

5. EPISKOPE AND EPISCOPACY AND OUR CHURCHES IN COVENANT

Introduction

At the heart of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant of 2003 is a journey towards the full visible communion of our churches. We have discussed what this might mean in practice in the chapter ‘The Unity We Seek and the Unity We Have’ in this report. But such visible communion certainly includes an interchangeable ordained ministry. Unrestricted communion with each other as churches is not possible until our ordained ministries and structures of pastoral oversight are also in visible communion. A common ministry is a key focus of the visible unity of the Christian Church. The JIC was asked to give priority to working towards an interchangeable ordained ministry. In our two interim reports we have already put in place several building blocks that are intended to contribute to this goal. It has always been clear to both churches that in seeking to bring about a common ministry, the question of *episkope* and episcopacy cannot be avoided.¹ The 2007 Methodist Conference encouraged the Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) to bring forward its proposals on *episkope* and episcopacy and at the same time to take into account models of Anglican episcopacy in the other nations of Britain and Ireland.

But it is not only considerations of unity that motivate us; we are also driven by a passion for effective mission, including evangelisation, in our society and culture, where there is huge opportunity, but also some hostility. Both our churches, when reflecting on episcopal ministry, have underlined the role of the bishop as a leader in mission. Visible, public, representative leadership in the cause of the Kingdom of God is needed for effective mission today. We need to ask where that can be found. Although our churches are blessed with many who lead in mission without being bishops, the question of episcopal ministry in this context can hardly be avoided.

For these reasons the JIC has had issues of *episkope* and episcopacy on its agenda from the start. One of the foundations of the Covenant was the conclusion of the Formal Conversations that there was no disagreement between our churches on the principle of personal *episkope* (the New Testament Greek word for pastoral oversight) as expressed in the historic episcopate. Precisely while the Formal Conversations that led to the Covenant were under way, the 2000 Conference adopted the guidelines of

¹ See *Episkopé and Episcopacy* (2000), para. 97.

the report *Episkopé and Episcopacy* which reaffirmed what the Methodist Church had said many times before: that it was willing in principle to accept episcopacy in the form of the historic episcopate.²

Responding to the encouragement of the 2007 Methodist Conference, we offer some specific proposals in this chapter, with regard to *episkope* and episcopacy, for both our churches to consider. We believe that there is a way forward that has not been fully articulated in the Methodist discussions so far. We believe that it is faithful to the Methodist Church's understanding of the nature and mission of the Church (its ecclesiology) and to its connexional polity. Our model builds on Conference decisions over a considerable period of time. But we are not putting forward proposals for immediate decision. We hope that the Methodist Church will take our suggestions and consider them in its own time and in whatever way it sees fit. What we have to say also puts a number of challenges to the Church of England in the area of *episkope* and episcopacy and we trust that these too will receive careful consideration. Both our churches have taken decisions in principle in this area and are currently attempting to work out how those decisions might be implemented. The Church of England's General Synod in July 2006 authorised the setting up of a legislative drafting group to bring forward proposals that would have broad support for the ordination of women as bishops and would take account of the pastoral needs of those opposed in conscience to this step. The group's report will be debated by the Synod in July 2008.

First we summarise where we believe matters stand now in the implementation of the Covenant as far as *episkope* and episcopacy are concerned.

The Common Statement *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* (2001) recognised that there was agreement between Methodists and Anglicans on the principle of episcopacy. It noted that the Methodist Conference had affirmed on a number of occasions its willingness to adopt the sign of the historic episcopate as a step towards visible unity. It commented that 'the willingness of the Methodist Church to become a church ordered in the historic episcopate' was of great significance for Anglicans. It gave grounds for believing that, in due course, 'the common ministry for which both churches long', will become a reality (AMC: 174). The same

2 The shorthand expression 'the historic episcopate' refers to the orderly transmission of ordinations by bishops, in intended visible continuity with the mission of the apostles.

report commented that both Anglicans and Methodists were aware of ‘the substantial ecumenical consensus that recognises that ministry within the historic episcopate should be a feature of united churches (as it already is of several in South Asia with whom Methodists and Anglicans are in communion)’ and that both churches were mindful of the cause of unity with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and of their dialogues with those communions (173). It was these perceptions, as well as what was said about the diaconate and the presbyterate, that led the Common Statement to conclude that ‘all the essential theological ingredients to bring about an integrated ministry in the future seem to be in place’ (176).

Our first Interim Report, *In the Spirit of the Covenant* (2005), devoted a chapter (7) to the question of the interchangeability of ordained ministries. After pointing out that the discipline of the Methodist Church already made interchangeability possible and underlining the authority of the Conference in this respect, the report noted that in the Church of England, as in all other provinces of the Anglican Communion, only episcopally ordained persons may hold the office of bishop, priest or deacon. It pointed out that, in this respect, the Church of England believes that it is being faithful to the pattern of the early Church, because it holds that this pattern comes to us from apostolic and early post-apostolic times and is intended to be followed. For Anglicans, it is important that there should be a formal expression of the intention to ordain in visible continuity with the ministry of the Apostles themselves. The report also pointed out that, in maintaining this pattern, the Church of England is ordering its own ministry, and not passing judgement on the practice of other churches (SOC: 7.5-6). This chapter concluded: ‘If the Methodist Church were to implement what it has approved in principle several times over many years – to embrace episcopacy – a new situation within the Covenant relationship would arise. From an Anglican point of view, the prospects for achieving an interchangeable ordained ministry would be transformed’ (7.10.17).

In its second interim report, *Living God’s Covenant* (2007), the JIC took account of the outcome of the Connexional process of consultation on the reports *What Sort of Bishops?* (WSB) and *The Nature of Oversight*, describing the result of the consultation as ‘a major setback to the progress of the Covenant’. It noted the tension between this outcome and the numerous Conference resolutions, going back many years, that the Methodist Church was willing in principle to accept episcopacy. It commented that, ‘if the Methodist Church were to adopt a form of personal *episkope*, in continuity with the greater part of the Church through the centuries, and to do this in its own way and on its own terms’, that step

would provide ‘a key building block to bring about the interchangeability of ministries’. The JIC promised to say more about this matter in its 2008 report, for consideration by Conference as it saw fit (LGC: 1.14-17). The purpose of this chapter of our quinquennial report is precisely to set out those ideas for consideration by the Methodist Church and the Church of England.

As we have done our work over the past four years, we have discovered many ways in which Methodists and Anglicans can – and do – work together in mission and many ways in which the ministry of our churches can be shared.³ But we have also become increasingly aware of how much of the future potential of the Covenant hinges on the achievement of an interchangeable ordained ministry – a ministry that would help to give a visible public focus to the unity of the Church and to make possible a full and equal sharing in its sacramental life, so releasing energy for the joint mission of our churches. We believe that our suggestions here could help to bring this further stage of the Covenant significantly closer.

The Affirmations and Commitments contained in the Covenant (AMC: 194) are fundamental to our work. We wish to underline the significance of the following Covenant Affirmations:

- 1 ‘We affirm one another’s churches as true churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God’;
- 4 ‘We affirm that one another’s ordained and lay ministries are given by God as instruments of God’s grace...’;
- 6 ‘We affirm that... communal, collegial and personal oversight (*episcopate*) is exercised within them in various forms’;
- 7 ‘We affirm that there already exists a basis for agreement on the principles of Episcopal oversight as a visible sign and instrument of the communion of the Church in space and time’.

