

## 9. Response to The Church: Towards a Common Vision

<b>Contact Name and Details</b>	The Revd Nicola Price-Tebbutt Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee Price-tebbuttn@methodistchurch.org.uk
<b>Resolution</b>	9/1. The Conference adopts the report as its response to <i>The Church: Towards a Common Vision</i> , the 2013 Report of the World Council of Churches.

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and Aims</b>	The response of the Methodist Church in Britain to the World Council of Churches 2013 report <i>The Church: Towards a Common Vision</i>
<b>Main Points</b>	The process leading to <i>The Church: Towards a Common Vision</i> God's mission and the unity of the Church The Church of the triune God The Church: growing in communion The Church: in and for the world Response to general questions Concluding remarks
<b>Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)</b>	<i>The Church: Towards a Common Vision</i> <a href="http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision">http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision</a>

## Response of the Methodist Church in Britain to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (World Council of Churches, 2013)

A pdf download of the original WCC document can be found at:

[www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision)

1. The Methodist Church in Britain offers this formal response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (World Council of Churches, 2013) as part of our longstanding commitment to engage constructively with ecumenical texts produced by the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission. Through our delegated representatives to the Commission and formal responses to its published papers, we have contributed to shaping these texts; and, in turn, the way in which we express our theological self-understanding as a Christian community has been shaped by an emerging ecumenical consensus.
2. The so-called Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (WCC, 1982), has become a landmark in ecumenical convergence statements and a theological reference point in our most recent teaching document on the Church, *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (1999). Since the Lima text was published more than 30 years ago, a number of subsequent Faith and Order papers have prepared the way for this latest text, including its immediate predecessor *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (WCC, 2005), to which the Methodist Church in Britain made a formal response (*Conference Agenda* (2009), pp. 108-122). It is good to note that very many of our suggestions and comments in response to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* have been incorporated into *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.
3. In this present response, we summarise the main points of interest in each of the four chapters in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (hereafter *TCTCV*) and offer brief comments from the perspective of a British Methodist theological tradition that seeks to be faithful to both the Apostolic Tradition, as received in the distinctive circumstances of our own particular history, and our cumulative experience as a renewal movement raised up by God to spread scriptural holiness and reform civic life. Recently, we have found it fruitful to prioritise our ecclesial life around the conviction that the Methodist Church's vocation in the world is to be "discipleship movement shaped for mission". Our formal response is made with the intention of contributing positively to the discernment of a common vision of the Church on the way to visible unity.

### **The Process Leading to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision***

4. The "Historical Note" appended to the text identifies *TCTCV* as a significant achievement in "the long trajectory of Faith and Order reflection on the Church". This "present text is not a stage on the way to a further common statement; it is the common statement to which its previous versions [...] were directed", thus bringing "to completion a particular stage of Faith and Order reflection on the Church". Furthermore: "The [Faith and Order] Commission believes that its reflection has reached such a level of maturity that it can be identified as a convergence text, that is, a text of the same status and character as the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*."
5. "As such, it [*TCTCV*] is being sent to the churches as a common point of reference in order to test or discern their own ecclesiological convergences with one another, and so to serve their further pilgrimage towards the manifestation of that unity for which Christ prayed." We are therefore mindful of a responsibility to discern as authoritatively as possible the extent to which our vision of the Church coincides with that found in *TCTCV*. Accordingly, our annual Conference, the

highest court in British Methodism, has endorsed the content of this response, which has been prepared by our Faith and Order Committee.

