

## **Ministry in the Methodist Church**

### **Draft Conference Statement**

This draft Statement was included in the '[Ministry in the Methodist Church](#)' report to the 2018 Conference as Part B. The Conference, pursuant to Standing Order 129 (2) and (3):

- (i) commended the draft Conference Statement 'Ministry in the Methodist Church to the Connexion for study, discussion and response;
- (ii) directed the Secretary of the Conference to ensure that the draft Statement is made widely available for study and discussion.
- (iii) invited Districts, Circuits and Local Churches to send comments on the draft Statement to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee (faithandorder@methodistchurch.org.uk) to arrive not later than 1 February 2020.

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The Church of Christ, in every age  
beset by change but Spirit-led,  
must claim and test its heritage  
and keep on rising from the dead.

...

We have no mission but to serve  
in full obedience to our Lord:  
to care for all, without reserve,  
and spread his liberating Word.  
Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

#### **1. The background and purpose of the Statement**

- 1.1. In the early part of the 21st century, the British Methodist Church is encountering and exploring many questions about the form and nature of the ministry it undertakes. Such questions provide an opportunity for it to reflect on how, as a particular portion of the people of God, it discerns and responds to God's call in changed and changing contexts. New situations and patterns of relating, the plethora of conversations about ministry in different areas of the Church's life, and the diversity of views and experiences led to the recognition of a need for a new Statement on ministry. This Statement, therefore, sets out the British Methodist Church's understanding of ministry.
- 1.2. Any understanding of ministry begins with an understanding of, and response to, God. Methodists are part of a people called by God to love and praise God for the sake of the world. This is explored further in section two and forms the foundation of this Statement. Section three notes our changing context, remembering that the Methodist story is one of change as, through God's grace, we seek to find new ways to express and celebrate God's love for all. The Methodist Church continues to affirm that the ministry of the whole people of God is central to its understanding of ministry (section 4). As part of the universal Church and mindful of their call to spread scriptural holiness, the Methodist people shape their life together in order to share in God's mission (section 5) and to ensure that they stay true to God's purposes (section 6). Section seven considers how we release and support people for

particular ministries and leads to the invitation to all Methodists to engage with the thinking in this report within their own contexts as they participate in discerning our continuing response to God.

- 1.3. Conference Statements express our corporate understanding and wisdom and are intended to last for a considerable period of time. It is hoped that this Statement will help the Methodist people, and others, to think more clearly about the nature and purpose of ministry and how we corporately and personally respond to God's call. Drawing on previous Conference Statements and reports, insights from the Methodist and wider Christian tradition, Scripture, and past and current experience, this Statement reflects a conversation between these different voices, thus modelling a process of theological discernment through conferring. It is a reference point for the Methodist people and it provides a framework and resource for exploring the particular questions about ministry that arise from time to time in different and changing contexts. Furthermore, it encourages reflection on how we engage with Scripture and tradition in the light of our experience and applied reason as we continue to seek to live faithfully in response to God's call.
- 1.4. The themes of remembering, rearticulating and re-visioning have shaped this work. Building on the corporate wisdom of the Methodist people across the years, this Statement helps the Methodist Church to remember its previous theological thinking about ministry by drawing attention to those aspects that remain central to its shared understanding. In a new context, and in the light of experience, elements of this understanding are rearticulated or expanded, or areas of Methodist theology and practice that may require further consideration are highlighted. Any re-visioning can only begin from this point and will form part of the continuing reflection on ministry and the Methodist Church's response to God.
- 1.5. There are several significant and foundational documents that the Methodist people are particularly encouraged to 'remember'. Of particular importance are Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union* which sets out the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church and *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), the Methodist Church's key ecclesiological Statement. In addition, there are a number of reports, adopted by the Conference, which have continuing theological significance. Methodist theology exists within the context of the universal Church and, whilst there is a wealth of theological thinking from which we draw and to which we contribute, of particular note are the World Council of Churches convergence texts *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), and our joint work in relation to the Anglican-Methodist Covenant<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.6. All human communities develop their own language and the language we use is shaped by our history, experience and dialogue with others. Some of our theological language comes from Scripture, some from tradition and some from contemporary society. Readers will come from different perspectives and backgrounds and understand theological language in different ways. Some terms will be familiar and we may therefore bring assumptions about what they mean; some terms may be new or feel obscure. Yet theological language is part of our striving for a deeper relationship with, and a better understanding of, God, and the terms we use have developed through dialogue and discernment. Theological language provides important insights and conveys shared wisdom. It says something about our identity as part of the people of God and is shaped by our particular history as well as by that of the wider Church. Christians from different traditions and Methodists from different cultural contexts sometimes use theological terms in different ways. Although different Churches use similar words to describe particular ministries they do not always mean the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> See *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* (2003) and the work of the Joint Implementation Commission [www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/jic](http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/jic)

1.7. The Bible is a key source for all Christian theology. In this Statement, the Bible has been read primarily to discern and articulate its great theme of God's self-giving love in creation, in the person and work of Christ and in the hope that is set before us. Our understanding of ministry is situated within this story, and the key biblical images of the people of God and the Body of Christ are used to emphasise the priority of a corporate understanding of ministry over one that is focused on individual roles and gifts. Discussion of Christian ministry often concentrates on particular New Testament words and phrases, whether indicating particular roles or more general patterns of behaviour towards God or one another, and such discussions take place in several of those previous Methodist documents on which this Statement is built. It is rarely possible to translate these words, or to define the roles to which they point, with sufficient precision. For example, the words conventionally translated 'ministry' and 'minister' are used and understood in a variety of ways. They do not refer to one clearly defined concept but to a pattern of response to God. Our language of ministry is related to the way in which the New Testament talks about the service and ministry of Jesus and the way in which the witness and service of the Church flow from that. It is clear that the language and patterns of ministry in the New Testament are varied and fluid. Ministry is thus a dynamic term and we draw on a variety of words and metaphors to help convey its meaning. Whilst we see in the New Testament a variety of forms of ministry existing at different times and places, as "the Holy Spirit continued to lead the Church in life, worship and mission, certain elements from this early variety were further developed and became settled into a more universal pattern of ministry."<sup>2</sup> In the second and third centuries, a threefold pattern of bishop, presbyter and deacon became established as the pattern of ordained ministry throughout the Church. The Methodist Church claims continuity with this pattern of ministry within the ministry of the universal Church. Over time, the practical exercise of these ministries has undergone some considerable change, and in some communities the continuing functions have been differently distributed according to structures other than the threefold pattern. Part of the purpose of this Statement is to express how Methodists understand ministry.

## 2. **Understanding ministry**

Our understanding of ministry flows from the understanding that first we are a people called by God. What we believe about the nature of God and our response to God's call will shape the way in which our ministry is understood and expressed.

### 2.1. **Beginning with God**

We know God primarily through God's actions in human history. God is the source of all that is and everything, therefore, starts with God and God's love for the world.

2.1.1. God's outgoing all-embracing love for the whole of creation (God's mission) began with the act of creation itself.<sup>3</sup> As part of the creative act, God created humanity in God's likeness to be in a loving relationship with God, others and the whole of creation and to be a sign of God's faithful care for the whole universe. Through God's revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit Christians have a Trinitarian understanding of God, believing that God's being is a relationship of self-giving love.

2.1.2. The mission of God is focused in a new way in Jesus. We understand that "In the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians saw both the completion of God's mission and the decisive evidence that God reigns – in and through the love which allowed itself to be crucified for the sake of the world."<sup>4</sup> Through and in Jesus, God's kingdom (the sovereign presence and activity of God<sup>5</sup>) is established, although it is still to come in all its fullness. God offers us

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<sup>2</sup> 1982, World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§19

<sup>3</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.2.

<sup>4</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.4

<sup>5</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.3

love, forgiveness, acceptance and new life in Christ.

- 2.1.3. Christians recall and summarise their understanding of God and God's relationship with creation when they gather for the Lord's Supper in their prayers of thanksgiving. For example, Methodists declare:

We praise you, gracious Father,  
our Maker and Sustainer.  
You created the heavens and the earth  
and formed us in your own image.  
Though we sinned against you,  
your love for us was constant,  
And you sent your Son Jesus Christ  
to be the Saviour of the world.

