a structured and supportive environment in which disciples seek to be more Christ like.⁷

- 2.3. One question that arises from time to time is that of why membership in the Methodist Church is necessary. This was articulated in a memorial⁸ to the 2019 Conference:

"... a number of very active and committed people within the Local Church choose not to join. The main reason is that they know themselves to be already members of God's church through their Baptism. The concept of membership of a particular denomination is unnecessary and indeed

¹ Clause 8 of the *Deed of Union*

² Report of *The Faith and Order Committee*, 2010, 3.1

³ CPD, Vol 1, *The Rules of the Society of the People called Methodists*, p.73

⁴ This followed consultation, documented in the report of *The Faith and Order Committee*, 2010

⁵ *Deed of Union*, Clause 9(a)

⁶ *Deed of Union*, Clause 9(b).

⁷ Note that under SO050(4) evidence of life and conduct, fidelity to the ordinances of the Church and maintenance of Christian fellowship in the means of grace are seen as the criteria for the Church Council to establish a candidate's sincere acceptance of the basis of membership.

⁸ Memorial M16, 2019

contradictory to most of these people's understanding of being a member of the whole body of Christ."

In response, the Conference emphasised that:

"It is important to distinguish the Methodist concept of membership from Baptism. Baptism is a sacrament of the Church. It marks entry into the one holy catholic and apostolic church, of which the Methodist Church is a part. Baptism marks a new relationship with the Church of Christ and is a rite of initiation, the ritual beginning of a journey of faith. All the Baptised belong to God's church and are members of the Body of Christ."⁹

- 2.4.** Whilst Baptism is entry into a community of faith, Methodist membership invites Christians to express their discipleship and relationship to the church catholic in a distinct way. Membership in the Methodist Church involves a choice and commitment to work at growing in grace and holiness in relation to a particular community of Methodist disciples. It therefore involves commitment to a specific group of people, reflecting both the corporate nature of discipleship and a personal responsibility to celebrate the faith and be accountable in the exercising of worship and service. In the early Methodist societies, members covenanted together to help each other work out their desire for salvation in their daily lives. They kept a rule of life intended to equip and empower them to live faithfully as disciples of Christ in the world. Working this out within a society enshrined the principle that the "quest for holiness was not solitary but drew people together in a discipleship which embraced devotion, discipline and social action."¹⁰ That people could be and were removed from the society, and still can be removed from membership of the Local Church, is a reminder that there is a requirement to attend to one's salvation: membership requires active commitment (however faltering and imperfect). 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.¹¹
- 2.5.** Candidates for membership in the Methodist Church are approved by the Church Council and then publicly received as members (and confirmed, if not already confirmed) at a service conducted by a presbyter in the presence of the Local Church and including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.¹² Within this act of worship the following elements are of importance: a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and expression of the desire to serve Christ in the Church and the world; an offering of prayer that the gifts and graces which Christ by the Holy Spirit has already given may be continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit; and a commitment by the members of the Local Church to "maintain the Church's life of worship and service that [those being received into membership] may grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord".¹³ Membership offers a structured way in which to nurture, encourage and care for individuals whilst making it clear that this a corporate responsibility of the whole community of faith.¹⁴ Being received into membership offers an opportunity to grow and develop, and the Local Church therefore has a responsibility to ensure that there are meaningful opportunities for nurture and

⁹ Memorial M16, 2019

¹⁰ Called to Love and Praise, 1999, 4.2.14

¹¹ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.4.6

¹² *Deed of Union*, Clause 8(b)

¹³ *Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, Order for 'Confirmation and Reception Into Membership', 14

¹⁴ *Faith and Order Committee Report*, 2010

learning.