## Chapter One: God's Mission and the Unity of the Church

6. *"The Church: Towards a Common Vision* opens with a chapter exploring how the Christian community finds its origin in the mission of God for the saving transformation of the world" (Introduction). Section A outlines "The Church in the Design of God"; section B describes "The Mission of the Church in History"; and section C considers "The Importance of Unity".
7. *TCTCV* emphasises that "[the Church] is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom" (§13). The opening chapter affirms that: "The mission of the Church ensues from the nature of the Church as the body of Christ, sharing in the ministry of Christ as Mediator between God and his creation. At the heart of the Church's vocation in the world is the proclamation of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen" (§4). The purpose of the Church is to engage in mission: "The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God's work of healing a broken world" (§1).
8. In the overall design of God, Jesus' own intentions for the Church are summarised in terms of its witness, worship and discipleship: "It [the Church] was to be a community of witnesses, proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus had first proclaimed, inviting human beings from all nations to saving faith. It was to be a community of worship, initiating new members by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. It was to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the Word, baptizing and celebrating the Lord's Supper, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded" (§2).
9. The description of the Church as a "community of discipleship" reflects British Methodism's current ecclesiological emphasis on discipleship and is consistent with the classical Protestant definition of the Church as a community of the faithful in which the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments duly administered. On the basis of this definition, Methodists are able to recognise diverse Christian communities as true churches, irrespective of how their ordained ministry is structured or its relation to the historic episcopate.
10. The absence of a description of what it means for the Church to be "a community of worship" is regrettable. Insofar as worship is the source and summit of ecclesial life, it has a bearing on how churches understand the nature of the Church. Granted that "the purpose for which they [human beings] were created and in which their joy ultimately is found" is precisely "to praise and glorify God together with all the heavenly hosts" (§25), then a common vision of the Church requires a common vision of Christian worship.
11. The description of what it means for the Church to be "a community of witness" needs to be more closely related to "the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ" (§1). To say that the Church's witness involves "proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus had first proclaimed" (§2) obscures the significance of his death and resurrection in salvation history, even though the text affirms that "the kingdom of God [has been] inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen" (§4). It is not the proclamation of the kingdom of God as such that provides the basis for inviting people to saving faith but rather the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. Thus, it is potentially misleading to identify the Church's witness to Christ primarily with "the proclamation of the kingdom of God" (§7).

## Chapter Two: The Church of the Triune God

12. "The second chapter sets out the salient features of an understanding of the Church as Communion, gathering the results of much common reflection both about how Scripture and subsequent tradition relate the Church to God and some of the consequences of this relation for the life and structure of the Church" (Introduction). Section A explores the vital ecumenical task of "Discerning God's Will for the Church"; Section B describes "The Church of the Triune God as *Koinonia*"; Section C affirms "The Church as Sign and Servant of God's Design for the World"; while Section D considers "Communion in Unity and Diversity"; and Section E reflects on the "Communion of Local Churches".
13. As we ourselves seek to discern God's will for the Church, Methodists accept that, because "Scripture is normative", "the biblical witness provides an irreplaceable source for acquiring greater agreement about the Church" (§11). Even though "Subsequent interpretation within the Church, seeking always to be faithful to biblical teaching, has produced an additional wealth of ecclesiological insights over the course of history" (§11), Methodists do not accept that this bears the same authority as Scripture. The status and role of Scripture in relation to the history of its subsequent interpretation requires further ecumenical study if the churches are truly to discern God's will in the form of a common vision of the Church.
14. In this regard, we are both challenged and encouraged by the statement that "The same Holy Spirit who guided the earliest communities in producing the inspired biblical text continues, from generation to generation, to guide later followers of Jesus as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel" (§11). The challenge for Methodists is to recognise in dialogue with our ecumenical partners how agreement about the Church cannot simply be reduced to an exercise in biblical exegesis concerning the earliest apostolic communities – as if the guidance of the Holy Spirit was withdrawn with the closure of the canon of Scripture – but must also take account of the providence by which the Church developed in successive generations. Encouragingly, this same statement is consistent with our experience that being faithful to the Gospel similarly involves recognising how the Holy Spirit has continued to guide subsequent generations in the apostolic mission, fruitfulness being the criterion of divine providence (cf 1 John 4:1; Matthew 7:16).
15. *TCTCV* raises the underlying issue of "How continuity and change in the Church relate to God's will", since "the same intent – to obey God's will for the ordering of the Church – may, in some, inspire commitment to continuity and, in others, commitment to change" (§24). The churches are invited "to reflect together about the criteria which are employed in different churches for considering issues about continuity and change" and the extent to which such criteria are open to development in response to Christ's urgent call to reconciliation (§24). In agreeing that such a study is necessary, we consider that it is necessary first to discern from Scripture how and in what ways God's will for the Church is unchanging, and how and in what ways it might change in response to the particular circumstances of salvation history.
16. Concerning "The Church of the Triune God as *Koinonia*", it is true to say that "The biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church" (§13). We concur with much of what Chapter Two says in outlining the present state of ecumenical agreement concerning *koinonia* or communion ecclesiology. Thus the Church is "The Prophetic, Priestly and Royal People of God" (§§17-20); it is the "Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit" (§21). The description of the four marks of "The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" (§22) is consistent with Methodist understanding.
17. We particularly welcome the emphasis on the royal priesthood of the people of God. "Every Christian receives gifts of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the Church and for his or her part in the mission of Christ. These gifts are given for the common good (cf 1 Corinthians 12:7;