Sharing our human nature,  
he was born of Mary  
and baptized in the Jordan.  
He proclaimed your kingdom, by word and deed,  
and was put to death upon the cross.  
You raised him from the dead;  
you exalted him in glory;  
And through him you have sent your Holy Spirit,  
calling us to be your people,  
a community of faith.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. **Called to be God's people**

Christians therefore believe that they are called to be God's people, and they understand this in multiple ways.

- 2.2.1. The concept of 'the people of God' has been significant throughout the history of God's people. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the people of Israel are called into being as a covenant people, the people of God, with a vocation to worship the one God, to live together justly in God's name and to be a sign of this one God before the nations. The people of Israel experience God as liberator, lawgiver and source of renewal and hope. In the New Testament, texts relating to the people of God are recalled and applied to the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early Church. The vision of the Church as 'the Body of Christ' is another way of expressing this understanding. Through baptism, all Christians are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and are brought into a new relationship with each other, becoming a community that expresses God's purpose for the entire human community.

- 2.2.2. Among Christian Churches there is consensus that:

"In a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become God's people. For this purpose God chose Israel and then spoke in a unique and decisive way in Jesus Christ, God's Son. Jesus made his own the nature, condition and cause of the whole human race, giving himself as a sacrifice for all. Jesus' life of service, his death and resurrection, are the foundation of a new community which is built up continually by the good news of the Gospel and the gifts of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit unites in a single body those who follow Jesus Christ and sends them as witnesses into the

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<sup>6</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 1999, *The Methodist Worship Book*, Holy Communion, Ordinary Seasons (1), p.192

world. Belonging to the Church means living in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

2.2.3. The Church is a community called into being by God to participate in God’s mission, witness to divine grace, and proclaim the kingdom of God as Jesus did.<sup>8</sup> From God’s “reign and mission, exemplified in and established by Jesus”<sup>9</sup>, the Church derives its existence and purpose and thus discerns its calling. God’s mission does not belong to the Church but the Church participates in it and witnesses to God’s love through loving, suffering and service in our broken world.<sup>10</sup> The Church is a sign, foretaste and instrument of God’s kingdom.<sup>11</sup> In this imperfect human community, the presence of the Holy Spirit makes such witness possible.

### 2.3. **Called for a purpose**

God’s people are called to be set apart to love and praise God so that the world may believe. This double dynamic of turning to God and turning to the world is central to understanding ministry.

2.3.1. God’s people are called to be set apart to love and praise God. 1 Peter 2, for example, draws on a range of Old Testament references to describe the Church as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,’ all of which are rooted in and directed towards God. Similarly, Paul can say ‘we are the temple of the living God’ (2 Corinthians 6:16). The Church offers worship to the glory and praise of God,<sup>12</sup> joyfully proclaiming God’s wonderful acts and celebrating God’s eternally loving nature. It consists of those who respond to God’s undeserved, abundant love in thanksgiving and joy. Through worship, fellowship and the work of the Holy Spirit Christians grow more Christ-like and participate in the life of God. Only if it remains a worshipping community will the Church live and speak the Gospel and serve Christ and its neighbours.<sup>13</sup>

2.3.2. In response to God’s call, God’s people are called to be set apart for the sake of the world, so that the world may know and experience God’s love and that all things may be reconciled to God. Amongst Christians, it is common understanding that “the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom”<sup>14</sup> In the language of John’s Gospel, Christians are not ‘of the world’ (in that the source and foundation of their life is in God) but they are still ‘in the world,’ still a part of God’s creation, wrestling with its complexities, practicalities and imperfections and longing for the kingdom to come. Guided and equipped by the Holy Spirit, members of the Church participate in Jesus’ ministry of suffering and service, manifesting God’s grace and inviting hope in the God who has poured out his life for the life of the world.<sup>15</sup>

2.3.3. In the Scriptures this calling is expressed in terms of covenant. The idea of the covenant has been significant in Methodist thinking. For example in the annual Covenant Service Methodists remember that:

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<sup>7</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*, M§1

<sup>8</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.1, 2.1.7

<sup>9</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.8

<sup>10</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.10 and see 1.4.3

<sup>11</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 1.4.1

<sup>12</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 1999, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.vii. The *Preface* to the *Methodist Worship Book* begins by reminding the Methodist people that: “The Church is called to offer worship to the glory and praise of God.”

<sup>13</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 3.2.7

<sup>14</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §13

<sup>15</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.1.7

“God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law. The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord, in his life, work, death and resurrection. In him all people may be set free from sin and its power, and united in love and obedience. In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ. For our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God.”<sup>16</sup>

Understandings of the covenant emphasise both grace and obedience. In the light of this, and with its distinctive emphases on “God’s grace and on holiness, commitment and social action” Methodism firmly places itself in the covenant tradition.<sup>17</sup> The annual Covenant Service provides an opportunity to remember God’s generous, abundant love and that our response to this is rooted in thanksgiving.

- 2.3.4. The Methodist Church understands that its particular call is to spread scriptural holiness.<sup>18</sup> Holiness has been a distinctive emphasis of Methodism from its inception. It is understood as a Christ-like characteristic that brings freedom from evil thoughts and actions. It is both the goal of Christian living and an experience possible, through God’s gift, for ordinary Christians (and not just the select few). It is both a gift and an aspiration. Holiness is personal but never individualistic: John Wesley was clear “the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>19</sup> Following John Wesley’s example, Methodists were to preach God’s love and call people to new life: holiness is a blessing available to all.

#### 2.4. **Responding to God’s call**

God’s call to be set apart for the sake of the world forms the foundation of our understanding of ministry. Those who believe God’s self-revelation in Jesus and accept Jesus as their Saviour become part of Christ’s Church. In responding to the grace of God, they share in God’s mission.

- 2.4.1. There are different ways of expressing this double dynamic of being set apart for the sake of the world and different ways in which people come to their understanding of ministry. It is rooted in our understanding of baptism for, as Methodists are reminded in the Ordination Services: “All Christians are called through their Baptism and by the hearing of God’s word to ministry and service among the whole people of God and in the life of the world.”<sup>20</sup> In common with the majority of Christian traditions, Methodism sees in baptism a sacrament of God’s grace and our response to it. We understand that those who are baptized are embraced by the love of God, incorporated into Christ and enfolded into the body of God’s people.<sup>21</sup> Commitment to Christ “can truly be realized only in full participation in the worship, witness and service of the Christian community.”<sup>22</sup> The baptized participate in fulfilling the mission of the Church “through the witness of their lives and, when possible, through the open proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> The word ‘discipleship’ is an important way of expressing that living out of Christian faith to which Christians are called. In the 1982 convergence document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Churches agreed that:

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<sup>16</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 1999, *Methodist Worship Book*, p.285

<sup>17</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 2.2.9

<sup>18</sup> Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union* states that the Methodist Church “ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unflinching resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.”

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley quoted in The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.3.9

<sup>20</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 1999, *Methodist Worship Book*, p.297, Introduction to the Ordination Services

<sup>21</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.4.3

<sup>22</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.4.8

<sup>23</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §25

“Living in this communion with God, all members of the Church are called to confess their faith and to give account of their hope. They are to identify with the joys and sufferings of all people as they seek to witness in caring love. The members of Christ’s body are to struggle with the oppressed towards that freedom and dignity promised with the coming of the Kingdom. This mission needs to be carried out in varying political, social and cultural contexts. In order to fulfil this mission faithfully, they will seek relevant forms of witness and service in each situation. In so doing they bring to the world a foretaste of the joy and glory of God’s Kingdom.”<sup>24</sup>

2.4.2. The relationship of love at the heart of God is a characteristic of the community of God’s people. The 2013 convergence text, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, draws on the biblical notion of *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing) as central to a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church.<sup>25</sup> The Methodist Church has affirmed that “Christian believing and living are essentially societal in nature. This is true both for individuals and local church communities.”<sup>26</sup> The way in which we discern and exercise our response to God’s calling is always corporate and communal. Christians are called to share in God’s mission in the power of the Holy Spirit and in company with other Christians, remembering, always, that it is at God’s invitation and initiative.