The Covenant Commitments that we have made as churches are also crucial. The first Commitment is an imperative to work to remove the remaining obstacles to a deeper and more visible unity that will entail an interchangeable ordained ministry.

We commit ourselves, as a priority, to work to overcome the remaining

3 This is evidenced in our two interim reports, *In the Spirit of the Covenant* and *Living God’s Covenant*.

obstacles to the organic unity of our two churches, on the way to the full visible unity of Christ's Church. In particular, we look forward to the time when the fuller visible unity of our churches makes possible a united, interchangeable ministry.

The rest of this chapter falls into three parts.

1. A brief synopsis of the various studies and decisions of the British Methodist Church on the subject of *episkope* and episcopacy in recent decades (though they can be traced as far back as Methodist re-union in 1932). This may be particularly helpful to Anglicans, who may not be aware of the substantial discussions of episcopacy that have gone on in the Methodist Church or of Conference decisions. This material may provide a useful *aide memoire* to Methodists as well.

2. A concise statement of how a bishop's ministry is currently understood in the Church of England. This may be helpful to Methodists, some of whom, in our experience, are still working with an outdated picture of episcopal ministry. This statement could serve as a useful summary for Anglicans too in setting out the model that Anglicans profess and in challenging them to live up to it more adequately.

3. Some reflections, in the light of the Covenant, on *episkope* and episcopacy in our churches, leading finally to some challenges to both.

Episkope, episcopacy and the British Methodist Church

This section provides an overview of the studies that the Methodist Conference has commissioned and the decisions that it has taken over several decades with regard to episcopacy.

The Methodist Conference's statement in 1985 in response to the WCC Faith and Order Commission's report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* said 'we await the occasion when it would be appropriate to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'. In 1998 it adopted a report which included this conclusion (para 44):

The Conference of 1997, in adopting Notice of Motion 14, directed the Faith and Order Committee to clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy. Having briefly reviewed Methodist considerations of this subject during a period of sixty years, the Committee believes that the following summary may be helpful to the Conference:

- a) The Conference has asserted its view that episcopacy is not essential to the Church, but has also expressed its belief that the coming great Church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal.
- b) The Conference has declared that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate the Methodist doctrinal standards.
- c) In the context of proposals towards closer unity, the Conference has on several occasions indicated its willingness to embrace episcopacy, while insisting that Methodists should have no less freedom of interpretation than Anglicans enjoy in respect of the historical episcopate.

The Conference has recognized that *episkope* is already exercised in personal and communal ways within the life of the Methodist Church.

The Conference Statement *Called to Love and Praise* (1999) pointed out that ‘a connexional understanding of the Church recognises the need for ministries of unity and oversight (*episkope*) within the universal fellowship of believers.’ It added: ‘If in practice episcopacy serves to reinforce the unity and *koinonia* of the whole Church, it is to be welcomed. Thus episcopacy can be a valuable witness (though not the only witness) to continuity in and faithfulness to the apostolic tradition.’ (4.6.9)

The Methodist Conference agreed as recently as 2000 to affirm its willingness in principle to receive the sign of episcopacy on the basis of the Guidelines set out in the report, ‘Episkopé and Episcopacy’. Guideline 4 said: ‘In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ’s Church, the Methodist Church 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.’⁴ With regard to these two conditions, we note:

- a. The first affirmation made in the Anglican-Methodist Covenant by both our churches means that the Church of England acknowledges that the Methodist Church has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

4 The Guidelines in full are appended to this chapter.

- b. The Church of England, along with other Churches of the Anglican Communion, already accepts that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign of episcopal succession exist and discussions on this subject continue throughout the Anglican Communion and in dialogue with other Churches and Communion.

It is also worth recalling that the Conference approved the episcopal Ordinal for the Anglican-Methodist unity scheme of the 1960s and the proposal for the Ecumenical Bishop in Wales. The Conference has also been willing to contemplate episcopal ministry in the contexts of the Covenanting for Unity proposals of 1981 and the recent Scottish Churches' Initiative for Unity.

How has the Methodist Church understood the ministry of a bishop? *Episkope and Episcopacy* said this:

It is generally agreed, in episcopal churches, that bishops are to exercise oversight, both within their particular areas of responsibility and in the wider Church. Bishops exercise their oversight both individually and collegially, and in many episcopal churches play a leading role, alongside presbyters, deacons and lay people, in church government. They have responsibility for the transmission and safeguarding of the apostolic faith, for providing for the administering of the sacraments, and for leadership in the Church's mission. They ordain presbyters and deacons. Their prophetic role includes the responsibility to represent the concerns of the wider Church to their dioceses, as they listen to and share with others the insights and witness of their own local churches.

(4)

What Sort of Bishops? set the question of episcopacy in the contexts of mission as well as unity:

This present report [WSB] on models of episcopacy reflects the fact that the move to an episcopal order of ministry may be regarded as a *Methodist* matter as much as an ecumenical one. ... as a Methodist matter, episcopacy is also a *public and social matter* as it relates to the potential enhancement of the contribution that the Methodist Church makes to public life, as part of its mission as a church. ... We are examining models of bishops with *the possibility that Methodist practice and thought will be enhanced*. In so doing, we may better be able to fulfil our own task, and in so doing contribute to the mission of the wider Church in Britain and beyond. [6]

Episkope and Episcopacy in the Church of England

This section aims to set out succinctly how the office and ministry of a bishop are understood in the Church of England and in Anglicanism more generally. It does not deal with structures of the Church, or with how authority is distributed, but is a more of a ‘job description’ for a bishop in the Church of England. It is drawn from the official texts of the Church of England, which are listed below. These can be read against the background of other, less official discussions, which are also mentioned.

Like everything else in both our churches, the Anglican understanding of episcopacy has evolved over the centuries. However, there is a strong case for thinking that the essentials have remained much the same over time, while the emphasis may have varied. Certainly, Anglicans believe that they are justified in looking to patristic and mediaeval, as well as to Reformation and modern models of episcopacy as sources for how they understand that ministry now. An historical overview can be found in the ‘Rochester Report’, *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).⁵

The main official sources for the Church of England’s understanding of episcopal ministry are:

- The Ordinal of 1550, which received its definitive form in 1662 and is bound with the Book of Common Prayer.
- The *Common Worship* Ordinal of 2005 (Study Edition, 2007).
- The Canons of the Church of England.

Other, more or less contemporary sources, which carry less (and varying) authority include:

- *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (The Rochester Report, London: Church House Publishing, 2004), ch. 2 – the main resource for the current work on women in the episcopate.
- *Episcopal Ministry* (The Cameron Report, London: Church House Publishing, 1990).
- ‘Apostolicity and Succession’: a House of Bishops paper (London: Church House Publishing, 1991).

5 A concise view is provided in C.J. Podmore, ‘The Church of England’s Understanding of Episcopacy’, *Theology*, May-June 2006. See also P. Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

- ‘Bishops in Communion’: a House of Bishops paper (London: Church House Publishing, 2000).
- ‘Suffragan Bishops’ (GS Misc 733, 2004).
- *Saepius Officio*, the response of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the Papal Bull *Apostolicae Curae* (1896).
- *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982), in which the General Synod and the Lambeth Conference of 1988 were able to see ‘the faith of the Church through the ages’.
- ‘Ministry and Ordination’ (in Anglican Roman-Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report*, London: SPCK and CTS, 1982).
- *Together in Mission and Ministry: The Porvoo Common Statement, etc.* (London: Church House Publishing, 1992).
- *The Meissen Agreement: Texts* (Church House, Westminster, 1992).
- *Called to Witness and Service: The Reuilly Common Statement with Essays on Church, Eucharist and Ministry* (Church House Publishing, 1999).
- *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (Faith and Order Advisory Group, 2007; available from Church House Bookshop).