Ephesians 4:11-13) and place obligations of responsibility and mutual accountability on every individual and local community and on the Church as a whole at every level of its life. Strengthened by the Spirit, Christians are called to live out their discipleship in a variety of forms of service” (§18). At the same time we would affirm that “the royal priesthood of the whole people of God (cf 1 Peter 2:9) and a special ordained ministry are both important aspects of the church, and not to be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives” (§20). Methodists explain “mutual accountability” among Christians in terms of the connexional principle, whereby every part of the Church is dependent upon every other.

18. “The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World” reflects the communion of the Triune God and serves the goal of gathering humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ (§25). “The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ” (§26). Thus we agree that the Church, in participating in the mission of Christ, is “an effective sign and means” (or instrument) of the salvation to which it bears witness through the proclamation of the Word (§27). We therefore affirm that the Church, as a redeemed and redeeming fellowship, is “sacramental” in nature; in our theological tradition, however, we reserve the term “sacrament” to describe baptism and the Lord’s Supper alone.
19. In considering “The Church as Sign and Servant of God’s Design for the World” in the face of global religious pluralism, *TCTCV* affirms two basic truths about the Church in relation to other religions, without attempting to settle all aspects of what is a complex and disputed issue among Christians. First, concerning Jews, “There is a genuine newness in the covenant initiated by Christ and yet the Church remains, in God’s design, profoundly related to the people of the first covenant, to whom God will always remain faithful (cf Romans 11:11-36)” (§17). Secondly, “While respecting the elements of truth and goodness that can be found in other religions and among those with no religion, the mission of the Church remains that of inviting, through witness and testimony, all men and women to come to know and love Christ Jesus” (§25). Methodists hold a variety of opinions as to how they should bear Christian witness to people of other faith, but these two affirmations provide the parameters within which we would seek to develop a theology of religions in relation to the Church as sign and servant of God’s design.
20. The Church’s “Communion in Unity and Diversity” (§§28-30) means that “Legitimate diversity is not accidental to the life of the Christian community but is rather an aspect of its catholicity, a quality that reflects the fact that it is part of the Father’s design that salvation in Christ be incarnational and thus “take flesh” among the various peoples to whom the Gospel is proclaimed”(§12). Thus “Cultural and historical factors contribute to the rich diversity within the Church”(§28). Nevertheless, “There are limits to legitimate diversity” if the gift of unity is to be preserved (§30). Here we agree that “A pastoral ministry for the service of unity and the upholding of diversity is one of the important means given to the Church in aiding those with different gifts and perspectives to remain mutually accountable to each other” (§29). Under the connexional principle, however, the pastoral ministry, too, must be accountable to the Church, without undermining its essential service among the people of God. Despite affirming the importance of mutual accountability “at every level of its life” (§18), *TCTCV* does not explain how this might apply in relation to the Church’s pastoral ministry.
21. We agree, moreover, that the vital ecumenical task of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate diversity in the Church will require: “(a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognised structures as are needed to use these effectively” (§30). A positive step towards making common discernment possible would be for churches to involve their ecumenical partners in authoritative acts of discernment. The Methodist Church in Britain currently invites a number of other churches to appoint representatives to our annual

Conference in order to participate in our Christian conferring and discernment. Their presence and contribution is greatly valued, and we commend this practice to other churches.

