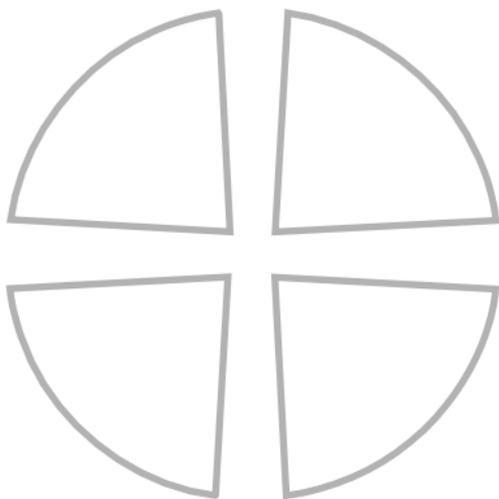


# **Conferring and Decision-Making during the COVID-19 Pandemic**



Reflections and Guidance

The **Methodist** Church 

# Introduction



*It has been very challenging...  
but a joy to connect with people.*

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These words from one local Methodist church may echo our own experience in these challenging times. This leaflet is offered to help Methodist ministers and local church leaders seeking to ‘do business’ in a context of unprecedented complexity and constraint.

Physical meetings may not be possible for you yet; even if they are, they are not as simple as they once were. Using virtual means of gathering for business isn’t necessarily easier: many lack access to a reliable internet connection, while for many others it still feels like a strange and alien way of ‘being the Church’. Nevertheless, across the Connexion, churches, circuits and districts have been finding new ways of worshipping, sharing fellowship and reaching decisions under the unprecedented circumstances brought about by COVID-19. We are hearing stories of connection, of hope, of new expressions of mission and ministry, and of God’s Spirit calling us to remember afresh God’s unfailing love and untiring purpose for all our lives, and the life of the world.

This resource seeks to distil some of the good practices and answers to frequently asked questions that have emerged during the pandemic, drawn in part from those stories. Of course, we recognise that many of you would have valued a resource like this several months ago – but we hope that you’ll find here some wisdom for your own continuing work and witness, drawn from the deep wells of God’s constant and ongoing work among us, and our efforts to listen to and learn from what the Holy Spirit has been saying to our churches in these days.

## Why do Methodists ‘confer’?

Methodists’ love of meetings is the subject of many jokes. But it springs from some of the distinctive charisms that underpin Methodist faith and practice; from ways of living and practising our faith that go all the way back to our beginnings. They include an emphasis on ‘conferring’ – conversation and careful listening.

## Conferring:

- is a means of grace – a gift from God through which we discern, together, God's presence and purposes for today;
- reflects the Methodist understanding of 'Church' in which belonging, mutuality and interdependence are key. Power and responsibility for decision-making are shared by lay and ordained, as stated in [Called to Love and Praise](#) paras 4.4.7 and 4.6.6;
- requires an open and enquiring mind;
- is not simply 'having a debate' or taking a vote. Through conferring, we might find that we change our minds, come to a different view, and are enriched by someone else's experience or perspective. Good listening involves paying careful attention to voices that may otherwise be marginalised – decisions will not always be based on the 'majority view', see [Called to Love and Praise](#) para 4.7.3 and [Living with Contradictory Convictions](#) para 5.2;
- is a gift that Methodists can offer the wider Church, and the world, as a witness to the God who calls us into community and sustains us in relationship, see the 2017 Conference report [The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century](#) para 16.

You can find fuller reflections on these principles by clicking on the links above to the Appendix, where you will find links to the full reports. Perhaps, in a Circuit Meeting or similar, you might use these to encourage conversations about the importance of conferring in the current climate and the sharing of good practice.

Through practical suggestions and pastoral considerations, this summary resource aims to help you ensure that these principles are given full expression, even when physical meetings are impossible.

*Many of the elderly have been determined not to miss out and have mastered Zoom: even one 90-year-old lady who had little experience of the internet!*

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# Practical Guidance

Standing Orders did not provide for undertaking meetings virtually or by correspondence, so, in keeping with Charity Commission advice, the 2020 Conference passed **resolutions** ratifying reasonable steps in the past, and enabling reasonable steps in the future, to the degree normal physical gatherings are prevented by current Government requirements. Accordingly, managing trustees can be reassured that, provided they undertake business in a reasonable manner to fulfil Standing Orders albeit at times in pragmatic ways, they will be acting responsibly, and not in breach of trust. It is, however, important to record how a meeting is being held, and why it is being held in that way, especially if the format or voting procedure is not strictly in compliance with Standing Orders.

