

31. Faith and Order Committee Report

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Nicola Price-Tebbutt Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee price-tebbutt@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	31/1. The Conference receives the Report. 31/2. The Conference adopts the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements.

Summary of content

Subject and aims	To provide a report on the work of the Faith and Order Committee
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The work of the Faith and Order Committee 2017/2018 • Ways of working • Responses required by previous Conferences • Scrutiny and consultation work • Work being brought to the 2019 Conference

The Work of the Faith and Order Committee 2017/2018

1. 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 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.
2. The remit of the Faith and Order Committee is contained within Standing Order 330. It is directed, for example, to encourage reflection on the theological implications of all the work undertaken by the Connexional Team, to undertake specific tasks of theological scrutiny, and to stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church. The Committee seeks to fulfil its responsibilities by offering theological consultation for work being conducted throughout the Connexion and theological scrutiny for the work of the Conference and the Connexional Team. The Committee drafts, scrutinises and comments on reports from its own members or from other parts of the Methodist Church, makes recommendations to the Council and the Conference, offers advice on issues related to the faith and order of the Methodist Church, and reports to the Conference. Its roles in offering encouragement and in undertaking scrutiny sit alongside each other, and the Committee continues to give particular attention to how it might best help to stimulate, resource and encourage theological reflection throughout the Church.
3. In this report, the Committee outlines the main areas in which it has been working during the present connexional year and indicates the main items which it intends to bring to the Conference in 2019.

4. Ways of working

- 4.1. The Committee has met four times since the 2017 Conference: in October for a 24-hour residential meeting; in January for a day meeting (in part, jointly with the Ministries Committee), in March for a day meeting, and jointly with the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission in May. The Faith and Order Executive is appointed to make some decisions on behalf of the Committee between meetings.
- 4.2. The Worship and Liturgy Sub-Committee meets according to need, and utilises electronic ways of working.
- 4.3. All reports, questions and communication to the Committee should be sent in the first instance to the Secretary of the Committee. The Committee has agreed a protocol for Faith and Order representation and consultation. As a general principle no one speaks on behalf of the Faith and Order Committee, except for the Secretary, unless they are specifically authorised to do so. Whilst those representing the Faith and Order Committee on other bodies cannot act on behalf of the Committee they shall endeavour to: articulate faith and order perspectives and highlight questions and concerns as appropriate; encourage a shared engagement in theological reflection; liaise with the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee; and make reports or raise issues with the Committee as required.
- 4.4. The Committee continues to explore how it might best work with others in order to seek to stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church (SO 330(3)). It welcomes opportunities for collaboration and would encourage the creation of more opportunities for Methodists to confer theologically together within our oversight structures.
- 4.5. The appointment of the Faith and Order Committee is the responsibility of the Methodist Conference. The Committee expresses its thanks to the Revd Dr Martin Wellings who will be retiring as a member of the Committee at the end of this connexional year.

5. Responses required by previous Conferences

- 5.1. The Faith and Order Committee has been working on responses to specific Conference resolutions, and draws the attention of the Conference to the following:

5.2. Ministry in the Methodist Church

The 2014 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Ministries Committee "to undertake work on the theology and nature of lay and ordained ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain" and bring a report with any recommendations to the 2018 Conference. This work, along with other work relating to ministry is brought to the 2018 Conference in a separate report.

5.3. *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*

Mission and Ministry in Covenant, the report produced by the faith and order bodies of the Methodist Church and the Church of England on oversight and ministry, has already been made public. It was discussed at the Church of England's General Synod in February, and is brought for debate, but not decision, as a separate report.

5.4. *Response to The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory (2016)*

The proposed response from the Methodist Church to *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory (2016)* is brought as a separate report. *The Call to Holiness* is the tenth report from the Joint

International Commission for dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church and it can be accessed here: <http://worldmethodistconference.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/The-Call-to-Holiness-Final-copy-28062016.pdf>

5.5. **Alternative liturgical resource for Baptism** (Memorial 25, 2016)

The 2016 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to “produce some alternative baptism resources in accessible language that adhere to the structure of the authorised texts and thus retain the Methodist emphasis on prevenient grace.” This resource has now been produced and approved by the Faith and Order Committee. An alternative service for the baptism of young children will be available on the *Additional Methodist Liturgies* page of the Methodist website at www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/additional-methodist-liturgies/

5.6. **Holy Communion Mediated Through Social Media**

5.6.1. The 2011 Conference instructed the Faith and Order Committee to establish a group to discuss the issues related to “the practice of celebrating Holy Communion with dispersed communities via live, interactive media such as the Internet or video-conferencing”, including the question of whether “such a form of Holy Communion is acceptable within our discipline and practice.”

5.6.2. The 2015 Conference received the report *Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media* as an interim report and directed that further work be undertaken, including the involvement of those set out in the original response, and that a fuller report be presented to the Conference no later than 2018. In response the Faith and Order Committee has conferred with those with whom it had not previously consulted, undertaken further research, and engaged in further exploration of the relevant issues and questions.