22. In *koinonia* ecclesiology, “The universal Church is the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world” (§31). Although the Methodist Church in Britain does not have bishops or dioceses, and therefore does not define the local church in such terms, neither do we regard the Local Church as “simply the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments” (§32). In Methodist understanding, the ministry of oversight is a necessary element of being the local church, ensuring that each congregation or assembly is linked to all others.
23. Although “Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church”, we agree that communion among the Local Churches is “not an optional extra” (§31) but requires visible expression. Here, too, the connexional principle ensures that the interdependence and communion of local Methodist churches is visibly expressed in ecclesial structures, including Circuits and Districts, as well as through the ministry of oversight. That no one may preside at the Lord’s Supper in the Local Church without authorisation from the Conference signifies and maintains visible unity among all the Local Churches.

### **Chapter Three: The Church: Growing in Communion**

24. “The third chapter focuses upon the growth of the Church as the pilgrim people moving towards the kingdom of God, especially upon several difficult ecclesiological questions that have divided the churches in the past” (Introduction). Section A, “Already but Not Yet”, asserts that “The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization” (§33). Section B surveys “Growing in the Essential Elements of Communion: Faith, Sacraments, Ministry”.
25. *TCTCV* relates the essential holiness of the Church to the reality of human sinfulness within an eschatological perspective that has the potential to overcome significant differences among Christians. Thus “As a pilgrim community, the Church contends with the reality of sin” (§35). Methodists are among those Christians who believe that “it is appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself and, although sin is in contradiction to the true identity of the Church, it is nonetheless real” (§35). Recognising that other Christians emphasise the essential holiness of the Church, we find it helpful to acknowledge that “Holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways. Holiness expresses the Church’s identity according to the will of God, while sin stands in contradiction to this identity (cf Romans 6:1-11)” (§36).
26. It is fair to say that the essential ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united Church can be summarised as faith, sacraments and ministry (§§37-57). As a result of the reception of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in the churches, there has been “significant progress in convergence about these essential elements of communion, though less on ministry than on the other two” (§37). Since the sections on Faith (§§38-39) and Sacraments (§§40-44) mostly summarise the content of the Lima text, they will not be considered here because the Methodist Church in Britain is among those churches to register their broad approval of the way in which *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* described the sacraments.
27. The longest section in *TCTCV* (§§45-57) explores certain aspects of ministry within the Church: “Ordained ministry”; “The Gift of Authority in the Ministry of the Church”; and “the Ministry of Oversight”. Though confusingly structured, this section accurately summarises the competing views among Christians concerning ministry in the Church, revealing what is probably the most significant theological divergence among the churches and the greatest challenge in achieving a

common vision of the Church. That “all churches would look to Scripture in seeking to follow the will of the Lord concerning how ordained ministry is to be understood, ordered and exercised” (§46) confirms both the possibility and the challenge of finding an agreed method of reading Scripture in relation to tradition in order to discern God’s will for ordained ministry.