These sources help us to get at the ‘essence’ of episcopal ministry as Anglicans understand it. But it is important to note that many of these attributes are not exclusive to bishops and are shared with the whole Church, or with all the ordained, and are exercised in a collegial and/or communal context. Furthermore, while there are differences of style in the practice of bishops throughout the Anglican Communion (just as there are between individual bishops of the Church of England), the theology of what a bishop is and does is essentially the same. We can say that, according to the Church of England (and there is no suggestion that this differs essentially from the understanding of episcopacy held by the other churches of the Anglican Communion), the identity of a bishop in the Church of God is made up of a number of constituent and complementary aspects. When they are brought together in one person, they result in a significant ministerial office, one that is therefore regarded as of vital importance for the unity and continuity of the Church, and for its mission, by Anglicans.

A baptised Christian believer. This is surely the right place to start. ‘With you I am a Christian; for you I am a bishop’ (St Augustine of Hippo). A bishop is first of all a member of the *laos*, the people of God.

A deacon. A bishop remains a deacon, called to serve God and God's Church. A deacon bears the fundamental commission of Christ to his Church (Matthew 28.16-20), a commission that is expressed in the ministry (*diakonia*) of word, sacrament and pastoral care that is appropriate to a deacon. Anglicans practise 'sequential ordination': deacon-priest-bishop. A presbyter does not cease to be a deacon and a bishop does not cease to be a presbyter and a deacon. The character of an order, once given, remains (Canon C 1.2).

A presbyter or priest A bishop remains a priest ('priest' is the language of Cranmer's Ordinal), ordained to the apostolic ministry of reconciliation through the gospel (2 Corinthians 5. 18-20), to preaching and teaching, presidency at the celebration of the sacraments and to the exercise of pastoral oversight in collaboration with others. (Cf. the House of Bishops' statement *Eucharistic Presidency*, London: Church House Publishing, 1997.) The order of bishop 'includes' the orders of deacon and priest.

A pastor A bishop is the senior pastor or shepherd of the portion of the people of God committed to his or her care: 'the chief pastor of all that are within his diocese, as well laity as clergy, and their father in God' (Canon C 18). The bishop is also a collegial pastor: 'As chief pastors, it is their duty to share with their fellow presbyters the oversight of the Church' (*Common Worship Ordinal*).

A minister of word and sacrament The Church is the community of word and sacrament (Thirty-nine Articles). A bishop's primary tasks are to proclaim the gospel and to celebrate the sacraments of the gospel: bishops are 'principal ministers of word and sacrament' among the portion of the people of God committed to their care (*Common Worship Ordinal*; cf. Canon C 18.4).

An overseer (*episkopos*) Bishops have a crucial role in the governance of the Church. They have a special responsibility of oversight for the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral oversight within the diocese and, collectively with other bishops, throughout the Church of England (cf. *Bishops in Communion*), including a special responsibility for the doctrine and worship of the Church. A bishop's oversight is exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways – collaboration is ensured through synodical structures, including the Diocesan Synod and the Bishop's Council. The bishop administers the law of the church. 'As chief pastors, it is their duty to share with their fellow presbyters

the oversight of the Church, speaking in the name of God and expounding the gospel of salvation. With the Shepherd's love, they are to be merciful, but with firmness; to minister discipline, but with compassion' (*Common Worship Ordination of a Bishop*).⁶

A guardian of true doctrine A bishop is a guardian of the apostolic faith and carries out this responsibility by teaching, preaching and discipline. 'It appertains to his office to teach and to uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions' (Canon C 18. 1). Of course, all the ordained share this responsibility, as, of course, do all Christians.

A successor of the Apostles A bishop is regarded as a successor of the Apostles – not, obviously, in their unique role as witnesses to Christ's resurrection, but in the sense of upholding and promoting the apostolic faith and leading the apostolic mission of the gospel through the Church, and of being a visible link with the Church of the Apostles. 'Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy holy Apostles many excellent gifts, and didst charge them to feed thy flock: give grace, we beseech thee, to all bishops, the Pastors of thy Church...' (The Ordinal, 1662).

A leader of mission, including evangelisation A bishop is a leader in mission within the diocese, primarily through the ministry of the word and the sacraments. Although clearly contained in the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care, this aspect was made explicit in the (now superseded) *Alternative Service Book 1980* Ordinal, which derived from Anglican-Methodist conversations in the 1960s, but it has received greater emphasis since then. 'They are to seek out those who are lost and lead them home with rejoicing, declaring the absolution and forgiveness of sins to those who turn to Christ'; 'Will you lead your people in proclaiming the glorious gospel of Christ, so that the good news of salvation may be heard in every place?' (*Common Worship Ordinal*).

A focus and minister of visible unity A bishop has a special role and responsibility with regard to the visible unity of the body of Christ, not only within the diocese, but also between dioceses and between

⁶ The Ordination of Presbyters in *The Methodist Worship Book* uses similar language of the oversight of presbyters: 'Be shepherds to the flock of Christ. As you exercise mercy, do not forget justice; as you minister discipline, do not forget mercy.'

the Church of the present and the Church of the past and the future. The bishop's office is an effective sign and instrument of this visible continuity across space and time. 'Will you promote peace and reconciliation in the Church and in the world; and will you strive for the visible unity of Christ's Church?' (*Common Worship Ordinal*).

The minister of ordination A crucial role for a bishop is to preside liturgically at ordinations. The bishop alone ordains deacons (perhaps deriving from the special relationship between the deacons and the bishop in the early Church). In the ordination of presbyters members of the presbyteral college lay on hands together with the bishop. In the ordination of bishops the Archbishop of the province normally presides and members of the episcopal college join in the laying on of hands. 'They are to preside over the ordination of deacons and priests, and join together in the ordination of bishops' (*Common Worship Ordinal*; cf. Canon C 18). The ministry of ordination is an expression of the oversight of mission and ministry that is entrusted to the bishop. The sending out of ministers is part of the Church's mission.

The shape of oversight in the Methodist Church and in the Church of England

The ecumenical context

In relation to *episkope* and episcopacy, both churches are conscious of the wider ecumenical environment and of their relations to, and dialogues with, other communions. The Methodist Church, in considering the possibility of embracing episcopacy, has taken the wider ecumenical scene into consideration. The World Methodist Council includes both episcopal and non-episcopal Methodist churches. The majority of Methodists in the world belong to episcopal churches, though most of these churches have bishops who are not within the historic episcopal succession. However, in the United States, the United Methodist Church (UMC) is in dialogue with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and with The Episcopal Church, both of whom have bishops in the historic episcopal succession. The goal of these dialogues is to bring about 'full communion', resulting in an ordained ministry in three orders, within the historic succession, that is common to those three churches. We believe that it is important that the British Methodist Church and the Church of England should take an active interest in these developments.⁷

⁷ In October 2007 the Co-Chairs and Co-Conveners of the JIC were invited to take part in a meeting of the Episcopal-UMC dialogue meeting in London.