5.6.3. It is clear that a wide range of theological questions is provoked not least in a continually changing digital context, and different social media platforms raise different issues. These questions relate to many aspects of online life and Christian experience and warrant further exploration and conversation. Many Christians, including Methodists, are engaged in creatively exploring these questions, and theological thinking is continually evolving. The Faith and Order Committee wishes to encourage Methodist engagement in these conversations and, in the light of this, has carefully considered whether a fuller report to the Conference is the best way to stimulate such theological thinking and enable theological exploration of new experiences, insights and technological developments. Rather than seeking to offer any Methodist view on these broad issues at this point, the Committee therefore notes that there are a range of resources and events, including online groups and forums, to help Christians reflect on these matters. It invites Methodists to engage with these and encourages theological exploration. The Committee will arrange the revising and updating of the list of resources available on the website, and will consider whether and how it can helpfully offer some opportunities for Methodists to confer together about such matters.

5.6.4. The Faith and Order Committee has given particular attention to the question of whether a “form of remote communion” in which a presbyter “in one location would be permitted to preside over a celebration of Holy Communion with a gathered group of fellowshipping believers consisting of groups or individuals residing in disparate locations who provide their own elements to be blessed by the person presiding.”¹ This involves consideration

¹ Memorial 13, 2011 Conference

of our theology of the sacrament of Holy Communion and our theology of ministry. The Committee noted that the questions relating to the sacrament of Holy Communion potentially lead to a significant re-imagining of sacramental theology and that this is not something the Methodist Church should undertake on its own. The original memorial expressly asked for the group undertaking the work to include “representation from the Joint Implementation Commission or the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England ... and from the United Reformed Church, in order to assist in the ecumenical exploration of the issue and any potential impact on the Anglican-Methodist Covenant of any potential outcomes proposed.” In the light of conversations with ecumenical partners, the Faith and Order Committee affirms the importance of together exploring such questions and coming to a shared understanding before the Methodist Church could consider whether any significant changes in policy and practice were appropriate.

- 5.6.5. Consideration has also been given to exploration of these issues in other Methodist churches, particularly the discussions in the United Methodist Church. A report of their formal conversation and a collection of different views can be found on their website here: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-methodist-view-of-online-communion>. The consensus from this 2013 formal conversation emphasised that “for the sake of unity in the Body of Christ, the establishment of unprecedented sacramental-like practices should be worked through in conversation with ecumenical partners”, that the teaching document *This Holy Mystery* does not support online Holy Communion and that engaging in such practice endangered intercommunion agreements with ecumenical partners. In 2013 the Council of Bishops agreed a moratorium on all online sacramental practices and, although this has not been universally observed, it was subsequently extended and is understood still to be in effect.
- 5.6.6. In the light of both further reflection and conversations with ecumenical partners, the Faith and Order Committee therefore re-affirms the recommendation of the Committee’s 2015 interim report that “the Conference adopt the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper may not be permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present at the celebration of the sacrament to participate by using their own communion bread and wine.” The Committee will keep this matter on its agenda and give consideration to the contribution it might helpfully make in stimulating theological thinking in this area.
- 5.6.7 In its report to the 2016 Conference the Faith and Order Committee outlined a potential new piece of work on the theology of online life. The Committee is now in a position to take forward this work in order to support continued reflection on the particular questions relating to ‘holy communion mediated through social media’ and to enable theological exploration of the broader questions about the nature of online life and Christian experience (referred to in 5.6.3). In the coming months the Committee will work with Methodists who are already engaged in ministry in online spaces; firstly to identify the key areas for theological exploration and, secondly, to help shape a consultation day to be held during the 2018/19 connexional year. It is hoped that the consultation day will involve practitioners and theologians, enable a variety of perspectives to be expressed and discussed, and help identify how the conversation might best continue. A report on the progress of this work will be brought to the 2020 Conference.

6. Scrutiny and consultancy work

- 6.1. The Committee has engaged with various issues, projects and Council papers, providing specific responses to paperwork, continuing involvement in the support of working groups, or commentary on the development of reports. Where appropriate, specific responses have been sent directly to the authors of reports, or to those providing the lead in relevant areas of work.
- 6.2. 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 to establish effective and constructive ways of working and reflecting as the work develops.
- 6.3. The Committee continues to reflect on how it might best support members of the Connexional Team, and those undertaking work (individuals and working parties) on behalf of the Methodist Council and the Conference, to think about how their work might be theologically resourced and what it means to reflect theologically in the context of the Methodist Church in Britain.
- 6.4. The Committee continues to consider how it might best work with others in order to fulfil its remit under SO 330(3) to “seek to stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church”, and will continue to give this attention during the next connexional year.

7. Work being brought to the 2019 Conference

The Faith and Order Committee’s report to the 2019 Conference will include the following pieces of work:

- The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate (including the Liturgical Role of Deacons)
- Theology of Safeguarding
- Revision of guidelines in relation to Exorcism

*****RESOLUTIONS**

31/1. The Conference received the Report.

31/2. The Conference adopted the policy that presbyters and other persons authorised to preside at the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper are not permitted to use electronic means of communication, such as the internet or video-conferencing, in order to invite those not physically present with the presiding minister to receive the elements.