28. Even the structure of ordained ministry is disputed. “Some believe that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the Gospel and is vital to the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole. In contrast, others do not view faithfulness to the Gospel as closely bound to succession in ministry, and some are wary of the historic episcopate because they see it as vulnerable to abuse and thus potentially harmful to the well-being of the community” (§47). Methodists acknowledge that the threefold ministry is a sign of the orderly transmission of the apostolic faith and mission and thus a sign, though not a guarantee, of apostolic continuity in the Church. While we believe that faithfulness to the Gospel may be preserved in other ways, “In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ’s Church, the Methodist Church [in Britain] would willingly receive the sign of episcopal succession on the understanding that ecumenical partners sharing this sign with the Methodist Church (a) acknowledge that the latter has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and (b) accept that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist” (“Guidelines on *Episkopé* and Episcopacy”, *Conference Agenda* (2000)).
29. TCTCV associates the ordained ministry with the “gift of authority”, though much of what it says about the nature and exercise of authority in the Church is abstract and idealistic. “A relation of mutual love and dialogue unites those who exercise authority and those who are subject to it [...] the exercise of authority can call for obedience, but such a call is meant to be welcomed with voluntary cooperation and consent since its aim is to assist believers in growing to full maturity in Christ (cf Ephesians 4:11-16)” (§51). Continuing in idealistic vein, “Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God’s Word and to one another” (§51). But what actual structures will ensure “the community’s effective participation in the discovery of God’s will and the guidance of the Spirit” (§52) so that the exercise of authority is not experienced as oppressive? For Methodists, it is essential that structures of authority are representative of the people of God and that discernment involves the active participation of lay people alongside ordained ministers. A common vision of the Church requires a common vision of “synodality” and “conciliarity” (§53) as communal means of authoritative discernment in the Church.
30. We agree that “Authority within the Church must be understood as humble service, nourishing and building up the *koinonia* of the Church in faith, life and witness; it is exemplified in Jesus’ action of washing the feet of the disciples (cf John 13:1-17). It is a service (*diakonia*) of love, without any domination or coercion” (§49). Moreover, we are encouraged to read that the exercise of authority is always shared and mutually accountable, albeit in unspecified ways. Thus “The authority which Jesus Christ, the one head of the Church, shares with those in ministries of leadership is neither only personal, nor only delegated by the community. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit destined for the service (*diakonia*) of the Church in love. Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community, whose sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) contributes to the overall understanding of God’s Word and whose reception of the guidance and teaching of the ordained ministers testifies to the authenticity of that leadership” (§51). For Methodists, “the participation of the whole community” requires that lay people, and not just ordained ministers, actively participate in the actual structures of authority in the Church.
31. The ministry of oversight is “a ministry of co-ordination” so that the diversity of spiritual gifts and ministries “may enrich the whole Church, its unity and mission” (§52). It is exercised “in the service of maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life” (§52). Thus “In addition to preaching the Word and celebrating the Sacraments, a principal purpose of this ministry [of

oversight] is faithfully to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the Gospel” (§52). There is widespread ecumenical agreement that “the ministry of oversight, as all ministry in the Church, needs to be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways” (§52). But whether and how the ministry of oversight can be exercised *simultaneously* in ways that are personal, collegial and communal (as *TCTCV* appears to envisage), requires further study.

32. Conceiving the universal Church as a communion of Local Churches raises the question of primacy and whether a universal ministry of Christian unity has a place among the bonds of communion. Accordingly, *TCTCV* asks: “If, according to the will of Christ, current divisions are overcome, how might a ministry that fosters and promotes the unity of the Church at the universal level be understood and exercised?” (§57). The Methodist Church in Britain, responding to the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, confirmed its openness to exploring the idea of a universal ministry of Christian unity, though without conceding that such a ministry is strictly necessary under the will of God as revealed in Scripture: “Methodists accept that whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole of Christ’s Church must by that very fact be God’s will for his Church. A universal primacy might well serve as a focus and ministry for the unity of the whole Church” (*Conference Agenda* (1997), pp. 255-257).