The Methodist Church has recently considered various specific models of episcopacy. While we do not intend to evaluate all the options that are set out in *What Sort of Bishops?* – and share the hesitations that the report expressed in the case of some models – the question needs to be asked, which models (if any) would be helpful in terms of the quest for Christian unity? Which models would enhance visible unity with other Christian communions? The wider ecumenical implications of Methodist bishops have been noted before (e.g. in Section E of *Episkopé and Episcopacy*) and remain relevant. We agree with WSB that the various proposals that were canvassed in the report should be examined in that light. For example, would making hundreds of Superintendents bishops (as some, but not WSB, have proposed) advance the cause of unity, not just with the Church of England, but also in the universal Church (bearing in mind also the international Methodist – Roman Catholic dialogue)? Even if the number of circuits were to be significantly reduced in the future, would it be helpful to have, say, even a hundred Superintendents who were made bishops – roughly as many as the numerically larger Church of England (including its suffragan bishops) and three times as many as the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales? Again, if District Chairs only were to be made bishops (as some, but not WSB, have suggested), would this imply that districts should be seen as ‘dioceses’ (thirty-one), that is to say, communities of oversight, and how would this perception of districts as ‘dioceses’ relate to (a) the Methodist Connexion as a whole, in which the Conference exercises oversight and (b) the dioceses of the Church of England, given the fact that the already acute mismatch of boundaries between our churches would be exacerbated? We endorse the concerns of WSB in these respects.

Bishops within the Christian community

We believe that the specific link between a bishop and a particular eucharistic community is important. It is vital to ground the ministry of a bishop in the preaching and teaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments of the gospel. A bishop is seen as a representative minister of word and sacrament, one who takes the lead in worship (though not to the exclusion of other ministers, ordained and lay) and has responsibility for the oversight of worship and the administration of the sacraments, to ensure that they are carried out ‘decently and in order’ and in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the Church. It is important for the spiritual health of both the bishop and the community that they should be linked to each other. In the Church of England, the cathedral is the ‘seat’ of the bishop and therefore the mother church of the diocese. Many cathedrals now have ecumenical canons, including those drawn from the Methodist

Church, who help to enhance the cathedral's ecumenical, rather than purely Anglican, character, as ideally a spiritual centre and home which is shared with all Christians in the region. The bishop's oversight of the diocese is seen in the bishop's presidency of the diocesan synod, including its eucharistic celebration (the Chair of the House of Clergy and the Chair of the House of Laity being Vice-Presidents). In a similar way, the President of Conference presides not only at the business of the Conference, but also at its worship, including the Conference Eucharist.

The representative role of bishops is also pivotal. The concept of a representative ministry is one that has proved fruitful ecumenically and has been employed in various Methodist documents on ministry (most recently in *What is a Presbyterian?* and *What is a Deacon?*) and in the Common Statement that led to the Covenant. It enables us to affirm both the royal priesthood of all baptised believers and the specific ordained ministry within the *laos* (people of God). Ordained ministers represent the people to God, leading them in prayer and worship, and bring God's word and sacraments to the people. It is because Christ can never be separated from his Body, and the Church cannot live without its Head, that ministers are said to represent Christ in and through his Church (cf. *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*: 144). Against this background of the representative role of ordained ministers, bishops in any tradition are significant representative persons. They represent one part of the Church to the whole and the whole to the part. They represent the Church to the wider community and in the public square. They are seen by the media and by government as those who can speak on behalf of the Church. They help to make the Church visible and to make its message audible. Bishops also play a vital role in strengthening the ties of unity between one church and another: they are links in the fabric of unity. A bishop is called to be an instrument of unity (as *Called to Love and Praise* pointed out: 4.6.9).

The Church as communion in Anglicanism and Methodism

There is an important sense in which the Church of England, is not simply one church, but forty-four churches. The Church of England is made up of its constituent dioceses, which are (ecclesiologically speaking) 'local churches', spheres of communion under the bishop's pastoral oversight, with the cathedral as the 'mother church'. The diocese is the portion of the people of God entrusted to the bishop's care. Dioceses have their own synod; and local policy with regard to mission and ministry is determined by the synod, the bishop being the President, assisted by the Vice-Presidents, the chairs of the houses of clergy and of laity.

However, the dioceses are not isolated units, but are held together within the Church of England by a framework of national policy with regard to doctrine, mission, ecclesiastical law and finance, under the primacy of the two Archbishops and in relation to the state, including the Crown. The ‘Church of England’ consists of two provinces of the mediaeval Western Church (Canterbury and York), but even in the Middle Ages it was regarded as a single Church (*ecclesia anglicana*). The Church of England as a whole is rightly described as a church, but strictly speaking it is a church in a derivative sense. A national (or to use Reformation language, ‘particular’)⁸ church, like the Church of England, depends for its existence both on the universal Church – the Church Catholic – and on its own constituent dioceses as ‘local churches’. The universal and the local are the primary manifestations of the Church of Christ and of its communion.⁹

A great strength of the Methodist Church is that the whole Methodist community, consisting of local churches grouped in circuits, is bound together in Connexion. The Connexion is a visible expression of the living communion that should always characterise the Church of Christ. Both Circuits and Districts are defined as expressions of the interconnectedness of the Methodist Church.¹⁰ Looked at in terms of the nature of the Church (ecclesiological), the Connexion is clearly one church, an expression of communion and a single sphere of oversight under the Conference. If we compare the nature of the Methodist Connexion and the character of a diocese of an episcopally ordered church, we can see certain similarities. The Connexion is actually a single ‘portion of the people of God’.

8 Cf. Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, Article XXXIV, ‘Of the Traditions of the Church’: ‘... Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man’s authority, so that all things be done to edifying.’

9 The three Provincial Episcopal Visitors (PEVs), whose ministry is provided for under the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993, are suffragans of the Archbishops, to carry out pastoral ministrations within the province. They act at the invitation of the diocesan bishop in relation to those parishes that are not able to receive the ministry of women priests and have petitioned the bishop for this purpose. A number of bishops have made the relevant PEV an assistant bishop within the diocese in order that they may work closely with the diocesan and suffragan bishops. In Anglican ecclesiology the episcopate has a special role in manifesting and maintaining the communion of the Church. All bishops are in communion with the Archbishops and with the whole college of bishops.

10 Standing Orders 500: ‘The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ...’ and 400A: ‘The District is ... an expression, over a wider geographical area than the Circuit, of the connexional character of the Church.’

The implication of this perception for any form of episcopacy that the Methodist Church might introduce in the future is that its bishops should be ministers of communion for the Connexion, rather than for one part of it. This would tie in with the Conference's requirement, stated in Guideline 2 of *Episcopate and Episcopacy*, that 'the Methodist Church is a connexional Church and all *episkope* should be exercised within this context.' This suggests that any Methodist bishops in the future would exercise their ministry and oversight on behalf of the Conference, which is the source of oversight in the Methodist Church. On any understanding of episcopal ministry, bishops have a 'cure (care) of souls' within the portion of the people of God for whom they have received a particular responsibility. For Methodism, it seems to us, that 'portion' is the Connexion.

