

## **CRITERIA FOR THE TRANSFER OF MINISTERS (1993)**

1. In 1992 the General Purposes Committee offered to the Conference a report on the criteria for the transfer of ministers which was referred back after debate in the Ministerial Session for “light revision”. The Committee referred it to the joint working party originally set up by itself and the Faith and Order Committee, and the report is now re-submitted in amended form with the support of both committees.
2. Standing Order 725 governs the transfer of Methodist ministers to other conferences and churches, and the transfer of ministers from such churches into full connexion with the Conference. Clause (1) states that “it shall be competent for the Conference to transfer ministers in full connexion to other conferences and to other churches with which we are in communion, when mutually approved.” Clause (8) requires that a recommendation to receive a minister into full connexion should be accompanied by a recommendation “whether the applicant should be admitted by the Conference into full connexion as a person already ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments in a church whose ministry is recognised by the Methodist Church, or should be ordained upon admission into full connexion.” The interviewing committee is required to consult the Faith and Order Committee in cases of doubt.
3. The Methodist Church has no official definition of the terms used in these Standing Orders, apart from some short Faith and Order Committee reports to the Conferences of 1968 and 1970 in the context of what was then generally referred to as intercommunion. Relevant extracts are quoted below. A “full statement of the meaning we attach to the nature and extent of communion between Churches”, the preparation of which was authorised by the Conference of 1968, seems not to have materialised. Moreover there is no standard definition of the terminology in ecumenical discussion, nor does the discussion of these matters stand still. There is need for further exploration of the matter by the Methodist Church.
4. No list exists of churches with which we are in communion or whose ministry we recognise, and it is not easy to see how an exhaustive list could be compiled. In applying the Standing Orders interviewing committees have therefore to work from general principles, and from time to time they have encountered difficulties. The General Purposes Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, has therefore attempted to spell out more fully our understanding of the criteria to be applied, in the hope that it may be useful for reference in the future. How does one identify a church with which the Methodist Church is in communion? How does one determine whether the

ministry of another church is recognised by the Methodist Church? The results of this exercise are now offered to the Conference for endorsement.

5. One of the principal difficulties in discussing this subject is the wide range of meanings which may be attached to the terms used. Thus the term “in communion” may be used:
  - (a) of the relationship (sometimes described as “full communion”) which exists between local churches within one denomination, as, for example, the parishes of the Church of England are in communion within one diocese or province. It implies the acceptance of a common ecclesial authority (with whatever powers) of a bishop, synod, conference or assembly. In normal Methodist usage the expression for this is “in connexion”.
  - (b) of the relationship between two different churches, whether of the same denominational family or not, by virtue of which members are mutually recognised and readily transferable, and ministers can be used interchangeably, without formal transfer, although some further process of authorisation may be required. This relationship is to be seen, for example, between the British Conference and the Irish or other autonomous conferences.
  - (c) of a relationship in which Holy Communion is shared. One church is said to be in communion with another when its members are freely accepted at the Lord’s Table. Such a relationship exists among many of the Free Churches in Britain, even though, as with Baptist churches, there may be limitations to the free transfer of members.
6. These definitions, however, do not answer our questions. The first is too narrow. Questions about the transfer of ministers only arise between churches which are not in communion in this sense. The second describes the relationship in which such questions do arise and gives some examples, but offers no criteria by which to determine which churches belong in this category. The third draws attention to an important point. The fullest expression of communion must involve mutual acceptance at the Lord’s Table. It suffers however from the fact that it is applied differently in different Christian traditions. In Methodist tradition eucharistic hospitality would be offered to members of any church who felt free in conscience to accept it, on the grounds of the unity already given us in Christ. For other traditions, such hospitality is a sign of things to come, a mutual pledge of churches seeking a unity not yet realised. For other traditions again it is the goal of unity, to be celebrated only by those churches which are in communion in the first of the senses outlined in paragraph 5. To define communion only in terms of the sharing of the eucharist, without reference to relationships between churches, does not help with the issue before us.
7. These different definitions do, however, underline the fact that the term “communion” points both to identity and difference. By its use churches seek to transcend what divides them by the affirmation of the unity given in Christ which they share. Of necessity therefore it will always be an imprecise term. Negatively, it will be used to indicate those groups with whom there does not exist sufficient agreement in faith or practice for the Methodist Church to consider itself to be in communion at all. At the other end of the spectrum it

will be used to express the goal to which the church on earth is called but which is perfectly achieved only in the church triumphant. Between these two extremes it will be needed in the present divided state of the church to express that degree or quality of unity along the way that particular churches have already reached. As ecumenical relationships advance this quality of provisionality in the term will become more apparent. It is clear that with some of our ecumenical partners in Britain it is not yet possible to affirm mutual acceptance in all aspects of church life, nor move to greater integration, still less formal union, yet how could one say that the Methodist Church is not in communion with such churches when Sunday by Sunday Methodist congregations are committed, with official approval, to sharing with them in worship, including Holy Communion?

8. The Methodist Church recognises in many churches marks of authentic Christian faith and life, and seeks, notwithstanding differences of faith and order, to join with them in common prayer, witness and service. In the Standing Order, however, the term "in communion" is used in connection with the transfer of ministers, as ministers, to another church. That implies a greater area of common ground in faith and order than might be the case in some of the relationships referred to above. To be in communion with the Methodist Church for this purpose it is to be expected that a church
  - (a) claims to be an expression of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ;
  - (b) recognises other Christian communities outside its own fellowship, including the Methodist Church, as belonging to the Body of Christ;
  - (c) accepts the Trinitarian faith as set forth in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, whether or not it makes formal use of the creeds in public worship or official statements;
  - (d) acknowledges the authority of the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary for salvation; and
  - (e) recognises and practices the two biblical sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper;
  - (f) possesses a (presbyteral) ministry of word and sacraments to which candidates are ordained for life;
  - (g) does not by its officially authorised teaching and practice repudiate the standards of personal and social ethics which, in Methodist understanding, the Church of Jesus Christ is called to uphold;
  - (h) is willing to receive a Methodist minister by transfer, without further ordination.