The enabling resolution means that any business that needs undertaking, including as required by Standing Orders, can generally **move forward** (eg holding previously postponed elections). With that said, it will still sometimes be a matter of judgement as to whether more complex business should be deferred until conferring at physical gatherings becomes possible, or whether, as experience of conferring virtually or in hybrid ways develops, trustees can appropriately undertake such business.

## Virtual meetings

Connexional **guidance** about conducting meetings online can be found at [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/) including practical advice about conducting virtual meetings. As a connexional family, it is important that individual managing trustee bodies observe good principles and where appropriate consult with others so as to act wisely (eg local church leadership consulting with circuits about proposed arrangements for church councils, etc).

## Participation

*One elderly lady, who struggled to get online initially, said she felt part of the whole conversation rather than just on the outside, like in church.*

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Meeting virtually rather than physically will often remain the safer option for some time, but ensuring **participation** remains vital, especially where electronic access or internet reliability is lacking. Telephoning into Zoom meetings; providing electronic equipment; holding outdoor size-appropriate gatherings; or, where necessary, organising hybrid arrangements including an indoor element (if allowed), might be options. A hybrid arrangement might involve a virtual meeting but with some small satellite gathering(s) in church(es) viewing a screen; or the main meeting being physically gathered, but simultaneously extended to others via Zoom; with COVID-19 mitigation provisions being met for those gathered.

## Decisions and voting

**Informal decision-making** (eg by leadership teams) might use emails or online consulting tools (eg SurveyMonkey) to make decisions (although, depending on the type of decision being made, ‘conferring’ properly rather than merely ‘consulting’, may still often be better).

Wherever **formal conferring and meetings** are required, **voting** should usually be by those ‘present and voting’, meaning that voting must generally be conducted during the relevant meeting (with the use of Zoom poll cards often a better solution than voting eg by email during a meeting, especially when secret ballots are required since emails would then need to be anonymised).

*We are now pioneering Zoom from the church with a small congregation present, so we have the best of both worlds!*

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When it is **not possible for all to be present virtually**, so that hybrid arrangements are devised for the meeting and its decision making:

- if conferring before making a decision is not a vital element in the process, use can sometimes be made of emails or postal voting in advance (again anonymising where a secret ballot is involved). NB proxy voting at a meeting, or postal voting after a meeting, should not be used.
- Where any element of conferring is necessary before taking a decision there and then (including if a decision on one matter is needed before moving on

to the next related matter, so that the outcome of a previous vote needs first to be known) and hybrid arrangements are involved, creative options may be required. For example:

- in open voting, a scrutineer from amongst those physically gathered will need to determine the local votes (eg by show of hands) and report them as soon as possible to the chief scrutineer, for adding to the voting of those gathered virtually (eg by Zoom poll cards), to provide the overall totals for reporting to the meeting; or,
- where a secret ballot is required, anonymous ballots can be used at the satellite gatherings, to be cast in anonymised ways (eg by individuals placing them in turn on a table behind a screen), then to be counted by a local scrutineer (avoiding/minimising ballot handling, using gloves/sanitiser), who should then immediately report the local figures to the chief scrutineer for adding to the poll card votes completed by those in the Zoom meeting, so as to declare the totals to the meeting, often still within minutes (NB giving thought to ensuring a scrutiny trail throughout).

Again, staying as close as possible to Standing Orders is important, but managing trustees have scope to take reasonable steps to carry them out in pragmatic ways.

## Some Pastoral Reflections

Our current situation is an invitation to remember how we Methodists view our life together, rooted in how being a 'Connexion' has at its heart a distinctive understanding of loving, mutual and interdependent relationships. This quality of relating to one another embraces all our diversity and is enriched by that. It enables us to discern God's voice and God's will. It makes our decision-making compassionate and informed. It forms a key part of our witness to the world about the power of God's grace, revealed in Jesus: but glimpsed also in our common life.