Bishops in mission

We believe that it is vital to underline the role of a bishop as a leader in the mission of the Church, and particularly in evangelisation or evangelism. The Methodist Church has recognised (*Episkopé and Episcopacy*, Guideline 3) that all forms of *episkope* should enable and encourage the Church's participation in God's mission. The ministry of the word and sacraments, combined with pastoral care in its many forms, is at the cutting edge of the Church's mission; and word, sacrament and pastoral care are tools of evangelisation. If the bishop is a principal minister of word and sacrament, the bishop is inescapably a leader in mission and evangelisation. His or her role in mission is to lead, guide, support, advise, model and oversee the major expressions of mission and evangelisation that are undertaken on behalf of the portion of the people of God that is committed to his or her care. This means that episcopal ministry cannot be defined solely by reference to a bishop's 'internal' functions. As *Episkope and Episcopacy* implies, to think of a Methodist bishop purely for Methodist people would be inadequate. Episcopal ministry must be outward looking and have a shepherd's care for the lost sheep and for those who have never been part of the flock. In the Church of England, the bishop is specifically seen as the pastor of the whole diocese (Canon C 18).

It seems clear to us from an analysis of how oversight is exercised within the Methodist Church that it is not *episkope* (oversight; pastoral responsibility) that is the issue, but the *personal* form of *episkope*. The reality and authenticity of *episkope* within our respective churches was affirmed in the Covenant. Within the Methodist Church oversight is vested in the Conference and is exercised in a dispersed way, through many channels, individual and collective. The report *The Nature of Oversight* summarised the position like this:

The report explores how ‘connexionalism’ is fundamental to the Methodist way of being Church. This in turn makes it fundamental to Methodist understanding that oversight (*episkopé*) is essentially shared between different groups and individuals and different formal bodies and types of ‘officer’ across the whole Church. Consequently any exercise of personal (lay or ordained) or corporate expressions of oversight cannot be self-sufficient or independent of each other but must be intrinsically linked with the other expressions. Since Wesley’s death, oversight in Methodism has been corporate in the first instance and then secondarily focused in particular individuals and groups (lay and ordained). Therefore at the heart of oversight in the Connexion is the Conference which in turn authorises people and groups to embody and share in its oversight in the rest of the Connexion. There are two main strands of this oversight. One is that of formal bodies (e.g. Church Pastoral Committee; Church Council; Circuit Leadership Team; Circuit Meeting; District Policy Committee; District Synod; the Methodist Council) and particular office holders (e.g. class leaders; pastoral visitors; church and circuit stewards; Local Preachers; district officers; members of the Connexional Team; Vice-President of Conference). The other is that of ministers (presbyters) stationed by the Conference to exercise pastoral responsibility and, when appointed to circuits, pastoral charge. Oversight is not complete if the two strands of it do not collaborate and interact.

The exercise of *episkope* is richly present, distributed throughout the Methodist Church and its ministry. The communal and collegial expressions of oversight are found in abundance. But, as many Methodists frankly acknowledge (and as WSB points out), it is the personal expression of oversight that is comparatively weak, though certainly not absent, in British Methodism and is related to a lack of public visibility. Personal communication is crucial in mission and especially in evangelising.

Personal *episkope*, leadership and authority

Personal *episkope* can be exercised at many levels in the life of the Church, as it is so exercised in both our churches. But personal *episkope* at the level of a church as a whole (in the case of the Methodist Church, the Connexion) is actually a form of *episcopacy* by any other name. In the British Methodist Church, the person who is particularly entrusted with that level of personal *episkope* is the President of Conference. Personal *episkope* is evident in the role of the President in pastoral care, visitation and the sharing of vision. At the Induction of the President of Conference he or she is asked: ‘Will you endeavour so to lead the Church under

your care in unceasing mission that Christ's name may everywhere be proclaimed and that many may be brought to salvation and built up in that holiness without which no one shall see the Lord?'¹¹ As the report to the 2007 Conference 'Senior Leadership in the Methodist Church' points out, the Presidency (President and Vice-President together) represents and embodies the authority, the oversight of Conference in a unique way: it is 'the representative embodiment of the authority of Conference' (para. 32). The President and Vice-President carry out their roles in ways that are appropriate to their callings: one being ordained and the other lay.¹²

However, Presidents and Vice-Presidents have little opportunity to let their position go to their heads or to exercise undue influence, because their tenure of the office is limited to one year. While that may limit the harm that a President can do, it may also limit the good that can be achieved. It may restrict what can be accomplished in leadership in mission, in relating to government on public policy and to the media in making the Methodist voice and witness heard. It may restrict the ambassadorial role of the Presidency (which was affirmed by the 2007 Conference),¹³ including in relation to other Christian churches and certainly means that fresh efforts have to be made every year to build rapport, trust and affection with ecumenical colleagues, particularly within the Covenant – for example, with the Archbishops of Canterbury and York at their annual meeting. As

11 Similarly, it should be noted that, at the Induction of the Vice-President, he or she is asked: 'Will you endeavour so to discharge the duties of your office that under your leadership all the members of the Church may be encouraged in the exercise of their ministry, strengthened in their witness, and kept alive to their charge?'

12 Cf. Standing Order 110: '(1) The President and Vice-President shall preside at the Conference and act as the representative embodiment of its authority as prescribed by the Deed of Union and in accordance with Standing Orders. (2) The President and Vice-President, the ex-President and ex-Vice-President, and the President-designate and Vice-President-designate shall together be known as the Presidency. (3) The Presidency shall play a significant part in the oversight and leadership of the Church in responding to God's Spirit and developing prophetic vision. The President and Vice-President shall in particular exercise a ministry through visits to and encouragement of the constituent parts of the Connexion and beyond.

Standing Order 111 President's Powers. (1) The President shall have power to assist at any Synod, if requested to do so by the Chair or by a majority of the Superintendents in the District. (2) The President shall have the right if requested to do so to visit any Circuit, to inquire into its affairs, and to take any steps open to him or her which he or she judges beneficial.'

13 Ibid., para. 32: 'a very important strength of the Presidency is its ambassadorial capacity, to affirm and encourage.'

WSB acknowledges, Methodists tend to be very cautious about entrusting sole authority to individuals.

Many Methodists, it seems to us, have the impression that Church of England bishops have a lot of power in their dioceses; that they have the authority to do exactly what they want to do. That is very far from the reality, as the bishops themselves and the majority of Anglicans experience it. Bishops in the Church of England lead their people by teaching, by example, by encouragement and persuasion and they have jurisdiction – authority to apply the law of the Church. They are able to make direct appointments to some posts and to influence appointments to others. But they alone do not make the rules: they operate under the law of the Church and uphold that law. They alone do not make the pastoral or financial policy, though they contribute to shaping it: policy is made at the national level by the General Synod and, more locally, by diocesan synods (both of which have a House of Bishops). And bishops do not hold the purse strings: diocesan budgets are worked out by the Diocesan Board of Finance or the Bishop's Council (acting as the DBF) and are approved by the Diocesan Synod. The Church of England is both episcopal and synodical. Its bishops are 'bishops in synod' and this applies both nationally and in the diocese.

Communal, collegial and personal dimensions of oversight

What Sort of Bishops? insists that, in the Methodist Church, oversight is always shared. The only sort of oversight that it believes is appropriate for the Methodist Church is 'shared oversight'. This needs a little further analysis. If this means that the laity plays a vital part in the governance of the church, we can affirm that that is a principle that is embodied in the polities of both our churches. To that extent we can say that for Anglicans, as well as Methodists, oversight responsibilities are distributed between the ordained and lay people and that they are called to work together.