2.4.3. Ministry embraces the witness and service to which the whole people of God are called, whether as individuals, as a local community, or as the universal Church. Whilst ‘ministry’ or ‘ministries’ can also refer to the particular institutional forms which this service takes, ministry is fundamentally about the participation of the whole Church in the life of Christ.<sup>27</sup> All members of the Church, therefore, share in ministry, but the discernment and exercise of ministry is never an individualistic enterprise. The ministry of the Church is exercised as Christians together respond to God’s call and discover and use the gifts which the Holy Spirit has given them.<sup>28</sup>

2.4.4. Methodists understand that:

“Christ offered himself as a servant or minister and opened the way to God for us (his priestly ministry). All Christians are called to continue Christ’s ministry by serving in the Church and in the world.”<sup>29</sup>

Jesus, crucified, risen and ascended has a continuing ministry in which those who are called to be Christ’s body have a part. As God sent Jesus, so disciples of Jesus are sent into the world<sup>30</sup>, called to be “a prophetic people, bearing witness to God’s word; a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship; and a royal people, serving as instruments for the establishment of God’s reign.”<sup>31</sup> It is a constant challenge to the Church to consider how the teaching, sanctifying and governing ministry of Christ is continued in and through the Church. In some of Paul’s writings this is spoken of in terms of how we are transformed to live out the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 2:5). Ministry is both a sharing in Christ’s service to the world and a service to Christ in the world.

2.4.5. For the sake of this ministry of the whole body, all are equipped with gifts (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-31), “for the benefit of the whole body in its disciplined life, and for its

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<sup>24</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§4

<sup>25</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §13

<sup>26</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.4.2

<sup>27</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§7

<sup>28</sup> The Methodist Church, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, 45

<sup>29</sup> The Methodist Church, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, 44

<sup>30</sup> John 20:21

<sup>31</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §19

service to the whole world”.<sup>32</sup> All members of the Church participate in the ministry of Christ by proclaiming the kingdom of God in different ways at different times, but sharing in God’s mission is essentially a corporate endeavour and rooted in the interdependence of all Christians as the Body of Christ. The gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit to each and every member of the Body of Christ are for the common good of the whole of God’s people and for the sake of the kingdom.

## 2.5. **Ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God**

Any reflection on ministry is therefore rooted in an understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God as the primary and normative ministry of the Church.<sup>33</sup> This has been a particular emphasis in Methodist theology, as noted in our response to the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*:

“[W]e believe that future discussion of ministry must be given much greater prominence to the vocation of the whole people of God... We believe that an expression of the apostolic faith today must concentrate on the calling of the whole people of God, must include a charge to the people to be what they are, and, if necessary, a charge to the ordained to enable this to be so.”<sup>34</sup>

The people of God are together called and set apart. Within each portion of the people of God some are further set apart within the body (usually through ordination) to enable the Church to fulfil its calling, but all participate in the ministry of the Church.

2.6. This section has explored how the Methodist Church, as part of the universal Church called into being by God through Jesus Christ, believes that it has a particular call to spread scriptural holiness, to share the good news of God’s love and salvation for all. For this purpose, the Holy Spirit guides the Church and gives to its members diverse and complementary gifts so that they may support and encourage one another and engage in witness and service in the world. All of God’s people have gifts to be used for the sake of the whole Church for the sake of the world. As the Methodist Church continues to discern how it is to live out its calling in a changed and changing world, all members are called to re-discover, with the help of the community, their gifts and the tasks which they are to undertake. Circuits and Local Churches are the settings in which we consider ways of supporting each other in this endeavour and together responding to God’s call.

## 3. **A changed and changing context**

3.1. Human societies are constantly changing, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly and sometimes dramatically. Likewise, patterns of church life and the relationship of the Church to the culture in which it is situated evolve and alter. In changing situations and contexts, the Methodist Church continues to develop and, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeks to discern new ways of responding.

3.2. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the British Methodist Church’s context is one of variety, fluidity and uncertainty. Within the living memory of many Methodists, there have been some significant changes in British society. Whilst it is not possible to offer any adequate exploration of these here, for the purposes of illustration it is noted that these include:

3.2.1. Changes in working and social life from defined social roles and a higher instance of lifelong professions and jobs, to increased social and geographical mobility and flexibility in work across a career. Whilst many can remember highly routinised patterns of social

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<sup>32</sup> The Methodist Church, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, 44

<sup>33</sup> Methodist Conference Agenda, 1990, *the Ministry of the People of God in the World*, pp.539

<sup>34</sup> The Methodist Church, 1985, *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text*, 2.4.0

life with Sunday observance, restricted shopping and licensing hours and routine meal times, much more is now available on demand with increased choice (or the illusion of choice) in many areas of life, and expectations of and greater flexibility of social provision around individual lifestyles and needs;

- 3.2.2. Changes in religious belief and practice as British society has shifted from positions defined in relation to a nominal Christianity to an increased relativism and lack of shared meta-narrative or belief in its possibility or desirability. Increased access to information (particularly electronically) and emphasis on individual choice and personal spirituality contribute to this. At the same time there is a lack of general theological literacy and many both within and beyond the Church perceive theology as a specialist, and even irrelevant, subject. Often religion and spirituality are now considered and approached within a consumerist framework;
- 3.2.3. Changes in the multi-cultural context. Whereas communities of other faiths have always been present they tended to be in defined locations, but British society now comprises dispersed communities of many faiths and those who profess no faith. Secularism and faith co-exist and Christianity is often regarded as one particular belief-system amongst many. In other parts of the world, the Church is growing, and Christians are addressing many of the same questions in very different contexts. As the geographical centre of Christianity is changing, so is the worldwide Church. In Britain many Methodist churches offer hospitality to congregations from other churches, which provides opportunities for exploring new ways of being church and different ways of worshipping, as well as taking seriously the different experiences of ministry;
- 3.2.4. Changes in the Church's place in British public life as its influence and moral authority has diminished. Where there is interest in spiritual experience there is frequently a disinclination for formal religious involvement on an ongoing basis. A loss of confidence in the Church is partly around questions of belief, partly due to an increased mistrust of public institutions, and partly about the behaviour of the institution and hurt and pain that have been experienced. In a culture in which the authority of traditional organisations is questioned, a church that is perceived to tell people what to think or how to behave is unwelcome.
- 3.3. Beginning as a movement within the Church of England to becoming a Church established by an Act of Parliament, the British Methodist Church itself has experienced many changes and has sought to respond to the activity of God in a changing culture and society:
  - 3.3.1. The British Methodist Church has experienced a shift from being a mainstream institution with a stable membership and organisational structure to becoming a marginal organisation in a constantly changing society. The Church is facing a sharp decline in numbers and anxiety about reducing resources. With changed understandings of community and belonging and patterns of relating, different ways of worshipping, serving and sharing in fellowship have developed. There have been increased questions about a denominational identity that was previously taken for granted when there were stable communities of Methodists who had been formed in British Methodist culture and practice. The Methodist Church moved from a predominantly residential model of full time training for ordained ministers to developing a number of models of training as it has tried to respond to its developing context. It continues to give serious consideration to the ways in which those selected for ordained ministry are encouraged to deepen and broaden their sense of identity as Methodists in leadership roles within the Church. At the same time, many professional lay leaders, such as children and youth workers or community workers, are likely not to have been trained in a Methodist environment. British Methodists today come from a variety of backgrounds, some from other Christian

Churches or from Methodist Churches in different cultures, resulting in varied experience and understanding of Methodism. The British Methodist Church is more culturally diverse than it has been in previous generations and it continues to affirm and seeks to strengthen its relationships of mutuality and interdependence.<sup>35</sup>