*Glenys, in her late 80s, is telephoned by Marj, in her 80s, who holds the telephone receiver each week so Glenys can listen to the weekly Methodist podcast.*

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So, as we plan for our meetings and conferring, we might be asking some of the following questions:

*How can we make our online meetings **as inclusive as possible**?*

*Can those without internet either dial in, or go to someone's home and share their connection if local rules allow?*

*Can the local church or circuit offer tech support?*

*Can we work to facilitate **wider and more informed reflection** before meetings?*

*We might share discussion questions in weekly notices and ask pastoral visitors to gather feedback prior to the meeting.*

*We might have some means to think together beforehand: small group conversations on conference calls, or socially-distanced gatherings in a garden or park.*

*This may also remind us of the importance, in all times, of conversations which press beyond small talk to what matters: **"How is it with your soul?"***

**Who is 'normally' disenfranchised** by the way we do our business (eg those who work at night; the housebound)?

*Can this moment be an opportunity more fully to involve them – and then to enable them to be included afterwards?*

*In common with many churches ... we have reconnected to the housebound, maintained connection with students who have left the area, and drawn in some new folks from around the country.*



Although the numbers of those who can vote might be few, how do **we widen the circle**?

*Church councils are generally open meetings: can we be intentional about inviting those 'not here' to join us?*

As we bear in mind 'technophobia' at doing things in new ways, can we be more purposeful about ensuring everyone is asked for their view?

How might we begin the meeting in a way that helps overcome the strangeness of the format and encourages a **more relaxed engagement**?

It's helpful to remind people of basic functions of the online 'room' and how to use them every time, and to be clear about **how you'd like people to engage** (eg using the 'raise hand' function).

Online meetings are often helped by a **different 'rhythm'**: a pause for coffee; a moment to reflect on a new idea; a break for individual or small-group reflection (via Breakout Rooms if you're brave!).

How do we facilitate this? Although good preparation is essential, are we still open to **being surprised by God** as we confer?

 It has included those who, due to age, were not able to attend before COVID-19 and has taught us all what being restricted in movement is like. 

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**More than anything, perhaps the heart of the invitation is about returning to where we began, and remembering God's call on us as those called Methodists.**

**It's remembering our witness to the world, at a time of great fear and challenge. It's about fostering a deep, loving attentiveness to each other, in all our conferring, which will enrich our life together for a long time to come.**

**In the words of John Wesley, we are guided by God's love for us to sincere, open relationships which help us to grow, and, through our sharing, make us "in some way wiser, or better, or happier than we were before".**

(A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity, 1753)

# Appendix

Here you will find extracts and resources that have shaped and informed this summary (and which can also be accessed by clicking on the hyperlinks in the resource itself, if you are reading it online). You may wish to use these for your own personal reflections on the importance of conferring, or to shape a conversation in a Leadership Team Meeting, Circuit Meeting, or similar.

The following extracts are taken from *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice* (a Conference Statement adopted in 1999).

With regard to the Methodist understanding of 'Church' in which belonging, mutuality and interdependence are key, and responsibility for decision-making is shared:

- "The welcome at the Lord's Table and 'reception into membership' together indicate how the individual's commitment to Christ is surrounded by, and relates to, that of the whole Church – first the local 'society', but essentially linked through Circuit, District and Conference into a web of interdependence in which gifts, decisions and responsibilities are shared." (extract from para 4.4.7)
- "The Methodist understanding of authority and Church government derive from the character of Methodism as a 'connexional' Church. The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. Insofar as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. In terms of the contemporary missionary strategy of the Church, authority is vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities. Within the structures of decision-making the Church gives a special place to those who are its ordained representative persons; it also listens, where relevant, with especial attentiveness both to ordained persons and to laypersons who serve it with special expertise, but **it is ultimately the whole people of God, who, through the relevant decision-making bodies, express their affirmation, or otherwise, of the strategies placed before them.**" (para 4.6.6, emphasis added)

With regard to conferring being more than 'having a debate' or 'taking a vote', and the ways in which our views may be changed and transformed in dialogue with others:

- "The various committees of the local church, supervised by the Church Council, reflect at their best the interdependence and collaboration of the whole church in the fulfilment of its task. This does not mean that majority decisions are always, and minority views never, correct (particularly if the structures of a church exclude those already marginalised). But this essentially collaborative character of ministry is all the greater in the Methodist Church because an ordained presbyteral minister normally has responsibility for more than one church. This, together with the itinerancy of the majority of ministers, makes all the more necessary the partnership between laypeople and ordained ministers, whether presbyteral or diaconal, which is implicit in the Methodist understanding of the Church." (extract from para 4.7.3)

On this subject, you might also like to read the following from *Living with Contradictory Convictions* (report received by the 2006 Conference):

- "A readiness to 'accept people as they are' and to listen to people's stories is basic Christian practice. Such readiness can, however, mask any sense that people may be changed by God. Christian practice also entails what, within a person's story, may invite change in the process of their story being read in the light of the story of God. Exploration of living with contradictory convictions within the Church means accepting that all must be prepared to change and develop in the light of what God is doing in, for and amongst us. Our main difficulty is that we are not always able clearly to see what it is in us that God needs to change. And we differ, amongst ourselves, in our interpretations of what needs changing in us and in others. As those who have been involved in interfaith encounter have noted, however, without entering into dialogue with a preparedness to be changed, as well as to bring change in others, no real dialogue happens." (para 5.2)

With regard to conferring as a gift that Methodists can offer the wider Church, and the world, as a witness to the God who calls us into community and sustains us in relationship, this extract comes from *The Gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century* (report adopted by the 2017 Conference and commended for study and reflection):

- “Although working out the practical implications of being a connexional Church in the twenty-first century is challenging (as it was in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the Conference is confident that the Methodist people have the resources and the determination to undertake this task. Above all, we affirm our confidence in God, who calls us into connexion, and sustains us in relationship.” (extract from para 16)

And finally, from *The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (report received by the 2005 Conference):

- “Wesley called people together to confer with him and sought to establish the process of what we might term “Christian Conferring” as the bedrock of the Methodist movement. Versions of this process were to take place in the Class, Band or other group which supported people in their personal faith and discipleship; in the body making decisions about the life of a particular society, local church or circuit; or in the Conference itself. The process involved what Wesley called times of “conversation ....seasoned with salt, fit to minister grace to the hearers”<sup>1</sup>. It had to be intentionally and regularly practised as a staple means of grace, or the pressures of contemporary life would seriously erode it.” (extract from para 2.13)
- “Christian Conferring is therefore a process of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue to which there are two important, complementary strands. As they confer, people intentionally, prayerfully and thoughtfully seek to describe and analyse their experience and to listen to others doing the same, and they give and receive guidance, advice, challenge and support. In this they are exercising both mutual *accountability and supervision*. These complementary strands are two sides of the one coin.” (para 2.15)

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is drawn from Colossians 4:6 and is used frequently by Wesley throughout his life. A typical example is John Wesley Sermon 42 *Satan’s Devices* 1749-50.

<sup>2</sup> The substance of this paragraph is drawn from material provided by David Lowes Watson for a Bishops’ Conference for Probationers in Nashville, Tennessee in April 2003.

## Helpful pages from the Methodist Church website

- Official guidance for the Methodist Church during the coronavirus pandemic, including information about holding church, circuit and district meetings online: [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/)
- Further Methodist Church property guidance (eg with regard to the risk assessment that would need to be completed before physical meetings can be held in church buildings): [www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/coronavirus-guidance-for-property/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/coronavirus-guidance-for-property/)

## Further helpful resources

- *The Work of God in This Place: Reflections for Church Meetings*. This A5 booklet provides prayers and reflections to encourage God-centred meetings and time to listen and reflect during meetings and is available to order from Methodist Publishing ([www.methodistpublishing.org.uk](http://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk)).
- Kenneth Wilson's summary of the 'nine principles of Methodist theology' (which include meeting together with others with an open and enquiring mind to discern what is, at present, the will of God). Kenneth Wilson, *Methodist Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2011), pp. 14-17.
- The Ven Bob Jackson and the Rev George Fisher, *Everybody Welcome Online*: [www.cpas.org.uk/download/3591/everybody-welcome-online](http://www.cpas.org.uk/download/3591/everybody-welcome-online)
- Information guides produced by the United Reformed Church on online working, including guides to setting up, managing and using Zoom securely. See <https://urc.org.uk/information-guides>