

Faith and Order Committee

MC/23/46

Date of meeting	25-27 March 2023
Contact name and details	The Revd Mark Rowland, Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee faithandorder@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	46/1. The Council receives the report. 46/2. The Council agrees that the Faith and Order Committee should design and conduct a suitable consultation process in order to develop proposals for a revision of the <i>Methodist Worship Book</i> .

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

Under SO 330(10) the Faith and Order Committee has a specific role in scrutinising all matters directly concerning the faith and order of the Church presented to the Conference by other bodies. Such scrutiny requires consultation with the full committee, and often some collaborative working, and the Committee is therefore grateful for early conversations, particularly with working parties appointed by other bodies, to establish effective and constructive ways of working and reflecting as the work develops. Conversations as the group is set up and the process for developing the work is established are particularly appreciated. All reports, questions and communication to the Committee should be sent in the first instance to the Secretary of the Committee.

Ways of Working

Each year the Committee reflects on its ways of working. In the current year, the appointment of a new Secretary of the Committee is inevitably leading to some adjustments and changes, which are still in their early days. The Committee has also given attention to its pattern of meeting and the ways in which new members are recruited. Last year, recruitment to both the Committee itself and to the Liturgical Subcommittee were by open advertisement and interview and a similar process is underway for this year's recruitment. Due to the success of last year's recruitment process for the Liturgical Subcommittee we are only recruiting to the main committee this year. Reflecting on the process from last year, we note that alongside the openness of an advert and application process, we need to work harder at offering encouragement and help to enable those who are underrepresented on the Committee to apply.

The Committee is aware that there are various expectations of what the Committee does, what it is responsible for, and the kind of decisions it can make. The role and remit of the Faith and Order Committee is set out in Standing Order 330.

A common misassumption is about the role that the Committee plays in the theological life of the Church. Although it does have a responsibility to "stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church" (SO 330(3)), it is important to note that the Faith and Order Committee is just one part of the process of theological reflection. It does have a particular role to play in helping the Conference make decisions which have implications for the faith and order of the Church. This often involves both a broad theological understanding and particular (and often detailed) knowledge of Methodist theology, polity and the relevant theological subject areas, which is more than just academic expertise. In addition, much of the work of the Committee requires the ability to read and process significant paperwork, too often at short notice, and with a careful attention to detail. Whilst not every member of the Committee needs to be proficient in every area, these are the gifts and knowledge needed to be able to carry out the Committee's work.

Given that the Committee is not, and should not be, the only place where theological thinking happens, then it does have a concern for the theological life of the Church and how theological thinking is facilitated in Local Churches, Circuits, Districts, the Connexional Team, and connexional working parties, committees and other bodies. Its own desire to play a part in stimulating theological thinking has often been thwarted by a heavy workload and immediate demands. This is likely to be mirrored in many other contexts, and continues to be an issue of concern.

When the Conference directs the Committee to undertake a piece of work on a specific topic the Committee would usually work with other people; either through establishing a working group that draws on a variety of people with different experience and perspectives relevant to the subject, or through reflection days, conversations or different forms of consultation. For many of the reports it brings to the Conference, therefore, it has worked with people outside of the Committee and from many parts of the Church's life.

In order for the Committee to be able to fulfil its responsibilities it requires not only the skills and knowledge indicated above, but also a commitment of time and attention. As in many areas of the Methodist Church's life, Committee members are volunteers. In a context when many people are already overloaded, finding people who have the time and availability is a challenge.

The Committee also notes that, like many others, it undertakes much of its work under pressure in order to meet Conference, Council and other deadlines. This affects the extent and nature of any consultation (which, if done well, always takes time, attention and resourcing), the opportunity to engage in more proactive and creative thinking, and the time and ability to develop skills for faith and order work. The Committee has given thought to how it might help to develop the particular skills and expertise needed for its work and has explored and is exploring various possibilities including mentoring, creating further opportunities for involvement in its work, training or study days or sessions in particular areas and paying attention to different ways of identifying people for particular pieces of work. It has been encouraged at the response to the recent advertisements, and is keen to identify people with potential for faith and order work even if they do not have all the skills needed at present.