- 3.3.2. As the British Methodist Church has sought to respond to God's call and share in God's mission in an ever-changing world there have been many developments and changes in the way in which it has engaged in ministry. It has taken organisational risks as it has tried different ways of expressing and expanding its understanding of mission and ministry in varied contexts and in response to different pressures and challenges. It has encouraged new ways of corporately responding to God's call, for example through nurturing and resourcing ministries that emerge for particular times such as the work of industrial chaplains or, more recently, pioneer ministers. Patterns of ministry have changed, with emphasis on collaborative and team ministry. It has been willing to try new ways of being, equipping people for particular roles for periods of time and seeking to discern how its resources are best employed.
- 3.4. The changed ecumenical context is also significant as the organic unity that, half a century ago, was hoped for has not yet been realised. Interest in receptive ecumenism has grown, with its understanding that through learning from other traditions and receiving gifts and understandings from them our identities authentically deepen and we are drawn into closer relationship. New Churches continue to come into being, adding to the diversity of the ecumenical context and the plethora of ecumenical partnerships. As part of the exploration of this broader landscape, time is given to working for common understanding and the mutual recognition of ministries. This and the greater mobility of Christians between different Churches highlights that words that are commonly used, such as 'minister', can mean slightly (or sometimes very) different things and thus require reflection on how we use and understand such terms. This is complex when a ministry in one church often cannot be equated with a ministry in another, although our tendency is to try and do so.
- 3.5. Whilst God's fundamental call remains the same, our particular response in a changing and complex world can be challenging to work out together. At times, the complexity of the contexts and the different position in which we find ourselves might feel daunting and overwhelming but the same God who continues to call us, equips us and inspires us. Throughout their history, the Methodist people have sought to respond to God in new situations in creative ways. Diversity of experience and understanding brings a richness of gifts, insights and perspectives to the Methodist Church today. The changed and changing contexts bring opportunities to share in and express God's mission in new ways and prompt us to assess that which is fundamental to our understanding of ministry and that which needs to be rearticulated or re-visioned. Discerning how we thus continue to respond to God's call is a task for the whole Church and one which we all share.

#### 4. **The ministry of the whole people of God**

- 4.1. The British Methodist Church has affirmed that the ministry of the whole community of Christians in the world shapes and determines all other ministries,<sup>36</sup> rejoicing in the commitment of Christian people in the world and recognising that "some situations are brutalising and others fulfilling."<sup>37</sup> Such an understanding requires the Methodist people to pay close and prayerful attention to the changing contexts in which we live and work.

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<sup>35</sup> The Methodist Church, 2017, *The Gift of Connexionalism*

<sup>36</sup> "The ministry of the people of God in the world is both the primary and the normative ministry of the Church." Methodist Conference Agenda, 1990, *the Ministry of the People of God in the World*, pp.539

<sup>37</sup> Methodist Conference Agenda, 1990, *the Ministry of the People of God in the World*, p.560, Resolution 2

Belonging to the Church involves supporting and encouraging each other, engaging in corporate discernment and making oneself accountable to other members of the community of faith. Although all members of the Body of Christ are given particular gifts and engage in specific tasks, ministry is always corporate and belongs to the whole Church. Ministry is therefore primarily about the witness of the whole people of God in the world. It is never merely an individual endeavour but always exercised as part of the Body of Christ.

#### 4.2. **The common priesthood of the faithful**

In Methodism this has traditionally been expressed through the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Priesthood incorporates the activities of drawing near to God, worshipping, offering and undertaking a representative role between God and humanity. It implies a turning towards God in worship and a turning towards the world in service. The two movements can be embodied and expressed in many different activities, but both are always necessary. Jesus is the unique priest of the new covenant instituted by his sacrifice for the sake of all people. Through God's grace and actions in Jesus, those who believe share in the "privilege and responsibility of direct access to God"<sup>38</sup> and are called to pray for all, "to express by their lives the fact that they have been named a 'royal priesthood', offering themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1)".<sup>39</sup> In the New Testament, understandings of priesthood relate to "the priesthood of the body of believers, rather than the priesthood of every believer, ... which stresses the inter-dependence of believers."<sup>40</sup> The Methodist Church therefore believes:

"that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised."<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.3. **Sharing in ministry together**

In all areas of church life, Methodists are therefore encouraged to reflect on how we identify, nurture and encourage people's gifts and on how we support and hold each other accountable in our discernment in relation to ministry. Our affirmation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means that our primary understanding of ministry is that it is corporate. Ministry is essentially not only about individual vocation but the response of the whole faith community. How we resource, support and encourage each other as we share in God's mission in the world in a wide range of different contexts and roles is an ongoing challenge.

- 4.3.1. Discerning the particular tasks, and ways of being, that God is calling us to in the world is a corporate task and individual responses to God's call are shaped within this context. There can sometimes be a tension when an individual feels called to a particular role or activity but this is either not affirmed by the Church or the Church discerns that an individual's gifts could be better used in different ways for the sake of the ministry of the whole Body of Christ. We remember that gifts are bestowed on individuals for the common good of the whole people of God and for the sake of the kingdom (see 2.4.5 above). Discerning how gifts are to be employed and expressed is therefore not just a matter for an individual, although the flourishing and wholeness of all people is desired. Similarly, within the context of the Covenant Service, we are reminded that it "is not just a one-to-one transaction between individuals and God, but the act of the whole faith community."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The Methodist Church, *A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, p.22

<sup>39</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §18

<sup>40</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.5.3

<sup>41</sup> *Clause 4 of the Deed of Union*

<sup>42</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, pp.281-282

“Christ has many services to be done;  
some are easy, others are difficult;  
some bring honour, others bring reproach;  
some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,  
others are contrary to both;  
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;  
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.  
Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.”<sup>43</sup>

- 4.3.2. All have a part to play. We participate in responding to God’s call in that we have a share in ministry by virtue of belonging to the priesthood of all believers and only within that context do we explore our individual role. Therefore we always share in ministry, even when it does not feel as if we have a specific role to play, because we participate in the whole. It is this understanding that is encapsulated in the words of the Methodist Covenant Service: “let me be employed for you or laid aside for you.”<sup>44</sup> Whoever we are, whether a child or someone living with dementia, a supernumerary or someone new to the church or community, someone full of energy and new ideas or someone unsure of whether they have anything to offer, all contribute to and participate in the ministry of the whole people of God. This is remembered and expressed in the fellowship of the Local Church and in the ways in which people’s gifts are recognised, encouraged and employed in its life and witness.
- 4.3.3. The Circuit is the primary church unit in British Methodism,<sup>45</sup> “in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help.”<sup>46</sup> For many Methodists, however, the Local Church is the primary place for the celebration, exploration and encouragement of the variety of ways in which Christians engage in witness and service in response to God’s call. For some this is through their paid employment or voluntary work, for others it is through their relationships and roles in their families or the communities of which they are a part. In 1988 the Methodist Conference “believed it would be valuable if churches could *recognise in informal ways* the many and various ministries which the Church needs and needs to be released.”<sup>47</sup> The “ministries which the Church needs” are not primarily about people undertaking tasks in an ecclesial context but the ways in which the people of God are called to share in God’s mission in the world. Local Churches can affirm, celebrate and learn more about the ways in which their members are engaging in worship, witness and service and together discover new opportunities and ways of doing so. This poses both a challenge and an opportunity to re-engage in reflection on ministry and vocation in ways that focus on the understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God in the world.
- 4.3.4. The main ways in which members of the Church support each other in responding to God’s call are through worship, prayer and fellowship. There are many opportunities in the many different contexts of Methodist Local Churches for people to share in conversation, prayer and reflection on the ways in which they are participating in the kingdom of God in the world and engaging in witness and service. The Methodist people are encouraged to seize and create such opportunities so that we may help each other recognise and celebrate our gifts, discern and fulfil our calling, and resource and sustain our witness in sometimes difficult or challenging or mundane contexts.
- 4.3.5. The ministry of all Christians within the corporate life of the Church is also important. By their various gifts the members of the Church contribute to its life and witness, but for its

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<sup>43</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.288

<sup>44</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.290

<sup>45</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.7.4

<sup>46</sup> The Methodist Church, 2017, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, SO500

<sup>47</sup> The Methodist Church, 1988, *The Ministry of the People of God*, 062

work and well-being it also needs people to be available in different ways. Some are set apart to enable the whole Church to fulfil its calling, some undertake particular roles, and some are appointed to specific tasks at certain times. Whilst particular ministries in the life of the Church require specific gifts, sometimes members of the Church are required to undertake tasks to which they may not feel particularly called or gifted on behalf of the whole community.