The report of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) distinguished three dimensions of ministry (including oversight): personal, collegial and communal. That report noted that the balance of the three was differently arranged in the various main Christian traditions, and challenged them to examine their own practice and to ask themselves whether there were any imbalances that needed to be adjusted. Partly as a result of this challenge, the bishops of the Church of England have been working on the meaning and practice of collegiality and this has been the subject of two reports (*Bishops in Communion*, 2001, and 'Suffragan Bishops', GS Misc 733). We think that there is a different challenge to the Methodist Church in

the recommendation of *BEM*: to examine the weight given to personal *episkope* within the overall economy of oversight.

Communal oversight is another way of speaking about the wider conciliar life of the Church: the Methodist Conference and the Church of England's General Synod are both expressions of communal oversight (though not exhaustive of it). Collegial oversight, on the other hand, is where those with special responsibilities work together, share their wisdom and their burdens, and perhaps divide up the work. The Methodist Connexional Leadership Team/ Leaders' Forum and the Church of England College of Bishops (wider than the House of Bishops and consisting of all serving bishops) are both expressions of collegial oversight. Collegiality also extends to bishops and presbyters working together. Both the communal and the collegial expressions of oversight, by their nature, involve shared responsibility.

But is personal oversight (*episkope*) also shared? In one sense it is, because oversight is inescapably relational. It is not possible to be an overseer (*episkopos*) in isolation, but only in relation to others – in connexion, we could say. The relationship may be constructive and rewarding, or it may be detrimental and demoralising. That ambiguity is not, we want to stress, because it is personal, for history testifies that collegial and communal expressions of oversight can also be harmful. Juntas and cabals have been tyrannical and even parliaments have legislated for oppression and injustice. We recognise that, in both our churches, power is not always used as it should be. However, the suspicion remains among Methodists that personal oversight is more risky than other forms of oversight and that it must therefore always be shared somehow. We think that this idea needs to be nuanced a little more. Personal *episkope* can be and must be shared in the important sense that it must be representative of the whole body, that it must be accountable to wider authority, that it must be supported and guided by the wisdom of others. But can all burdens be shared? Does not the leader sometimes have to walk a lonely path in carrying the responsibilities of office? We regret that WSB finally remains over-cautious at this point, plays safe, and therefore misses an opportunity to challenge the Methodist Church to rectify weaknesses in leadership and public visibility by being a little bolder about personal *episkope*.

The *episkope* of the Methodist Conference and of bishops

The oversight that is vested or embodied in the Conference has been referred to. We now want to explore this a little further. The Conference,

which of course consists of lay and ordained representatives, exercises oversight in various ways:

- Conference teaches the faith with authority and adjudicates on doctrinal matters.
- Conference determines the practice of the Methodist Church and makes the rules.
- Conference ordains through its deputed instruments, and the President of Conference, who is always a presbyter, presides at ordinations (or Past Presidents, on the President's behalf, do). The President presides at ordinations by virtue of presiding at Conference – a significant conjunction of ideas.
- Conference deploys ministers and deacons and certain lay officers within the Methodist Church.
- Conference exercises pastoral discipline throughout the connexion in accordance with the rules of the Church.

As we have seen in looking at Anglican and Methodist material on episcopacy, these are precisely the tasks (determining doctrine and practice; ordaining, deploying and disciplining) that are entrusted to bishops to carry out (not on their own, but through the collegial and communal expressions of their oversight). If the Conference exercises an episcopal type of ministry, it is appropriate to regard it as a corporate bishop – and this is not a controversial idea, but is increasingly recognised in the Methodist Church. For example, the Methodist Faith and Order Committee's formal response to the JIC's first interim report suggested that, because the Conference is a corporate bishop (and, as the Methodist ordination rites make clear, intends to ordain to the diaconate and the presbyterate of the one Church of God), Methodist presbyters and deacons are already, in that sense, episcopally ordained.¹⁴ So the Conference is, as it were, the bishop for the Methodist Church. Every bishop belongs to and exercises authority within a particular community, the portion of the people of God entrusted to his or her care. In the British Methodist Church, that community is the whole Connexion. Because the conference is the 'bishop' and the Connexion is 'the bishop's' community, the connexion can be seen as having certain key characteristics of a diocese within the Christian Church – albeit an exceptionally large one!

14 The Faith and Order Committee's response to *In the Spirit of the Covenant* said: 'The episcopal function of the Conference ... means that, in Methodist perspective, Methodist presbyters and deacons have already been "episcopally ordained" in so far as their ordinations only occur at the specific request of the Conference, those presbyters who preside doing so on behalf of the President of the Conference' (p. 7).

We have already said that it is not *episkope* (oversight) that is in question here, but personal *episkope*. The strongest expression of personal *episkope* is in the office of the President of Conference. The President not only presides at ordinations, but, with the Vice-President, speaks on behalf of the Conference, gives spiritual and pastoral leadership to the Conference and to Methodists throughout the connexion, through intensive visitation, and relates to leaders or senior pastors of other churches. Together with the Vice-President, the President is a focus of unity and a leader in mission. Above all, perhaps, the President is a minister of word and sacrament and pastoral responsibility throughout the Methodist Church. The role of the President of Conference is the fullest expression of personal *episkope* that the Methodist Church knows. In fact, we can go further than that and say that the President exercises an episcopal ministry in many ways.

So what we have now is a suggestive conjunction of three things: the Conference can be seen as ‘the bishop’, the Connexion bears certain key marks of a ‘diocese’, and the President is clearly the fullest expression of personal *episkope*, linking the Conference and the Connexion. We suggest that, if these perceptions were to become widely recognised, certain possibilities would be opened up for enhancing the covenantal relationship between our two churches.

A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

A President bishop?

If the Methodist Church were to decide to revisit the question of becoming an episcopally ordered church, we suggest that the most appropriate way of bringing this about would be for the President of Conference to be the first bishop. For the President to be incorporated into the historic episcopate of the universal Church would be to recognise (this is the crucial step in the argument) what is already the case, that the President exercises an ‘episcopal’ ministry on behalf of an ‘episcopal’ Conference. We believe that it would be a desirable and proper step for this recognition to be given. The Methodist Church would not be creating an episcopate from nothing, but giving appropriate recognition to what is already true, and building on both corporate and personal *episkope* in their fullest expressions within British Methodism. To apply the language of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Methodist Church clearly has the reality of *episkope* (that is mutually acknowledged in the Covenant): it is therefore free to receive the sign of that reality (incorporation into the historic episcopate by means of ordination by bishops within the historic succession). This is a sign that is recognised throughout the greater part of the Christian Church, and one

that will open doors ecumenically in several directions, without closing any (cf. BEM M 53).

An episcopal President of Conference would be a bishop for the whole Connexion, which, as we have pointed out, already has certain characteristics of a very large diocese. We are not convinced that a President-bishop would be ‘disconnected from the organised life of the church’, as WSB suggests – far from it. As now, the President, working with the Vice-President, would have a Connexion-wide ministry of leadership. But, while the first ordination could very well be of one bishop, some more bishops would be necessary for an effective episcopal ministry throughout the connexion (including ordinations) and in relation to wider society and to other churches. Various options for establishing an episcopate have been discussed in WSB. We recommend that the episcopate should continue to be closely connected to the office of President, as already a *de facto* ‘episcopal’ ministry and as the locus of a Methodist episcopate that would be least controversial and which would command the broadest support among Methodists and which would, we believe, also commend itself to other churches that are ordered in the historic episcopate.

