

EPISCOPACY AND METHODIST DOCTRINAL STANDARDS (1982)

1. In 1980-81 the Faith and Order Committee was asked to consider whether the acceptance of the historic episcopate would violate our doctrinal standards. The Committee reached the conclusion that these standards would not be violated and reported this to the Conference of 1981. From this it followed that no question of amending the Deed of Union under the Methodist Church Act 1976 para. 5(2), would arise if the present proposals for covenanting were pursued to a successful conclusion.
2. The committee has now been asked to explain its judgement by reference to the Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union, and further, by reference to Methodist usage, and it gladly complies.
3. First we consider the Deed of Union in which Methodism commits itself to Scripture, the Apostolic Faith, the historic creeds, and the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation. No case can be made that episcopacy violates the Apostolic Faith or the historic creeds. The creeds were composed and the Faith was preserved for centuries within a church that was episcopally ordered. Neither can it be argued that the repudiation of episcopacy was one of the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation. Trenchant as were the reformers' criticism of mediaeval Catholicism, they rarely attacked episcopacy as such. Their primary theological targets were the Roman doctrines of Merit, Scripture and Tradition, and the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice. Luther's doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers was not directed against bishops but against one particular view of the doctrine of the Church, which drew a false distinction between the ministry of bishops and priests and the ministry of the rest of the people of God.
4. Methodism is identified with the Evangelical Faith, but that faith is not essentially anti-episcopal. John Wesley completed his life's work within an episcopal body, and approved of the ordering of the Church of England. He sought episcopal ordination for the ministers and superintendents who were to carry on the work in America, but it was refused. His clashes with the prevailing church order were on practical, not theological, grounds. Many who have inherited the Evangelical Faith of the Wesleys are still to be found within the Church of England; some of them are themselves bishops.
5. Similarly, Scripture provides no argument that the acceptance of episcopacy violates evangelical doctrine. Scripture does not require episcopacy, nor does it preclude it. The government of the New Testament churches was a very *ad hoc* affair. Different patterns pertained.
6. When the Deed of Union becomes specific, it speaks not about bishops but about the whole ordained ministry. Ministers 'hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people'. Further, 'no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class'. And again, 'For the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the Ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination.' At the same time, the Deed requires that ministers, 'shall be ordained by the imposition of hands'.

7. These paragraphs are emphatic in their rejection of any peculiarly priestly character in the ordained ministry. The introduction of any such notion would violate our doctrines. The question is whether the acceptance of episcopacy constitutes a step in that direction.
8. Despite the negative statements in the Deed of Union, the idea of priesthood has a long and honourable history in Scripture and in the Christian faith. Fidelity, commitment, and indeed effectiveness, are marks of the true priesthood in the Old Testament, which explains why Our Lord is described as our great high priest in the Epistle to the Hebrews. All readily agree that Our Lord's priesthood is shared in some measure with the whole company of believers in the Church. Nevertheless, the Deed excludes certain expressions of priesthood as descriptions of the status and function of the Methodist Ministry.
9. What are these objectionable features of priesthood? Plainly not the being 'set apart by ordination', since our doctrine requires this; nor the traditional intercessory or pastoral functions of the priest, since we prize and practise these things. The objectionable features must be the notions that a priest has a unique status before God, that he is an essential mediator, offering to God the sacrifice of the Mass.
10. The question of unique status is easily resolved. If Methodist ministers are set apart by ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments, and yet hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people, it is clear that it is possible to ordain certain people without conveying to them status unacceptable to Methodism. If it is possible to do this with ministers, then it is possible to ordain some within the ministerial body as bishops, without offending against our doctrines. On these grounds, it is illogical to suggest that, whereas the ordination of ministers conveys no priestly character, the ordination of bishops would do so.
11. It may be argued that the ordination of bishops would be different because bishops of other communions would be involved as a matter of necessity. But bishops of other Communion have been involved in ordinations in the CSI and the CNI for a long time and there has never been any doubt among us that the practice was wholesome and positive as an act of fellowship between churches, nor that the Methodist ministers so ordained were entirely acceptable. The presence of a bishop from another communion in these cases has not required us to take any view of ordination contrary to that which we have always taken, and the same would hold good if the covenanting proposals were implemented.
12. The argument about unique status, can therefore, only be maintained by those who reject every kind of ordained ministry. The Deed of Union requires ordination, and the acceptance of episcopacy is a further step within the terms laid down by the Deed.
13. Methodism accepts the doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers, which affirms that, through the work of Christ, every believer has direct access to God. Consequently no functionary, whether priest or bishop, is necessary for mediation between God and men. There are no grounds for saying, however, that a Methodist episcopal order, understood in terms of the Deed of Union, would pretend to authority in mediation when an ordained ministry so understood does not.
14. The doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers, properly understood, also has reference to the intercessory and missionary work of the church. All believers,

both individually and as a group, are charged with the task of entering into the ministry of Christ and bringing others to God through him. The acceptance of episcopacy may be justified by the argument that it will make the task easier and it may be attacked on the grounds that it will not. But it cannot be maintained that the acceptance of episcopacy would be a denial of this intercessory and missionary responsibility.