- 4.3.6. The class meeting is a part of the Methodist tradition that merits rediscovery and new engagement. In parts of the early Methodist movement the class meeting was vital to enable growth in holiness as it was a place where Christians were held accountable for, and supported in, their faith and ministry. Now this happens in different ways and in various forms of meetings. Aspects of the class meeting, including the role of class leader, have now dispersed into other roles and areas of church life but it warrants new exploration in our changed and changing context. Class meetings have been places of affirmation, challenge, accountability, encouragement and support as people are helped to know themselves before God and as part of the Christian community. Emphasising the rootedness of Christian living in daily life, in 1999 the Methodist Church was clear that “there is little doubt that the Church is poorer [for their decline].”<sup>48</sup> Although there are other ways in which Methodists support each other and hold each other accountable for their faith and ministry, in a changed and changing context rediscovery of the Class Meeting offers rich potential for the Methodist people. Each Local Church is invited to explore and discern new ways of enabling support and a mutual holding to account.

## 5. **Order**

- 5.1. The Methodist Church comprises a rich diversity of people called by God and seeking to respond to God’s call. As in any group of people, there are shared principles about how we conduct our life together, but our way of being and working together also expresses and reveals our identity as the Body of Christ. Church order refers to how we live together as a portion of God’s people. It is recognised that:

“Though the churches are agreed in their general understanding of the calling of the people of God, they differ in their understanding of how the life of the Church is to be ordered. In particular, there are differences concerning the place and forms of the ordained ministry. As they engage in the effort to over-come these differences, the churches need to work from the perspective of the calling of the whole people of God. A common answer needs to be found to the following question: How, according to the will of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the life of the Church to be understood and ordered, so that the Gospel may be spread and the community built up in love.”<sup>49</sup>

- 5.2. The Methodist Church began as a movement within the Church of England. It was made up of a ‘connexion’ of ‘societies’ which supplemented involvement in the parish church, providing a disciplined framework for worship and spiritual development. Travelling preachers to these societies were also said to be ‘in connexion’ with John Wesley.<sup>50</sup> Over the years, Methodism grew into an independent organisation with its own identity and structures, developing from a connexion of societies into various churches with some in 1932 becoming the Methodist Church in Britain. This change from society to church has affected the way in which the Methodist people organise themselves and how they relate to each other, as well as shaping its identity, self-understanding, call and ministry.

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<sup>48</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.3.5

<sup>49</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§6

<sup>50</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.2.1

- 5.3. The Methodist Church is also a human organisation. It is an institution established by an Act of Parliament and is in some ways accountable to the State. It has the same obligations and responsibilities as any other organisation (for example concerning safeguarding, health and safety and employment among others), to be carried out wisely, efficiently and with integrity. The Church is the Body of Christ incarnate in a particular culture, part of that culture and yet called to live in response to God. Called into being by God the Church exists to witness to the love and grace of God and share in God's mission.<sup>51</sup> As an organisation, it is ordered to fulfil this calling above all, and its structures, processes and ways of working help to reveal the kingdom of God.
- 5.4. The way in which the Methodist Church is ordered reflects both its understanding of itself as part of the universal Church and its particular history. The Methodist Church understands that it should be structured for mission (see 2.1.1), able to respond pragmatically as needs emerge and new opportunities arise,<sup>52</sup> and yet, as part of the universal Church of God, it also shares common understandings about the nature, order and ministry of the Church. The tension between enabling pragmatic effectiveness for mission in a specific context at a particular time in history and upholding and expressing those things which are perceived to be of the essence of the very existence of the life of the Church is present in all Churches, but a particular feature of Methodist experience and history. The way in which we are ordered reflects our call, and shapes and enables our ministry.
- 5.4.1. From its beginnings, Methodism was structured to encourage growth in holiness. Methodists, grouped in societies and held together in connexion, maintained a common discipline in prayer, worship, fellowship, the study of Scripture and social action. Class meetings came into being to encourage people to grow in their life with God, expressing a corporate concern for justice and integrity in daily life. It is noted that the Methodist Church has not adequately responded to its own question:
- “Methodist origins invite the question whether the Church's structures help its members to grow in holiness. If the class meeting has largely gone, what has taken its place?”<sup>53</sup>
- Methodism has always understood that growth in holiness can happen if there is a disciplined approach to our spiritual life and our life together.
- 5.4.2. The connexional principle which “witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God”<sup>54</sup> has always been intrinsic to Methodism. Methodists understand themselves as all related to each other at every level of the Church. No Local Church (or other Methodist group) is an autonomous unit complete in itself but is linked to others in the Connexion and dependent on the whole. Just as Wesley's preachers were itinerant, available to be sent where needed, so Methodism's ordained ministers are at the disposal of the whole Connexion. Connexionalism helps point up priorities of mission and service in all parts of the Methodist Church, whilst giving Circuits and Districts the greatest possible degrees of autonomy to engage in God's mission in their local context in the best possible way.<sup>55</sup> Connexionalism shapes the Methodist understanding of authority and governance. At each level, authority is given to bodies that represent and serve local Christian communities, with the Church's presbyters having a “principal and directing part”<sup>56</sup> in the structures of decision-making, but

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<sup>51</sup> The Methodist Church, 2000, *Our Calling*

<sup>52</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.7.1

<sup>53</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.7.10

<sup>54</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.6.1 and see The Methodist Church, 2017, *The Gift of Connexionalism*

<sup>55</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.6.2

<sup>56</sup> Clause 4 of *The Deed of Union*

it is the whole people of God who make decisions through the Church's relevant bodies. Supreme authority resides in the Conference. A Church that is ordered according to the connexional principle pays attention to the mission priorities not just in each area of its life but across a range of contexts, and deploys its resources where they are most needed.

- 5.4.3. This ordering emerged from the 'missionary' situation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a pragmatic response to enable the effective witness of the Church in the world. Thus there has been a continuing emphasis on deploying resources according to the missionary needs of the Church and Methodism has been pragmatic in its approach to questions of church structure. The Methodist Church has, at different times, adapted its structures to respond to new situations and opportunities, and regards this flexibility in itself as an important principle alongside underlying principles of interdependence and relatedness and small-group fellowship and discipline.<sup>57</sup>
- 5.5. Just as the ministry of the whole people of God is representative of the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ, so the pattern of representation is replicated within the life of the Church. The ordained have a distinct representative role, which is explored further in section 7.4, but those who are appointed to offices, roles and specific tasks also represent the Body of Christ in particular ways. They become accountable to the Church, through the appointing body, in a new way. Local Churches, Circuits and Districts are encouraged to reflect on how they resource, support and hold to account those whom they appoint to offices and roles in the life of the Church, identifying ways in which they might both offer to and receive from the shared wisdom of the Methodist Church as it seeks to participate in God's mission.

## 6. Oversight

- 6.1. Oversight is the function of ensuring that the Church is true to its calling. It involves "the process of reflecting on experience in order to discern the presence and activity of God in the world."<sup>58</sup> It has always been necessary to the life of the Church, and a key feature of that oversight is ensuring the continuity of the Church in apostolic faith and mission. In the Methodist Church that continuity is located in the Conference.
- 6.2. Oversight is a rich concept. The Greek word *episkope*, from which it is translated, is used in the Bible to describe God visiting people and 'keeping an eye' on what is happening. For many years, the Methodist Church in Britain has thought of oversight as being expressed through 'governance, management and leadership.'<sup>59</sup> Although it is acknowledged that oversight is not defined solely in these terms, in many contexts they have dominated thinking, leading, in some cases, to the development of a rather narrow and functional understanding of oversight. The limitations of this framework are increasingly recognised, and in recent Anglican-Methodist conversations the need for a broader understanding was re-emphasised:

"Oversight is more than governance, leadership and management. It includes the preservation of the integrity of the community in continuity with the apostolic faith and mission through the work of corporate bodies and individuals in teaching, preaching, encouraging, making judgements, evangelising and offering pastoral care."<sup>60</sup>

In the 2013 World Council of Churches' convergence document, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, the ministry of oversight is described as a "ministry of coordination" so that the diversity of gifts given by the Holy Spirit "may enrich the whole Church, its unity and

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<sup>57</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.7.11

<sup>58</sup> The Methodist Church, 2005, *The Nature of Oversight*, p. 1

<sup>59</sup> The Methodist Church, 2005, *The Nature of Oversight*, 1.8-1.13

<sup>60</sup> The Methodist Church and the Church of England, 2017, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, 39(f)

mission.”<sup>61</sup>

6.3. The Methodist Church exercises a corporate and connexional form of oversight. As connexionalism expresses the consciousness that Christians are bound together at all levels of the Church, oversight is thus exercised corporately through the Conference and by designated individuals on behalf of the Conference. All who exercise oversight in the Methodist Church derive their authority from the Conference.