#### **Chapter Four: The Church: In and For the World**

33. “The fourth chapter develops several significant ways in which the Church relates to the world as a sign and agent of God’s love, such as proclaiming Christ within an interreligious context, witnessing to the moral values of the Gospel and responding to human suffering and need” (Introduction). Section A outlines “God’s Plan for Creation: The Kingdom”; Section B describes “The Moral Challenge of the Gospel”; while Section C summarises the role of “The Church in Society”.
34. In God’s plan for creation, “The Kingdom of God [...] is the final destiny of the whole universe” (§58). Since God intends the Church to serve the divine plan for the transformation of creation, “service (*diakonia*) belongs to the very being of the Church” (§58). Such service includes the proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and “manifesting the newness of life given by [Christ], thus anticipating the Kingdom already present in him” (§58). Evangelisation, which includes the promotion of justice and peace, is “one of the foremost tasks of the Church in obedience to the command of Jesus (cf Matthew 28:18-20)” (§59).
35. The fact of religious pluralism and the vitality of various world religions undoubtedly present a challenge to evangelisation and the way in which Christians witness to the Gospel in word and deed in accordance with God’s will and design for the Church in and for the world. While “Evangelization should always be respectful of those who hold other beliefs” (§60), “Sharing the joyful news of the truth revealed in the New Testament and inviting others to the fullness of life in Christ is an expression of respectful love” (§60). Satisfying both of these requirements within the broad range of possible Christian approaches to mission remains a considerable challenge, but one to which Methodists in Britain are committed.
36. The question of whether and how those who do not come to saving faith in Christ may receive salvation has implications not only for the practice of mission but also for understanding the nature of the Church (§60). The Methodist Church in Britain does not believe that all people will necessarily be saved but that all can be saved: “Methodist Doctrine and the Preaching of Universalism” (*Conference Agenda* (1992), pp. 113-23). In the absence of saving faith in Christ, our emphasis on God’s universal salvific will and prevenient grace leads us to hope that, in ways known to God alone, those who have not explicitly rejected the Gospel may yet be accepted by God, though they are without the assurance of Christian faith. Insofar as salvation may be

possible in the absence of saving faith in Christ, we would maintain that it is necessarily “salvation in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (§60). Furthermore, since Christ is never without his body, the Church, salvation is never unrelated to the Church.

37. *TCTCV* invites the churches to consider how they might arrive at greater convergence about issues relating to religious pluralism in order to cooperate more effectively in witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed (§60). We note that the text nowhere defines “salvation” (in Christ) but simply identifies it with “reconciliation” and “communion” without reference to Christian anthropology. Yet Methodists think of salvation as a staged process of growth in grace and holiness, beginning with justification and culminating in entire sanctification. Greater convergence among Christians in understanding the nature of salvation as an eschatological reality (and hence a present pledge of a future gift) would be a useful prelude to effective cooperation in witnessing to the Gospel in a religiously plural context.
38. “The Moral Challenge of the Gospel” concerns the way in which Christians live their life. Since “human beings are justified not through works of the law but by grace through faith [...] the Christian community lives within the sphere of divine forgiveness and grace, which calls forth and shapes the moral life of believers [...] It is on the basis of faith and grace that moral engagement and common action are possible and should be affirmed as intrinsic to the life and being of the Church” (§61). In this regard, *TCTCV* rightly suggests that it is of significance for the reestablishment of unity that *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation* (1999) (JDDJ) “achieved consensus about the central aspects of the doctrine of justification by faith” (§61). We would add that the World Methodist Council, following an extensive consultation among member churches, signed a tripartite statement of association with the JDDJ in 2006, thereby extending the agreement to include a third major world communion.
39. Since the Gospel applies to the personal and communal aspects of human existence, “*koinonia* includes not only the confession of the one faith and celebration of common worship, but also shared moral values, based upon the inspiration and insights of the Gospel” (§62). For this reason, the “ethical reflections and decisions” (§62) of one church affect the lives of others. In view of the fact that “philosophical, social and cultural developments have led to the rethinking of many moral norms, causing new conflicts over moral principles and ethical questions” (§63), *TCTCV* asks “How might the churches, guided by the Spirit, discern together what it means today to understand and live in fidelity to the teaching and attitude of Jesus?” (§63).
40. Methodists, in company with others, have been wrestling with this question for a number of years, particularly over issues relating to human sexuality. For some, the traditional ethical teaching of the Church has always to be reassessed in light of the “attitude” of Jesus, which was inclusive, loving and compassionate. For others, the “teaching” of Jesus reinforces the moral absolutes contained in Scripture which must not be compromised. In circumstances where Christian approaches to moral questions are often polarised, discernment is likely to be a gradual process in which diverse voices and competing convictions have to be held together in tension within the communion of the Church (cf “Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church”, *Conference Agenda* (2006), pp. 237-50). Common discernment in moral issues is part of the wider task of common discernment in the Church for which it will be necessary to develop an ecumenical method of reading Scripture in relation to tradition.
41. The role of “The Church in Society” is summed up in a number of activities: to work “for the transformation of the world”; “to help those without power in society to be heard”; “to work for a just social order, in which the goods of this earth may be shared equitably, the suffering of the poor eased and absolute destitution one day eliminated”; to “advocate peace, especially by seeking to overcome the causes of war”; and to “defend human life and dignity” (§64). To these