A fundamental revision of the Methodist Worship Book?

The Secretary of the Conference asked the Faith and Order Committee to consider whether it is time for a fundamental revision of the *Methodist Worship Book* (MWB). Under the terms of Standing Order 330(9), the Committee has the authority to make proposals for revising forms of service authorised by the Conference. Authorisation by the Conference is our highest level of liturgical approval.

MWB was published in 1999 so is now a little over 20 years old, although the work on producing it began in 1990. There has never been any requirement for Methodists to use authorised texts, but they provide 'norms for guidance.' It is a much more substantial book than its predecessor (the *Methodist Service Book* 1975) which was a deliberate decision in response to feedback at the time. With the developments of technology since then, it is easier for additional resources to be made available online via the Methodist Church website. These usually carry 'approved' or 'recommended' status and may be for particular needs or occasions. While in many ways MWB continues to wear well and to be a widely used resource in our worship, there is also a number of factors that point towards the need for change:

- The corrections to the text made since the original publication;
- Subsequent decisions of the Conference which have changed the text of the MWB eg those following the report on the Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate which amended the ordination service;
- The liturgies authorised by the Conference subsequent to the MWB eg the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Promises, and whether these should now be included;
- The new marriage services which will come to the 2023 Conference;
- Concerns about the Good Friday reproaches and liturgical resources for Holy Week and therefore whether these should be revised or whether the current guidance¹ becomes part of the text;

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/life-and-faith/faith-and-order/guidance-for-methodist-people-concerning-anti-semitism-and-the-service-for-good-friday/>

- Questions about inclusive and expansive language.

The Committee considered this at its November meeting and took the view that it is time for a fundamental revision of the MWB. The Committee recognised many factors that tend to support this view and felt that while some things could be retained the extent of revision required probably suggests a fairly full and comprehensive piece of work. It noted questions around format and use and the significance of authorised resources, while also recognising their value and importance beyond their use (or otherwise) in public worship.

As the conversation continues, no doubt further factors will be identified. There is also a practical motive in that the stock of MWB available for purchase has now been exhausted. As an interim measure, Englesea Brook is collecting, refurbishing and making available copies of MWB which are no longer required (eg from churches which have closed).

Following this it was agreed at a meeting of the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Conference, Director of Engagement (representing the publishing team) and Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee that the first step in any revision would be to conduct a consultation process among both leaders of worship and worshippers to assist in discerning what form a successor to MWB might take. This could include such matters as what use is currently made of MWB, what resources would be desirable in a new collection, what format(s) it should be available in (noting that our current practice is 'digital first') and so on.

The Methodist Council is invited to consider these questions too and offer its views as a first step in this process. It is suggested that the Faith and Order Committee consider what form the initial consultation should take and arrange for it to take place, with a view to developing proposals to bring to the 2024 Conference. The Council is also invited to consider this proposed way of working.

Other specific items of work

A new set of additional orders for services of Holy Communion have recently been completed and are now available on the Methodist Church website². These are intended to complement the current provision in the *Methodist Worship Book* and include explanatory notes that may be helpful for study, perhaps as part of preparation for membership or in house groups.

The Committee is planning to report to the 2023 Conference on online church, authorisations to preside at the Lord's Supper and to seek the formal authorisation of the new services for the marriage and blessing of a marriage of any two persons.

In conversation with the Secretary of the Conference, and in the light of the decisions of the 2022 Conference regarding districts, we plan to ask the Conference for permission to bring the work on the role of a District Chair to the Conference of 2024 and to refocus of it in the light of the new situation.

Other work currently in progress includes liturgical guidance for the ending of an appointment, theology and practice of the Peace, a report on singleness, some further work on membership, reflection on healing ministry and neurodiversity as well as ongoing input into the oversight and trusteeship process.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

46/1. The Council receives the report.

46/2. The Council agrees that the Faith and Order Committee should design and conduct a suitable consultation process in order to develop proposals for a revision of the *Methodist Worship Book*.

² <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/leading-worship/additional-methodist-liturgies/>