6.4. Churches affirm that the ministry of oversight, as all ministry in the Church, needs to be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways:<sup>62</sup>

“It should be *personal* because the presence of Christ among his people can most effectively be pointed to by the persons ordained to proclaim the Gospel and to call the community to serve the Lord in unity of life and witness. It should also be *collegial*, for there is need for a college of ordained ministers sharing in the common task of representing the concerns of the community. Finally, the intimate relationship between the ordained ministry and the community should find expression in a *communal* dimension where the exercise of the ordained ministry is rooted in the life of the community and requires the community’s effective participation in the discovery of God’s will and the guidance of the Spirit.”<sup>63</sup>

6.5. In order to hold the Methodist Church to its calling in its daily decision-making at every level of the Church’s life, individuals are appointed to a variety of offices in order to exercise particular kinds of oversight, for example in Circuits ministers and local preachers build up the Church through preaching and teaching, ministers and circuit stewards provide leadership, and Superintendents have oversight of all the ministers and probationers stationed in the Circuit.”<sup>64</sup> In each District the Chair exercises oversight of the character and fidelity of the presbyters and presbyteral probationers, and is responsible to the Conference for the observance of Methodist order and discipline.<sup>65</sup> Oversight is also exercised corporately, for example in District Synods or Circuit Meetings or Church Councils. In Methodist understanding, oversight is shared, even when exercised by individuals as they would usually collaborate with, be accountable to and be appointed by others, deriving their authority from the Conference.

6.6. Those who are ordained and in Full Connexion share a collegial responsibility for embodying, exercising and sharing with others the oversight of the Conference. Presbyters exercise a particular ministry of oversight within the life of the Church, having “a principal and directing part” in the shared duties of being “stewards in the household of God and shepherds of [God’s] flock.”<sup>66</sup> They usually exercise oversight in Christian communities “offering leadership and vision, and ensuring that decisions are made according to Methodist practice.”<sup>67</sup> This ministry is shared and comes to mature fruition<sup>68</sup> when it is exercised in collaboration with deacons and lay people.

## 7. Releasing and supporting ministries

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<sup>61</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §52.

<sup>62</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §29; The Methodist Church and the Church of England, 2003, *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*, Affirmation 6 and Commitment 6; and The Methodist Church and The Church of England, 2017, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, 39©

<sup>63</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M26

<sup>64</sup> The Methodist Church and the Church of England, 2017, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*; The Methodist Church, 2017, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, SO700(9)

<sup>65</sup> Standing Order 424

<sup>66</sup> Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*

<sup>67</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *What is a Presbyter?* 12

<sup>68</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *What is a Presbyter?* 7

7.1. As members of the Church, we all share in its ministry (section 4 above).<sup>69</sup> The Methodist Church recognises that: “Whether or not their calling is recognized by some form of commissioning, all Christians share in the service to which the Church is called.”<sup>70</sup> Methodists are invited to support, encourage and pray for each other as we together seek to respond to God’s call and share in God’s mission.

7.2. **The ministry of Christians within the Church**

As part of this some people are appointed to specific tasks for a period of time; sometimes these are particular roles or offices within the Church and sometimes they are roles undertaken on behalf of the Church in the wider community. Such ministries are important for the wellbeing of the Body of Christ and to enable the Church to witness to God’s love, proclaim the Gospel and engage in Christ’s ministry of service in the world. In order to help the Church fulfil its calling, some are set apart through ordination to ensure that it fulfils this purpose. (The place and role of the ordained in the life of the Church is considered in section 7.4 below.)

7.2.1. The Methodist Church appoints people to specific roles and offices in different ways and there is different language used to describe the ways in which they are supported and affirmed in their ministries. Local Churches, Circuits and Districts appoint people to offices and roles and authorise others to perform particular tasks on their behalf. Lay workers, Pastoral Visitors, Workers with Children and Young People, Worship Leaders and Class Leaders are also ‘commissioned’ within the context of an act of worship, whilst the ministry of others is sometimes publicly recognised in other ways. The question of which ministries are formally acknowledged in an act of public worship, and why, is a matter for ongoing reflection in each local context. As the Methodist Church is a connexional Church, it is appropriate that those exercising particular oversight responsibilities are authorised and recognised by and for the whole Connexion and not just within a particular community. Within Methodist ecclesiology Local Churches do not, therefore, appoint their own preachers, deacons or presbyters (see further 7.3.1 and sections 7.4 and 7.5).

7.2.2. Underlying the different terms and ways in which Local Churches, Circuits and Districts authorise people to undertake particular ministries, several key features can be identified: there is a call by God to the particular role that is recognised and affirmed by the Church; the person is appropriately selected and appointed to the role; there is a public invocation of the Holy Spirit for the ministry; they are resourced and supported; and they are held accountable in fulfilling the role. Although, in practice, not all of these elements are always present, it is important for Local Churches, Circuits and Districts to give attention to each aspect as, from time to time, they consider how they share in God’s mission as part of the Methodist Church and seek to respond to changing contexts and the new patterns of ministry that emerge.

7.2.3. All Methodists contribute to the life and ministry of the Methodist Church. Whilst some roles involve public recognition and affirmation, and others do not, all contributions are valuable, although people may not always feel valued. Those who are appointed to offices and roles that the Church has identified as necessary in the life of the Church undertake ministries that are recognised in particular ways, but Local Churches, Circuits and Districts can give attention to considering other ways in which people who contribute to the Church’s ministry are affirmed, supported, resourced and celebrated.

7.3. **Ministries recognised across the Connexion**

The Methodist Church holds to the connexional principle and its structures therefore express the interdependence of all Local Churches. Local Churches, Circuits, and Districts

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<sup>69</sup> See section 4: The Ministry of the Whole People of God

<sup>70</sup> The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Catechism*, p.22

have the necessary degrees of authority to enable them to share in God's mission in the most appropriate way in a particular community. This authority is "vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities."<sup>71</sup> From time to time, it may need to be limited in the light of the needs of the whole Church.<sup>72</sup> It pertains to the life of a connexional Church that for some ministries there needs to be some common practice and regularity, although the particular ways in which these ministries are undertaken and expressed may vary in different contexts (for example, Worship Leaders, Pastoral Visitors, Church and Circuit Stewards). Thus, there are some offices that are regarded as essential for the life of the Church and others that are recognised throughout the Methodist Church even if they are only taken up in some Local Churches, Circuits and Districts.

- 7.3.1. Local Preachers have an important place within Methodist tradition. They are admitted as Local Preachers through a public religious service arranged by the relevant Circuit, and during the service they receive a letter and Bible signed by the President of the Conference. These signify their connexional significance. Local preaching is a life-long ministry and Local Preachers are recognised as such in all contexts in the British Methodist Church.
- 7.3.2. The ministries that the Methodist Church believes it needs to fulfil its calling, or which are recognised throughout the Methodist Church, are usually identified within *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. There is common understanding about their nature and purpose (even if there is some variety in the way in which such offices are undertaken in different contexts). As times change some roles and offices exist only for a relatively short period, some develop and alter, and some persist. God raises people up for particular things at particular times. Local Churches, Circuits, Districts and the whole Connexion from time to time consider what particular ministries they need as they seek to respond to God's call and share in God's mission. The Methodist Church as a whole also considers in which areas of its life there needs to be some commonality of practice for the sake of its witness.
- 7.3.3. With the exception of ordained ministers and Local Preachers (see 7.2.1 above), those who undertake ministries in or on behalf of the Methodist Church do so in particular contexts and for a period of time. (Most appointments within the Methodist Church are made on an annual basis.) However the public recognition of their ministry happens, it is within a local, circuit or district context and is not automatically transferable from one place to another within the Methodist Church. Whilst the Methodist Church might offer training, resources and learning opportunities to help ensure that people are appropriately equipped and resourced for particular roles (and sometimes require this as part of the discernment process), successful completion of training and appointment to a role is always within a particular context and does not automatically 'qualify' someone for a similar role elsewhere. In other contexts people take with them their gifts, training and experience but may be called or needed to share in the ministry of the Church in other ways. This is an important part of our understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God. Each part of the Church discerns how to best use the gifts given by the Holy Spirit in the life and witness of the Church as it shares in God's mission.