We judge that these conditions are essential if there is to be a genuine transfer of a minister to a church in which the ministry to which he or she has been ordained can continue to be exercised. Where such conditions do not exist, we would expect a Methodist minister to resign rather than apply for transfer.

9. We turn now to the second issue, the recognition of ministries. The discussion is again confused by the fact that this expression is capable of more than one meaning.

10. There are many pastoral, preaching and diaconal ministries in all the churches which are the gift of the Spirit and made fruitful by God, and accorded recognition by the churches concerned in different ways. The Methodist Church acknowledges these for what they are. In the context of the Standing Order, however, recognition of ministry refers to the ministry of presbyters in the Church of God. Just as the Methodist Church (in the language of the Deed of Union) “cherishes its place in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church”, and therefore believes that Methodist ministers are ordained as presbyters in the Church of God, so it acknowledges ordination in other churches as ordination to the one presbyterate. Such ordination is not repeatable. When a minister of another church applies to be received into full connexion it is therefore important to determine whether the authorisation he or she has received is to be seen as ordination to the presbyterate. Where that is not the case, the applicant is received as a probationer and subsequently ordained. That is not to deny the pastoral ministry which such persons have been exercising. Indeed it is acknowledged by the fact that we receive them by transfer and do not require them to offer as candidates.
11. Recognition of ministries is thus distinct from the issue of communion between churches, although the two are related, and it is to be observed that the Standing Order implicitly observes the distinction. While it is possible to transfer a minister, in the strict sense, only to or from a church which is willing to accept or effect such a transfer, it is not our practice to require an ordained minister of a church which is not in that category (for example, an Anglican or Roman Catholic) to submit to local preacher training and all the other requirements and procedure expected of lay candidates, nor do we seek to repeat the ordination. We use the procedure and language of transfer even though the degree of communion is less and there are no formal procedures in the previous church for effecting such a transfer (though of course there may be expressions of commendation and goodwill). On the other hand, for ordination to be recognised by the Methodist Church as ordination in the Church of God, it must be an act of a body with which there is some measure of communion, even if impaired. That body must be acknowledged to be a Christian church.
12. But terminology and practice differ in different traditions. By what marks is the Conference to judge that what has been given and received is ordination as the Methodist Church understands it?
13. Some earlier reports to the Conference have taken for granted that the criterion is the use of prayer with the laying on of hands. This is the invariable practice of the Methodist Church in ordination. It is too narrow a criterion, however, and would invalidate some earlier practice prior to Methodist Union, when in some traditions the right hand of fellowship was used. In more recent times the Faith and Order Committee has advised against requiring the laying on of hands to have been used for an ordination to be recognised when all the other elements of an ordination are present, and the Conference has upheld that view in particular cases. Rather, the following is suggested. For ordination to the presbyterate to be recognised by the Methodist Church:
  - (a) there must be an intention, however expressed, to ordain to the ministry of word and sacraments in the Church of God;
  - (b) it must carry an expectation of life-long commitment;

- (c) it must therefore, according to the discipline of the church concerned, be unrepeatable;
  - (d) it must be an act, normally the laying-on of hands, which is accompanied by prayer in the setting of an act of worship;
  - (e) it must be an act which carries the full authority of the church, however that is expressed in terms of the ecclesiology of the church concerned;
  - (f) it must be an act which is recognised and transferable within the churches of the denomination as a whole, and not be confined in its effect to a single congregation.
14. It is impossible to anticipate all the questions of interpretation which may arise as applicants may present themselves in the future from a wide variety of Christian traditions in Britain and elsewhere. There is wisdom in confining the Standing Order itself to the briefest possible statement of requirements, and the Committee proposes no change. But it is hoped that if the Conference approves the amplification suggested above it will help interviewing committees to come to a decision on cases where there is no precedent to guide them.

NOTE: Extracts from previous Conference reports.

“We assume that we are in complete communion with all those Churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, and who are willing to be in communion with us, and it is our custom to welcome to the Lord’s Table communicant members of other Churches. But we have so far never closely defined the meaning of “full communion”, nor is there any list of Churches with which we have formally established relations of full communion. We have the fullest reciprocal relations with all other Methodist Churches; and our membership of the Free Church Federal Council implies relations of intercommunion with other members of that Council.” (1968)

“Our usage of the term “Full Communion” is deliberately comprehensive. In general we mean by it the fullest possible recognition of and cooperation with other Churches, including mutual recognition of the validity of orders and willingness to receive and transfer members from and to other churches. We draw attention to the definitions used in the Report *Intercommunion Today* and suggest that these definitions should be borne in mind, especially when Anglican attitudes are being considered.

“Each enquiry about our relationships with another Church is dealt with in the light of all the circumstances. Where ministerial status within Methodism is desired without further ordination, we require assurance that the church to which the minister belongs adheres to the apostolic faith, and that he has been ordained by the laying on of hands with prayer.” (1970)

(*Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order* pp.198-199)

## RESOLUTION

(Shared business) The Conference adopts the report.

(*Agenda 1993, pp.725-729*)

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The extracts from previous reports, cited in paragraph 14, can now be found in Volume 1 of *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, pp. 149 and 150.