- 2.6.** The Methodist service of Confirmation and Reception into Membership marks a significant point along the journey of faith which starts with Baptism. At Confirmation it is remembered that God continues to be at work in the lives of the baptized, who belong to Christ and the whole people of God. In Confirmation, those who have been baptized declare their faith in Christ and are strengthened by the Holy Spirit for continuing discipleship. It is a moment of personal decision and commitment. At a Methodist service of confirmation baptized Christians are also received into membership of the Methodist Church and take their places as such in a local congregation. Membership, though, involves making a personal offering to serve Christ in the Church and particularly in the fellowship of the Methodist people. It emphasises the corporate nature of what is done.
- 2.7.** Membership has a unique place in Methodism and is one of the characteristic defining features of Methodist ecclesiology and order. It is fundamental to the way in which belonging is expressed, being:
- “...at the heart of the structure of Methodism in a way that is not the case in other denominations. Whilst some independent churches have a concept of membership their very independence or congregational polity means that the membership is a clear articulation of the more local. In Methodism the class meeting is part of the local society which itself is part of a wider fellowship in connexion with the Conference. As such there is an immediate sense of belonging to a wider church that itself claims and cherishes its place within the wider holy catholic and apostolic church.”¹⁵
- 2.8.** The Methodist Church’s understanding of belonging is enshrined in the connexional principle which “witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God”.¹⁶ Those received into membership make a commitment within, and are accountable to, a particular community, as it is recognized that 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.”¹⁷ They are also linked, however, through Circuit, District and Conference “into a web of inter-dependence in which gifts, decisions and responsibilities are shared.”¹⁸ This reflects that belonging to Christ’s Church is always more than just a local matter. The Faith and Order Committee has previously affirmed that:
- “Far from being about an individualistic expression of belonging, it is at one and the same time the most local expression of being in connexion with a wider body, and a clear and unambiguous expression of the role of the local community in the church catholic.”¹⁹
- 2.9.** It is possible for members of other Methodist Churches who live and worship in the Methodist Church in Britain to hold dual membership and belong to both. Christians who belong to other churches, Methodist Church. It is therefore possible to belong to other churches as well as being a member of

¹⁵ *Faith and Order Committee* report, 2010, 4.2

¹⁶ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.6.1

¹⁷ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.4.8

¹⁸ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.4.8

¹⁹ *Faith and Order Committee Report*, 2010, 4.5

the Methodist Church.

- 2.10.** Membership is therefore a vital expression of Methodism, articulating the way in which the people called Methodists are committed to growing in grace and holiness.

3. Main challenges and questions

A. Lack of awareness of the meaning of membership

- 3.1.** The lack of awareness about what membership of the Methodist Church means, even amongst Methodist members, is a significant challenge. Too frequently, various misassumptions are made because of the way in which membership is understood in other areas of contemporary life. This begs questions about how the Methodist understanding of membership is communicated and expressed, about how members view and take up their privileges and duties, and about the nature and content of membership preparation. Yet, each time there has been a review of membership its importance and value have been reaffirmed by the Conference. One challenge, therefore, is to rediscover, celebrate and communicate the gift of membership today.

B. Nurturing Discipleship

- 3.2.** Much depends upon how membership is expressed in each Local Church. The expectation of actively paying attention to each other's spiritual growth is, perhaps, often not fulfilled in practice. The expectation of participation in a class, or its equivalent, does not match the reality of the ways in which time and energy is focused in many Methodist churches today. There is, therefore, a significant challenge to each Local Church as to how it cares for its members, nurtures faith and supports daily discipleship (as lived out by its members in various contexts), further inviting each member of the Methodist Church to consider how they are participating in supporting and encouraging each other in their spiritual development. Encouraging growth in holiness is a corporate responsibility of the whole community of faith. No one member of the Local Church can claim not to have some responsibility in this. For membership to have meaning, the ongoing need to grow in holiness needs to be taken seriously.
- 3.3.** There are further challenges about the process and content of preparation for membership, and the ongoing process of catechesis in each Local Church. In the pre-Christendom context, initiation into the Christian community required an education into the Christian story and practices of the believing community, and perhaps there is a similar need for such learning opportunities today. As in many places there is no longer a class meeting or its equivalent so how does continuing learning happen? What opportunities do Local Churches create to help fulfil the commitment to helping members "grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord"?²⁰ The 2021 Conference Statement, *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, noted that aspects of the class meeting have now dispersed into other roles and areas of church life. As the class meeting was the place where many early Methodists were held accountable for, and supported in, their faith and discipleship, every Local Church was invited to explore and discern new ways of enabling support and a mutual holding to account in

²⁰ See paragraph 2.5 above

spiritual growth and living out faith.²¹

- 3.4.** The individual focus on this within the responsibilities of class leaders and pastoral visitors is still significant even if the corporate has been lost in many places. It continues to be a responsibility of a Class Leader to encourage members to fulfil their commitments as set out on the ticket of membership,²² and the commissioning service for Pastoral Visitors and Class Leaders states that they will “seek for themselves and for those in their care a deepening experience of God’s grace in Christ”.²³