#### 7.4. **Ordained ministry in the Methodist Church**

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<sup>71</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.6.6

<sup>72</sup> The Methodist Church, 1999, *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.6.2

- 7.4.1. Starting from, and rooted in, its conviction that the whole people of God share in Christ's continuing ministry to the world,<sup>73</sup> the Methodist Church shares the view of the wider Church that:

"In order to fulfil its mission, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity. The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church ... Their presence reminds the community of the divine initiative, and of the dependence of the Church on Jesus Christ, who is the source of its mission and the foundation of its unity. They serve to build up the community in Christ and to strengthen its witness. In them the Church seeks an example of holiness and loving concern."<sup>74</sup>

The Methodist Church considers its ordained ministries to be ministries of the universal Church. If its understanding of ministry begins with the calling of the whole people of God then ordained ministry "exists as representative of the total ministry of the Church."<sup>75</sup> From within the whole people of God, therefore, some are set apart in ordination to represent Christ to his people and represent the people of God before the world.

#### **7.4.2. Patterns of ordained ministry in the Methodist Church**

- 7.4.2.1. Its particular history has played a significant part in shaping the pattern of ordained ministry within the Methodist Church. The early Methodist preachers, described by John Wesley as 'extraordinary messengers', emerged within the pattern of ministry in the Church of England which took for granted the three-fold order of bishops, priests and deacons. Preachers (some of whom were 'travelling' and some local, depending on their circumstances) were 'in connexion' with Wesley and this relationship gave them their status in the Methodist movement. Their calling was principally to preach and stir local clergy to greater effectiveness. The move from extraordinary messengers and travelling preachers, to (in some places) pastoral ministry, to the two orders of ministry (the presbyterate and the diaconate) in the Methodist Church in Britain today, has been complex and diverse, leading to continuing creative tensions in articulating the role of the ordained in a changed and changing Church. Nevertheless, the Methodist Church affirms the need for an ordained ministry, seeing it as a gift of God and essential to the being of the Church.<sup>76</sup> Much of British Methodism's understanding of ordained ministry is consonant with that of other Churches.
- 7.4.2.2. Although almost all Christian communities have a formal structure of ministry, some believe that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon "is a sign of continuing faithfulness to the Gospel and is vital to the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole" whilst others "do not view faithfulness to the Gospel as closely bound to succession in ministry."<sup>77</sup> The Methodist Church agrees that the episcopal, presbyteral and diaconal functions need to be exercised by the Church but does not hold that the threefold order of bishop, presbyter and deacon is essential to the ministry of the Church. Whilst the threefold ministry is a sign of the orderly transmission of apostolic faith and mission, and thus a sign (though not a guarantee) of apostolic continuity in the Church, we believe that faithfulness to the Gospel may be preserved in other ways (see 1.7 above). The Methodist Conference has expressed a willingness to receive the historic episcopate in order to advance the cause of visible unity, providing that it is acknowledged that the Methodist

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<sup>73</sup> The Methodist Church, 1974, *Ordination*, 6, 7

<sup>74</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§§8, 12

<sup>75</sup> The Methodist Church, 1985, *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text*, 4.3

<sup>76</sup> The Methodist Church, 1985, *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text*, 2.1.2 and 2.4.0; 1960 *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, p.103; 1974, *Ordination*, 5

<sup>77</sup> World Council of Churches, 2013, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §47

Church has been and is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and it is accepted that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist.<sup>78</sup> The World Council of Churches convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, only affirmed that the threefold ministry “may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it.”<sup>79</sup>

- 7.4.2.3. The Methodist Church has two orders of ministry: presbyters and deacons. Their ministry is interdependent with all other forms of ministry within the whole people of God. Each requires the other<sup>80</sup> and ordained ministers can only fulfil their calling in and for the Body of Christ. Many aspects of their particular ministries (see 7.4.4 and 7.4.5 below) are normally exercised in a variety of ways by a large number of Christians, both in the world and in the church, and they can therefore be understood only within the context of focusing, expressing and enabling the ministry of the whole people of God:<sup>81</sup>

“In their office the calling of the whole Church is focused and represented, and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world.”<sup>82</sup>

This understanding that ministers are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ is expressed, for example, when presbyters and deacons are welcomed to the appointments to which they are stationed by the Conference. Within the context of worship they are asked to affirm that they will “hold before” the people aspects of God’s call to the whole Body of Christ including “the story of God’s love and mercy and, above all, the Gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ” and “God’s commitment to human community”. Presbyters also affirm that they will hold before the people “God’s call to holy living” and deacons “God’s call to serve the needs of others.”<sup>83</sup>

- 7.4.2.4. In the British Methodist Church ordination is linked inseparably with ‘reception into Full Connexion’.<sup>84</sup> The Methodist Conference receives into Full Connexion with itself those who are called to exercise their ministry through the Methodist Church in particular.<sup>85</sup> When they are received into Full Connexion, ministers enter a covenant relationship with the Conference. At the heart of this mutual relationship, made possible through God’s grace, both the ministers and the Conference have appropriate privileges and responsibilities:

“Under the will of God the ministers are accountable to the Conference for the exercise of their ministry and for the execution of the Conference’s vision and will. At the same time they are accounted for by the Conference in that the Conference is committed to deploying them all appropriately and to providing them with the resources and support necessary for them to fulfil their ministry.”<sup>86</sup>

### **7.4.3. The nature of ordination in the Methodist Church**

- 7.4.3.1. Methodists formally set apart certain individuals as presbyters or deacons by the liturgical means of ordination to the appropriate order of ministry, in conjunction with the juridical

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<sup>78</sup> The Methodist Church, 1985, *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text*, 4.3.4; 2000, Conference Agenda, *Guidelines on Episkope and Episcopacy*; 2015, *Response to The Church Towards a Common Vision*, §28.

<sup>79</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, section on Ministry, §22

<sup>80</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *What is a Presbyter?* 2

<sup>81</sup> The Methodist Church, *The Ministry of the People of God*, 1988, 059, 065; *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 1993, 10.13

<sup>82</sup> The Methodist Church, 1974, *Ordination*, 14.

<sup>83</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, pp.358-361

<sup>84</sup> The Methodist Church, 1960, *Ordination in the Methodist Church*

<sup>85</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*, 4.2

<sup>86</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*, 4.2

act of reception into 'Full Connexion' with the Conference. The Methodist Church sets apart as presbyters and deacons those individuals in whom it discerns evidence of God's call to such ministry and a measure of the necessary gifts and graces. Insofar as the agency of the Church is concerned, ordination can be looked upon as a special form of commissioning, whereby the Church selects and appoints certain individuals to the office of presbyter or deacon and authorises them to undertake the work associated with that office. As in all aspects of ministry, however, the agency of the Church in ordination is dependent upon the primary agency of the Holy Spirit, who alone calls men and women into ministry and service, bestowing upon them appropriate gifts and graces.