Any such decisions would be for Conference to determine, but we suggest that one way of achieving this would be by each incoming President being ordained bishop for the whole Methodist Church. Within a few years, on the present system, there would be small group of bishops, ordained for a lifelong ministry, serving throughout the connexion. Active outgoing presidents, while being particularly linked, through stationing, with certain districts, circuits or institutions, would retain (as they do now) a recognised Connexion-wide ministry, closely related to the identity of the Methodist Church – a role that is entirely appropriate for a bishop. If this episcopal team came to be regarded as, in effect, a ‘college’ of bishops (made up of the President-bishop and Past President-bishops), there would be alongside a ‘college’ of Vice-Presidents, whose members similarly already have an acknowledged role in the Connexion. We also note that the 2007 Conference directed the Methodist Council to set up a working party on role of the Presidency, including the length of the terms of office that the President and Vice-President should serve.

There are already several distinct groups of bishops, ordained within the historic episcopate, in Britain. As well as Anglican bishops, there are Roman Catholic bishops, Eastern Orthodox bishops, Oriental Orthodox bishops and bishops of other churches. On the whole, these groups are not in communion with each other. In terms of the unity of the Church,

this is a scandal. The churches work hard to bring about greater unity, and with some success, but full ecclesial communion generally eludes them. Were there to be a large number of Methodist bishops, this would add to the confusion and would not advance the visible unity of Christ's Church. Successive resolutions of Conference have made it clear that a Methodist episcopate could only be justified if it were to enhance the visible unity and mission of the Church. It might actually be a virtue that the Methodist Church had one bishop to start with. Then it would be clear that this was a pioneer episcopacy, one that was established for mission and unity. It would be an example to all the churches.

Before a first Methodist President-bishop could be ordained, the Methodist Church would have to agree a doctrinal statement about the nature and duties of episcopal ministry. In our view, it would be a relatively simple matter to compile this from various statements that have been approved by Conference over the years. There would also be a need for a Methodist liturgy for the ordination of a bishop. Once again there are plenty of models among the reformed episcopal churches that could be adapted if that is what the Methodist Church wished to do.

How would the first Methodist President-bishop be ordained? Most episcopal churches follow the Council of Nicaea, AD 325, which ruled that at least three bishops should take part in an episcopal ordination, as an expression of episcopal collegiality and to testify to the acceptability of the candidate to the wider Church. The Methodist Church is in communion with a number of churches that are ordered in the historic episcopate and that could be invited to send a bishop to take part in the laying on of hands: the United Churches of South Asia and some Lutheran Churches of Northern Europe that are members of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Leuenberg Church Fellowship). These churches are also in communion with the Church of England.¹⁵ The First Interim Report of the JIC said that 'the JIC believes that it would be appropriate for the Methodist Church's Covenant partner also to be invited to participate' (7.10.19).

In our view, it would be important that, after the first ordination of a Methodist bishop at Conference, the President-bishop should preside at all subsequent ordinations, without exception, at least until there is one or

15 The significance of an interchangeable ministry in a relation of 'communion', as far as the Church of England is concerned, is set out in our first interim report *In the Spirit of the Covenant*, ch.7.

more episcopal Past Presidents to share this ministry (with the appropriate participation of the Vice-Presidents). With around 50 candidates for ordination anticipated each year, it is not out of the question for the President-bishop to preside at an ordination of presbyters and an ordination of deacons around the time of the Conference.

Marks of a possible Methodist episcopate

The sort of Methodist episcopate that we have outlined, would have several distinctive characteristics. We believe that each of these features would be true to the ecclesiology and polity of the Methodist Church as a connexional Church and would draw out what is latent there. Our challenge to the Methodist Church is: ‘Become what you are.’

It would be a *collegial* episcopate: the bishops (a small number comprising the President and, after a few years, some active Past Presidents) would work with each other and with others who share in oversight, sharing the tasks agreed by Conference; the current President, as *primus inter pares*, would convene them.

It would be a *flexible* episcopate – certainly not provisional with regard to the episcopal orders of the bishops, but with respect to structures: no ‘dioceses’ would be created, for the Connexion would remain, as it were, the ‘diocese’. Flexibility for unity would be retained, because no new fixed boundaries would be established.

It would be a *pioneer* episcopate: the Methodist Church would be exploring fresh forms of episcopal ministry; it would actually be doing precisely what Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher suggested for the Free Churches in his Cambridge sermon as long ago as 1946 – taking episcopacy into its system and (Archbishop Fisher emphasised) trying it out on its own ground.

Very clearly it would be an *accountable* episcopate, because it would be subject to Conference and carry out a ministry of unity and mission on behalf of Conference.

It would be an *earthed* episcopate, because (after their Presidential term) bishops could, if appropriate, continue to serve in their previous appointments, while being called to various episcopal duties further afield.

It would be an *ecumenical* episcopate, because, while new bishops in the historic episcopate would be added to the Anglican, Roman Catholic and

Orthodox episcopates that already exist in this country – in one sense, as we have said, an ecumenically questionable step – it would be with the purpose and goal of making visible unity (at least with Anglicans) a reality, and would actually make a unified episcopate possible in the end.

Crucially, it would be an *apostolic* episcopate – a visible testimony to the churches and to the world of the Methodist Church’s abiding intention to ordain to the ministry of the Church of Christ. As the report of the Formal Conversations put it: ‘This intended apostolic continuity is an expression, first, of trust in Christ’s faithfulness to his Church, and, second, of the Church’s obedience and faithfulness to the one apostolic mission’ (175).

Finally, it would be a *covenantal* episcopate, because bishops of the Methodist Church and of the Church of England would work closely and collegially together, with mutual participation in the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons, sharing in bishops’ collegial gatherings in the two churches, and with close consultation and co-operation on the ground, as our churches move yet more closely together until eventually they become one church.

Challenges to the Church of England

In what ways would this initiative on the part of the Methodist Church send out a challenge to the Church of England? We believe that each of these challenges would be true to the ecclesiology and polity of the Church of England as an episcopal Church and would draw out what is latent there. Our challenge to the Church of England is: ‘Become what you are.’

The Church of England could learn from such a pioneer episcopate the need for greater flexibility and imagination in responding to the demands of mission in our culture – ‘fresh expressions’ of episcopal ministry!

The collegial character of a Methodist episcopate, operating collaboratively throughout the connexion, could challenge the Church of England about how it practises episcopal collegiality. Collegiality applies both in the House of Bishops and in the wider College (all serving bishops meet annually in the Bishops’ Meeting and are joined by other Anglican and ecumenical bishops from elsewhere) and in the diocese, where there are usually suffragan or assistant bishops working with the diocesan. There is an intra-episcopal collegiality and a wider, less formal collegiality between bishops and presbyters and lay officers (such as lay chairs of diocesan and deanery synods, Readers, and Churchwardens) of the church.

The Connexional nature of a Methodist episcopal ministry could challenge the Church of England to be a more united church, with more internal coherence. We believe that Methodists would welcome greater consistency in policy across the dioceses. The recent trend for dioceses to collaborate and to share resources could be given a boost.

The close relationship between Methodist bishops and the Conference would parallel the Anglican understanding of ‘the bishop in synod’, and these models could be mutually enriching, without undermining the particular responsibilities that bishops in the Church of England have to guide the church in matters of doctrine, liturgy and ministry.