15. Similarly, as an episcopal Church, Methodism would be no nearer to a doctrine of propitiatory sacrifice in the Mass than it is today. The MSB was published in 1975. It is expected to last for thirty years or more. No change in our doctrine of Holy Communion is envisaged and none of those who have contended for the acceptance of episcopacy have suggested any such change. There is no reason why they should.
16. Perhaps it is feared that the acceptance of the *historic episcopate*, as distinct from other forms of episcopacy, implies certain doctrines contrary to our standards. Such fear is not justified. In the first place, acceptance of the historic episcopate is not to be equated with belief in the apostolic succession. The historic episcopate witnesses to the continuity of the church on the ground and through the centuries. Establishing and counting (or questioning and disputing) what were the actual links between the apostles and the present day is no necessary part of it. Episcopacy in this sense is a witness to the visible presence of the Church through space and time. In the second place, we are not asked to believe that bishops are essential to validate the Church, but we are asked to accept the historic episcopate as necessary for the promotion of unity, that is to say, in deference to the conscience of others, and as a sign, additional to those which we already have, of the continuity of the People of God from early times.
17. No doubt it was for reasons such as these that the Conference accepted the episcopal constitution of the CSI and the CNI and was prepared, in 1969, to take episcopacy into its system. Nothing has altered since then to affect the theological factors involved.
18. Another fear may be that episcopal ordination in Methodism will cut us off from the ministries of non-episcopal churches. But in accepting episcopacy we are not passing judgment on non-episcopal ministries. On the contrary, our own ministry, non-episcopal as it is, will be recognised and accepted by the other covenanting churches, as it stands. The introduction of episcopacy is a prophetic act that looks forward to the distant future. In the meantime there is nothing to prevent us from having the same relations with non-episcopal churches as we enjoy at the moment.
19. Turning to Methodist usage, we recognise that our Standing Orders are not theologically sterile. Rather they represent the doctrines of the Methodist Church in practical and structural ways. Nevertheless, usage is much more open to development and change than doctrine, as the annual amendments to CPD demonstrate. Nor is it only in small matters that our usage develops. The last few decades have seen the emergence of separated chairmen, the acceptance of women ministers, and the complete re-structuring programme, all of which represent important developments with strong theological overtones. There is no reason, therefore, to suppose that a change of the kind proposed would be a serious dislocation or unacceptable development of our usage.

20. The two areas in which the acceptance of episcopacy would be most likely to affect our usage are the act of ordination and the question of how authority is distributed through the Church.
21. Strictly speaking, as there is but one order in the Methodist ministry, Methodist ordinations are presbyteral, that is to say, ministers are ordained by other ministers. The laity have a part in voting at various stages and in the acclamation and prayers in the ordination service, but the primary actions are taken by ministers. Nevertheless the idea that any minister or group of ministers can, in fact, ordain is not consistent with our usage, at least since Methodist union. SO 718(6) states that preachers on trial, 'shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by his deputy, assisted by other ministers.' If Methodism adopts an episcopal order and, as is generally supposed, the President becomes a bishop, if he is not one already, then our usage in regard to ordinations will not be fundamentally changed. The President-bishop, ministers including those nominated by the ordinands, and the laity could all take part as at present. There would be a new ordinal and the various services would not all take place in the vicinity of Conference. Instead, the regions in which the ordinands were to work would provide the setting, and candidates from other covenanting churches would also be ordained. So future colleagues would be ordained together in the presence of the people to whom they would minister. This represents change, but change in terms of normal development rather than dislocation. It is possible that the Conference may wish to make other changes, but no other is actually necessary as a consequence of accepting episcopacy.
22. It is agreed by all that no order of bishops can function if the bishop is not granted some authority within the church structure and some opportunity to lead. Our present Standing Orders distribute authority and responsibility very widely through the Church, but they nevertheless assign particular tasks to particular persons and particular groups. Not everybody can do everything. It is by no means unusual for Conference to give extra responsibility to particular committees or office-bearers and no doubt the balance between the various groups and functionaries changes slightly from year to year. All this happens at present. To re-arrange responsibilities, therefore, so that bishops (whether they have emerged from among the chairmen, the superintendents, or some other group) are given some form of authority, is in no sense a dislocation of our usage. The very complexity of CPD bears witness to the fact that we are re-arranging responsibilities all the time. The two safeguards that have to be considered in this regard are, first, that the Methodist Church would be free to give to its bishops whatever authority it thought proper and equally free to limit their authority in any way it thought proper, and secondly, that bishops, like everybody else, would be subject to the Conference.
23. To sum up, there is no reason to suppose that an order of bishops would exhibit priestly features at odds with the Deed of Union or require any serious dislocation of our usage. On the contrary, there is good reason to suppose that Methodist bishops, whose role, according to the Covenanting Proposals, we are to conceive and develop in line with our own traditions and convictions, would display, and help others to display, the missionary zeal and the pastoral care to which Methodism is already deeply committed.

(Agenda 1982, pp. 24-7)

Major reports on episcopacy and episcopacy were presented to the Conferences of 1998 and 2000 (see Volume 2, pp. 370-411).