- 7.4.3.2. The Methodist understanding of the nature of ordination is contained in the liturgical rites found in *The Methodist Worship Book* (1999), authorised by the Conference for use at Methodist ordination services. These liturgical rites have their origin in John Wesley's *Sunday Service of the Methodists* (1784/6), adapted from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and intended for use by Methodists in North America and Britain. However, their present shape and form owe a great deal to the twentieth-century liturgical movement, which has strongly influenced ordination rites among all the Churches that practice ordination. This is significant because it has led to a deepening convergence among Christians in understanding the nature of ordination.
- 7.4.3.3. The essential features of a Methodist ordination service are an ordination prayer and the imposition of hands by an ordained presbyter (normally the President or a Past President of the Conference) on behalf of the Conference. The practice of laying hands on the head of each person to be ordained is an ancient feature originating in the Church of the New Testament, where it was used to denote and direct the focus of an accompanying prayer. In the case of a Methodist ordination service, the prayer accompanying the imposition of hands is: "Father, send the Holy Spirit upon *N* for the office and work of a Presbyter [or Deacon] in your Church."<sup>87</sup> The intention in a Methodist ordination service is to ordain into the presbyterate or diaconate of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
- 7.4.3.4. The precise form of the ordination prayer is significant because it affirms that the primary agent involved in setting apart women and men as presbyters or deacons is the Holy Spirit. Whatever effect ordination has upon the recipient (beyond the constitutional change that takes place in assuming an office), occurs through the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. In faith and confidence, Christians believe that the invocation of the Holy Spirit to bestow the gifts and graces needed to exercise the office and work of a presbyter or deacon is effective because God listens and responds to the prayer of the Church. An ordination service represents the culmination of a long process in which the Church first discerns and tests the call of candidates, shapes and forms their ministerial development, and finally presents them before God, ready to receive the gift and grace of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfil their vocation to ministry. At all stages, the Church seeks to discern and respond to the will of the Holy Spirit and therefore can, with confidence, call on the Spirit at the moment of ordination.
- 7.4.3.5. As heirs of the Reformation heritage, Methodists reserve the term 'sacrament' exclusively to describe baptism and the Lord's Supper, believing them to have been instituted by Christ himself. In these sacraments material things (water, bread and wine) and human actions (pouring water, sharing bread and wine) become means of grace, effective signs of the faithfulness of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Methodists also believe that the saving work of God is more generally expressed through the created order and human life, so that all the means of grace (whether instituted by Christ or developed in response to fresh contexts) have a sacramental quality. Methodists affirm that ordination is an

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<sup>87</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.306 (presbyters) and p.321 (deacons)

effective sign by which the grace of God is given and received in faith for the office and work of a presbyter or deacon in the Church. In other words, because of the faithfulness of God in response to the prayer of the Church, ordination contains and confers the grace it signifies. It is therefore appropriate to say that ordination, by its very nature, is sacramental.

7.4.3.6. Methodists do not attempt to describe the real interior effects of ordination in terms other than reception of the Holy Spirit for the office and work of the ministry to which a person has been set apart. Nevertheless, certain affirmations follow from this. By ordination, a person is irrevocably called and set apart as a presbyter or deacon because God does not rescind God's call upon the life of an individual. Such a special call shapes the whole of a person's life, thereby establishing a new and permanent relationship with Christ and his Church, and a permanent orientation within the baptismal state to serve God and the people of God as a presbyter or deacon. For this reason, Methodist polity asserts that a person may not be ordained more than once to the same order of ministry.

7.4.3.7. That the ordination prayer holds together the 'office' and 'work' of a presbyter or deacon overcomes the false separation of 'being' a minister and 'doing' the work of a minister. Ordination is not to be thought of as a temporary commission in order to fulfil certain ministerial functions for a period of time. Ministers do not cease to be such when they no longer undertake the normal work of a presbyter or deacon as a result of incapacity, becoming supernumerary or else taking up some form of secular employment. Equally, 'being' a minister necessarily involves a lifelong commitment to undertake the 'work' of a presbyter or deacon insofar as they remain able.

#### **7.4.4. Methodist Presbyters**

7.4.4.1. Methodist Presbyters are ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God.<sup>88</sup> Through ordination and reception into Full Connexion they are authorised by the Conference:

“to be public people who represent God-in-Christ and the community of the Church (particularly the Methodist Church and its Conference) in the world, and the world and the community of the Church in Christ before God, as they seek to serve the needs of the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit.”<sup>89</sup>

They share a collegial responsibility for embodying, exercising and sharing with others the Conference's oversight of the Church both as it gathers in Christian community and as it disperses in the world for worship and mission. They have authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments.

7.4.4.2. Although Methodist presbyters are not understood to be an exclusive order with a priestly character of their own<sup>90</sup>, the Methodist Church shares with others the idea of representative ministry which relates ordination both to the priesthood of Christ, and to the priesthood of baptized believers. It further holds that presbyters represent the holy, catholic and the apostolic nature of the Church.<sup>91</sup> In its response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Methodist Church acknowledges the need of the Church for people who are “called and set apart for leadership in pastoral care, preaching, and intercessory prayer,

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<sup>88</sup> The Methodist Church, 1974, *Ordination*, 5

<sup>89</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*, 4.4

<sup>90</sup> Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*

<sup>91</sup> World Council of Churches, 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Ministry, §17; The Methodist Church and the Church of England, 2003, *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*, 144,149; Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *Methodist Worship Book*, p.298; the Methodist Church, 2002, *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*, 4.7

and for presidency at the sacraments.”<sup>92</sup>

7.4.4.3. The Methodist Church shares the Protestant understanding that presbyters have the authority and responsibility to preach the word, preside at the sacraments, and administer our discipline. The ministry of Methodist presbyters has been summarised and characterised under three headings: it is a ministry of word (including preaching, evangelism, apologetic, theological and prophetic interpretation, teaching and the articulation of faith and human experience); sacrament (including presiding at acts of celebration and devotion, especially baptism (and, in the wider sense of sacramental acts, confirmation) and eucharist; and pastoral responsibility (including oversight, direction, discipline, order and pastoral care).<sup>93</sup> Virtually none of the individual activities is exclusive to presbyters. Nevertheless, the combination of the ministries of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility is exclusive to and definitive of the presbyter: “Moreover the very fact these ministries are combined imparts a distinctive nature to each of them.”<sup>94</sup>

7.4.4.4. Within the ordination service, those whom God has called into the Order of Presbyters are reminded that:

“In his name you are  
to preach by word and deed the Gospel of God’s grace;  
to declare God’s forgiveness of sins to all who are penitent;  
to baptize, to confirm  
and to preside at the celebration of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood;  
to lead God’s people in worship, prayer and service;  
to minister Christ’s love and compassion;  
to serve others, in whom you serve the Lord himself.”<sup>95</sup>

#### **7.4.5. Methodist Deacons**

7.4.5.1. Methodist Deacons are ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God and become members of the Methodist Diaconal Order. They are:

“... a ‘focus’ for the servant ministry of Christ; through their ministry of caring, the incarnate servant Christ is revealed. They are a ‘focus’ for the servant ministry of the Church, making visible God’s calling to the Church to be a servant in the world. Their servant ministry challenges the Church to respond to this calling. Part of their role is to interpret to the Church the needs and aspirations of the world. Deacons and deaconesses offer Methodism and the wider Church the discipline, spirituality and commitment to community that is part of working out their personal vocation in the context of being a religious order.”<sup>96</sup>

7.4.5.2. Within the ordination service, those whom God has called into the Order of Deacons are reminded that:

“In his name you are  
to assist God’s people in worship and prayer;  
to hold before them the needs and concerns of the world;  
to minister Christ’s love and compassion;  
to visit and support the sick and the suffering;

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<sup>92</sup> The Methodist Church, 1985, *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text*, 4.3.2

<sup>93</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *What is a Presbyter?* 6

<sup>94</sup> The Methodist Church, 2002, *What is a Presbyter?* 8

<sup>95</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.302

<sup>96</sup> The Methodist Church, 1993, *The Methodist Diaconal Order*, 10.12

to seek out the lost and the lonely;  
and to help those you serve to offer their lives to God.”<sup>97</sup>

- 7.4.6. Although differences in understandings about ordained ministry continue and present significant challenges on the path to unity, the Methodist Church “looks for the day when, in communion with the whole Church, such ministries are recognized and exercised in common.”<sup>98</sup>

## 8. Concluding comment

This Statement sets out the Methodist Church’s understanding of ministry. It provides a framework for the Methodist people to participate in discerning our continuing response to God and engage theologically with opportunities and challenges that arise, and it encourages reflection on how we encourage each other to share in God’s mission in the varied contexts in which we live and work.

Eternal God,  
the light of the minds that know you,  
the joy of the hearts that love you,  
and the strength of the wills that serve you:  
grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,  
so to love you that we may truly serve you,  
whose service is perfect freedom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Augustine of Hippo (430)

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<sup>97</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book*, p.317

<sup>98</sup> Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *Methodist Worship Book*, p.298