C. Understandings of belonging

- 3.5.** Methodist membership is often seen in the light of the ways in which membership is experienced and expressed in other cultural and socio-political contexts, and there are many contemporary challenges to understandings of belonging. In various areas of life it has been noted that many people are reluctant to commit to something long term, and that they want to choose when and how they belong and what kind of commitment they make. The ways in which people want to belong to a community or group may vary, and personal choice and a desire to help define the terms of participation often play a significant role. People are willing to join things that are important to them, but perhaps in more flexible ways. Whilst in many places a general reluctance to commit to something long-term is acknowledged, some communities that demand a high level of commitment are thriving, including Christian communities and churches.
- 3.6.** Questions that have been raised in particular contexts indicate that for some people belonging to a particular ecumenical partnership or form of fresh expression or pioneer community is the key factor, and there is little interest in belonging to the Methodist Church. It is the sense of connection with that specific group of people that is primary. Other Christians may not wish to identify with any denomination but still play an active role in the local Methodist Church. Reflection from those in pioneering contexts indicates that some see membership as a tool of conformity which reduces local expression, whilst others view it as something that connects to a way of life that is consistent and open and bigger than one particular community. Membership of the Methodist Church is one way in which Christian discipleship is expressed and lived out, but it is not the only way. A baptized Christian who is not a Methodist member is no less a member of Christ’s Church. What membership offers is a means of claiming the Local Church as the predominant focus through and in which salvation is worked out and the marks of the Christian life are developed by God’s grace.
- 3.7.** There is, therefore, a spectrum of perspectives on membership in the Methodist Church from those who feel that the idea of membership is unnecessary, unrealistic or off-putting, to those who see it as a positive, counter-cultural statement, signifying the importance of working at discipleship in relationship with a particular group of people. Previous exploration by the Faith and Order Committee led to the view that “[w]hilst it is the case that membership is undoubtedly counter cultural that does not mean

²¹ *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 2021, 4.3.6

²² SO 631(1)(iv)

²³ *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, ‘The Annual Commissioning of Pastoral Visitors and Class Leaders’ (2), p.345

that it is wrong or should easily be abandoned as belonging to the past.”²⁴ Where people are willing to make a commitment they see that there is a worthwhile reason and purpose for doing so. It has been previously noted that rather than making membership in the Methodist Church an easier option then it perhaps should be “a more worthwhile and attractive one”, in particular through emphasising that it is a means of supporting, nurturing and enabling continuing discipleship with Christ.

D. The nature of commitment

- 3.8.** One of the key misunderstandings of membership in the Methodist Church is that it equates to membership of an institution or charitable organization, and it is vital that narratives which indicate this (albeit subtly) are challenged. Whilst membership does enable wide participation in the oversight and governance of a particular portion of the Body of Christ, this is about sharing in the corporate discernment of the presence and activity of God and using individual gifts and graces to help the whole Body share in God’s mission. The Methodist view is that an individual’s commitment to Christ can truly be realised “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.”²⁵
- 3.9.** Membership in the Methodist Church does not equate to signing up to an organisation which offers member benefits and gives voting rights. The fact that the number of members plays a significant role in the formation and cessation of a Local Church is not helpful in this respect, and it is unfortunate that in many places the number of members continues to play a key role in determining the annual assessment that the Local Church has to pay. Since 1999 it has been the case that the number of members should not be the sole factor in calculating financial assessments within any Circuit.²⁶ Further reflection would be helpful in order to help to de-couple the concept of membership from the idea of institutional affiliation whilst upholding the opportunity and responsibility to participate in shared oversight.
- 3.10.** Sometimes it is not possible for members to take up fully the privileges and responsibilities of membership. As *Called to Love and Praise* states: “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.”²⁷

E. Challenges from particular contexts

- 3.11.** Three particular contexts in which challenges to membership have arisen are local ecumenical partnerships, new places for new people or fresh expression or pioneer communities, and online communities. These raise some specific questions, not least questions about how such communities relate to Methodist polity. There are particular questions about understandings of ‘local’ and the importance of geographical place, and about how the particular

²⁴ *Faith and Order Committee* report, 2010, 4.1

²⁵ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.4.8

²⁶ *Methodist Membership and Christian Discipleship*, 1999

²⁷ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.4.10

community relates to the wider church (who makes decisions about admission to membership if there is no church council, for example). As expressions of ecclesial life develop still further it will be important to find ways of expressing the essence of belonging in Methodism. Some of these questions are long standing whilst others have emerged more recently, but they all merit further attention.