The fact that a Methodist episcopate, within the historic episcopal succession, would be open to women from the very beginning needs to be taken seriously by the Church of England as it seeks to implement the General Synod’s intention, expressed in July 2006, to make it possible for women to be ordained bishop in the Church of England, while holding together as a Church. The Methodist Church believes that women and men are equally called to every area of ministry and that this is a truth that it has received from God.

Finally, we believe that this action, if it were taken by the Methodist Church within the setting of the Covenant, would call for an imaginative and generous response from the Church of England. It would be clear that all future ordinations in the Methodist Church would be within that intentional visible continuity with the Church of the Apostles that is called in shorthand ‘the historic episcopate’. The Church of England would be challenged to anticipate, as far as it could, a future that was already becoming a reality, and therefore to take a constructive view of what the 1998 Lambeth Conference called ‘bearable anomalies’ in order to make it possible for Anglican and Methodist bishops, presbyters and deacons to work together on equal terms.

How would this step directly assist our covenantal journey towards the goal of full visible communion?

The Methodist Church would have taken a step that it has said many times that it was willing to do for the sake of mission and unity.

It would create a much more level playing field as far as ordained ministry is concerned: there would be no sub-text of one church lacking something that the other thought it should have and no one-way transaction of ‘gifts’.

Consequently, such a Methodist episcopate would become the source of an episcopally-ordained ministry that would, in principle, be interchangeable with the ordained ministry of the Church of England.

As *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* suggests, those churches that have the particular sign of visible continuity in *episkope* (i.e. the historic episcopate) are free to recognise ‘the apostolic content’ of the ministry and the reality of *episkope* in a church that so far is without the sign. This is precisely what the Church of England has done in the Covenant. BEM also says that a church that does not have the sign of the historic episcopate, yet has the apostolic content of its ministry recognised, is free to accept the sign (BEM M 53). This is what we hope the Methodist Church will do.

Finally, the practical integration and joint mission of our churches would be enhanced, as Anglican and Methodist ordained ministers would in the future be eligible to be appointed, in accordance with existing procedures, to any position of responsibility and leadership within each other’s churches. Some imaginative appointments could be made, at a senior level, to positions that would enable the same person to be a pastor to Anglicans and Methodists alike in the same geographical area. Our journey towards full visible communion would take a major leap forward.

Altogether, in a way that is true to their teaching and polity, our churches would not only have taken an important step towards full visible communion, but both would be helped to become more fully what they are and what they aspire to be, and would be better able to work as one body in mission, while they continue to work for the full visible unity of Christ’s Church.

APPENDIX

'Episkope and Episcopacy' Guidelines (in bold), adopted by the 2000 Conference, with the commentary by the Faith and Order Committee.

1. The Methodist Church recognizes that *episkopé* is exercised within its life in communal, collegial and personal ways.

a. The Methodist Church values communal *episkopé*, exercised by representative bodies throughout the Church's life.

The Conference and the District Synod, in their representative sessions, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils are examples of the exercise of communal *episkopé*.

b. The Methodist Church values collegial *episkopé*, and its tradition of expressing collegiality, not only among members of the same order of ministry, but also among lay persons and ordained persons.

Examples of such collegiality include the Ministerial Session of the Conference, which is made up of ministers, and Local Preachers Meetings and local church Pastoral Committees, where collegial oversight is shared by ordained and lay persons.

c. The Methodist Church values personal *episkopé* in every part of the Church's life, but believes that such *episkopé* should be exercised within a collegial or communal context.

It is important that personal episkope be allowed for within connexional structures in ways consonant with its exercise in Circuits and Districts. Because the episkope exercised by individuals within the life of the Methodist Church is derived or representative oversight, it is important that those who exercise personal episkope remain accountable to the wider Church. It must be recognized that the need to be accountable and the need to maintain proper confidentiality may sometimes be in conflict.

- 2. The Methodist Church is a connexional Church and all *episkopé* should be exercised within this context. In the development of any structures, due consideration should be given to their impact upon the life of the whole Church. There is a proper balance to be maintained between, for example, Circuit and District or District and Connexion.**

While recognizing the value of a diocesan model, the Methodist Church would be uneasy about the development of any models of personal episkope which isolated Districts from the whole Church.

- 3. The Methodist Church began as a missionary movement and continues to have mission at its heart. Methodists believe that a key function of episkope is to enable and encourage the Church's participation in God's mission.**

The missionary imperative was an important consideration in the introduction of 'separated' Chairmen. The experience of some Methodist Churches, including the United Methodist Church, which have adopted episcopal systems of oversight provides encouraging precedents for expressions of episkope that are mission-led.

- 4. In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ's Church, the Methodist Church 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.**

As to (a), this was something that the Conference asked of the Church of England in 1955 as the 'Conversations' began. Many people in our partner churches would themselves be anxious to ensure that nothing done in the uniting of ministries should imply that previous ministries were invalid or inauthentic.

As to (b), Methodism has previously insisted that there should be freedom of interpretation as to the significance of the historic episcopate. The concept that episcopacy is a 'sign but not a guarantee of the apostolicity of the Church' may be widely acceptable as a testimony to its symbolic witness to links across time, while testifying too to the obvious truth that bishops are not automatically and invariably wise or faithful.

5. The Methodist Church, in contemplating the possibility of receiving the sign of the historic episcopal succession, expects to engage in dialogue with its sister Churches to clarify as thoroughly as possible the nature and benefits of this gift.

In considering the introduction of the historic succession to Methodism in the sort of circumstances outlined in Guideline 2, the Methodist Church recognizes the need to explore its potential for complementing and enriching the Methodist Church's present experience of episkope and for enhancing Methodism's sense of communion within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

6. The Methodist Church would be unable to receive the sign of episcopal succession in a context which would involve a repudiation of what the Methodist Church believed itself to have received from God.

An obvious and important example of what is meant by this Guideline is the ministry of women. Since women were ordained to the presbyterate in the Methodist Church, every office for which male ministers are eligible has been open also to women. In its preliminary consideration of the scheme for an Ecumenical Bishop in Wales, the Conference was extremely concerned by the statement that the first such bishop would necessarily be male, and it gave its approval for further work to be done on the scheme on the understanding that serious efforts would be made in the ongoing discussions to ensure that such a restriction should not obtain in relation to any subsequent appointment.

7. The Methodist Church, in receiving the sign of episcopal succession, would insist that all ministries, including those of oversight, are exercised within the ministry of the whole people of God and at its service, rather than in isolation from it and in supremacy over it.

In earlier conversations, the Methodist Church has emphasized the value which it would place on the pastoral office of bishops, and on bishops having leadership responsibilities for mission and a representative role in community affairs. The view has been expressed that they should know and be known at many levels, and that they should exercise authority with gentleness and be humble servants of Christ.

As the survey of styles of episkope and of episcopacy indicated, Methodists should not fear that the adoption of episcopacy would, of necessity, involve the adoption of a hierarchical model. Increasingly, in episcopally ordered churches, emphasis has been placed on the pastoral, teaching and missionary roles of the bishop. As Commitment to Mission and Unity insists:

The office [of a bishop] is relational in character and must be exercised in, with and among the community which it is called to serve. The office should not be so overburdened with bureaucratic demands that bishops are prevented from being alongside their people, or that their collegiality with their fellow bishops, presbyters and deacons is diminished. It is a ministry of service which requires an appropriate lifestyle and pastoral demeanour.¹⁶

16 CMU, p. 10.