can be added: “to share the lot of those who suffer and to care for the needy and the marginalised”; “to heal and reconcile broken human relationships”; and “to care for creation, which groans to share in the freedom of the children of God” (§66). We recognise in this brief description of the Church’s role in society many of the same emphases that John Wesley summed up in terms of Methodism’s vocation to scriptural holiness and reform of the nation.

### Response to General Questions

42. In their Introduction, the Faith and Order commissioners pose a number of general questions that churches are asked to consider in making a formal response, though not necessarily to answer directly. Short answers to complex theological questions risk over-simplifying things in a way that may mislead ecumenical partners. Accordingly, our summary answers to these general questions should be interpreted in the light of our detailed comments in the foregoing paragraphs.
43. *“To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?”* We confirm that, to a large extent, the ecclesiological understanding of the Methodist Church in Britain is consistent with the description of the Church contained in *TCTCV*, though our particular emphases may differ in certain respects from those present or implied in the text. Where alternative views are described, our position falls within the range of options.
44. *“To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?”* The text offers an appropriate theological framework and secure foundation for further growth in unity, subject to achieving the necessary convergence in those issues where the churches have adopted contrasting positions.
45. *“What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?”* In our theological dialogue and ecumenical relations with other churches, the Methodist Church in Britain is challenged to give greater consideration to the value which our partners place on the tradition of the Church developed in the centuries between the New Testament and the Reformation. Developing a greater awareness of Methodism’s continuity with the universal Church of the past is entirely consistent with John Wesley’s keen interest in the scholarship of the Church Fathers and theologians from subsequent centuries.
46. *“How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?”* Since British Methodism already has an inclusive ecclesiology and minimal criterion for recognising the reality of the Church in other Christian communities, we are readily able to form close relationships in life and mission with a wide range of other churches that broadly share our ecclesiological vision. Nevertheless, *TCTCV* encourages us to engage in theological dialogue and ecumenical relations with renewed vigour and a clearer focus on certain issues that require further study.
47. *What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?* The answer to this question is contained in our detailed response set out in the paragraphs above.

### Concluding Remarks

48. In their Introduction, the Faith and Order commissioners express a hope that *TCTCV* will serve the churches in three ways: “(1) by providing a synthesis of the results of ecumenical dialogue about important ecclesiological themes in recent decades; (2) by inviting them to appraise the results of this dialogue – confirming positive achievements, pointing out deficiencies and/or

indicating areas that have not received sufficient attention; and (3) by providing an occasion for the churches to reflect upon their own understanding of the Lord's will so as to grow toward greater unity (cf Ephesians 4:12-16)". We consider that *TCTCV* serves its purpose admirably.

49. As a rich ecclesiological resource, *TCTCV* will aid British Methodists in our continuing dialogue and relations with our principal ecumenical partners in Britain as we seek to grow towards visible unity. In particular, it will be a useful theological reference in our continuing Faith and Order work under the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, which commits the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England to work together towards overcoming the remaining obstacles to our visible unity.
50. The Methodist Church in Britain acknowledges a debt of gratitude to the members and staff of the WCC Faith and Order Commission for their considerable achievement in producing such a significant convergence statement. We concur with the Commission's Director and Moderator, who say: "The convergence reached in [*The Church: Towards a Common Vision*] represents an extraordinary ecumenical achievement" (Preface). As the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, the Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, says in his Foreword, this convergence text is a "gift" from the Faith and Order Commission to the churches – "a fruit of their many years of work on ecclesiology". As to the relevance of the text for the churches amidst competing priorities, we endorse Dr Tveit's observation that: "Work on ecclesiology relates to everything the Church is and what its mission implies in and for the world."

### **\*\*\*RESOLUTION**

- 9/1. **The Conference adopted the Report as its response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, the 2013 Report of the World Council of Churches.**