4. A Methodist Way of Life

- 4.1.** In recent years, as resources to support *A Methodist Way of Life* have been developed, questions have been asked about the place of *A Methodist Way of Life* in the Methodist Church and its relationship to membership. *A Methodist Way of Life* is a way of living out Christian faith and a potential pattern for discipleship. It is about how Christians try to live their lives in response to God's love, made known in Jesus. *A Methodist Way of Life* identifies twelve things for disciples to do individually and together to help them grow as followers of Jesus, and to worship God, serve others, be evangelistic, and learn and care together.
- 4.2.** *A Methodist Way of Life* is a key framework in which many (though not all) of the commitments made in membership can be lived out. It offers a practical means through which discipleship can be expressed, nurtured and encouraged. It is an important resource rather than an expectation for Methodists. Although *A Methodist Way of Life* draws from the rich resources of Methodist tradition and reflects some of the things that are cherished by Methodists, it is not definitive, nor is it comprehensive in expressing what it means to be a Methodist. The place of the sacraments, for example, is not given priority. *A Methodist Way of Life* overlaps with rather than mirrors the commitments of membership, and the two things should be seen as distinct and different.
- 4.3.** *A Methodist Way of Life* is a resource for Local Churches, new Christian communities and all who participate in a worshipping community (whether members or not). It can help anyone seeking to deepen their discipleship and live out their faith in community and, as such, can be valuable for people at different stages in their faith journey. It is therefore a resource which might also be drawn on to create opportunities for talking about membership as well as being one way in which members might live out their discipleship and maintain "true fellowship in Christian experience".²⁸

5. The nature and extent of further work

- 5.1.** Various questions and potential matters for further work emerge from the reflection above. The tension between the Methodist understanding of membership and how well that is embodied in practice is a continuing one, raising questions about whether the concept is now too aspirational. How does membership of the Methodist Church encourage growth in grace and holiness today? Is the Methodist understanding of membership a treasure ripe for rediscovery, or has it become an old wineskin in the present age? Such questions also concern matters of Methodist ecclesiology and exploring

²⁸ Clause 9 of the *Deed of Union* which speaks of the privileges and duties of membership notes that the weekly class meeting has proved to be the most effective means of maintaining among Methodists true fellowship in Christian experience. The class meeting envisaged here is no longer found in many places, but *A Methodist Way of Life* encourages a similar kind of group accountability.

them would require a significant piece of work that included wide consultation. The Faith and Order Committee notes that these questions have been looked at (in different forms) within previous pieces of work, where the Methodist understanding of membership has been reaffirmed. It has also considered the changes already taking place in the life of the Methodist Church to enable it better to respond to the love of God and share in God's mission, and the general concerns regarding priorities and capacity in the life of the Methodist Church. It does not, therefore, suggest that this broad piece of work is undertaken at this time, but that matters of Methodist membership continue to be explored in the following ways.

- 5.2.** Firstly, that Local Churches be encouraged to think about how they nurture growth in holiness, how members support each other's discipleship, and how these might be re-prioritized within Local Church life.
- 5.3.** Secondly, that the Faith and Order Committee consider some of the questions requiring attention, including those questions around ecclesial identity and the extent to which membership is essential to Methodist identity, especially in relation to ecumenical, online and New Places for New People contexts as identified in 3.11 above; and how different understandings of membership in Methodist Churches around the world impact on those who also wish to belong to the Methodist Church in Britain, for example through the Fellowship Groups.
- 5.4.** Thirdly, that after the Faith and Order Committee has considered the matters referred to in 5.3, the Conference then considers whether some new and additional resources would be helpful in order to:
 - help people to recognise and celebrate what membership offers and be inspired to better live out their commitment to grow in holiness with other members of their Local Church;
 - encourage and resource Local Churches to offer opportunities for membership preparation;
 - express the relationship between membership, discipleship and *A Methodist Way of Life*.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 29/1. The Conference received the Report.**
- 29/2. The Conference encouraged Local Churches to think about how they nurture growth in holiness, how members support each other's discipleship, and how these might be re-prioritised within local church life.**
- 29/3. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the matters described in paragraph 5.3 of this Report and report to the 2024 Conference.**