

EPISKOPÉ AND EPISCOPACY (2000)

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A. INTRODUCTION

1. The Conference of 1997 adopted Notice of Motion 14:

In order to enhance and develop discussions between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy and report to the Conference of 1998.

2. The Faith and Order Committee presented to the 1998 Conference a report which quoted extensively from the many statements about episcopacy which had been made in Methodist documents since the time of Methodist union. The Conference adopted the Committee's report and the following resolution:

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference of 2000 a further report on episcopacy which:

(i) explores the understanding of corporate and personal oversight implied by our present connexional and district practice;

(ii) explores models of the episcopate from the world-wide church; and on the basis of (i) and (ii)

(iii) proposes to the Conference guidelines on issues of oversight, including those concerning bishops, which may guide Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations and assist the development of our own structures.

3. The present report seeks to address the issues raised in the direction given to the Committee by the 1998 Conference.

B. TERMINOLOGY

4. It is important to distinguish from the outset between '*episkopé*' (the Greek word for 'oversight') and 'episcopacy', which refers to the oversight exercised by bishops. Generally, it is only those Churches which include the office of bishop within their structures which are called 'episcopal'.
5. *Episkopé* is exercised in all Christian communions, whether or not they are 'episcopal' churches. Thus episcopacy is not essential to ensure *episkopé*, though it is highly valued by the majority of Christian Churches.
6. The words 'oversight' and '*episkopé*' themselves convey a range of meanings. Some of these are given focus in the biblical image of the shepherd, which speaks of pastoral care and a concern for unity; it also speaks of leadership, enabling the Church to share in God's mission and maintaining and developing structures appropriate to that task. The exercise of *episkopé* also reminds the Church of its roots in Scripture and tradition and encourages it to be open to the Spirit's leading in the contemporary context. *Episkopé* includes the exercise of authority, a sometimes uncongenial concept which is nevertheless required by church order.
7. Some episcopal Churches (notably the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches) claim that their bishops belong to the 'historic episcopate' or stand in the 'historic succession':

Within Anglicanism, the historic episcopate denotes the continuity of oversight in the Church through the ages from the earliest days, expressed in a personal episcopal ministry, the intention of which is to safeguard, transmit, and restate in every generation the apostolic faith delivered once for all to the saints.¹

Other Churches which have bishops, such as the United Methodist Church, do not claim to be in ‘the historic succession’. In Part E of this report, where various models of episcopacy are to be considered, it will be important to distinguish between those churches which make the claim and those that do not.

8. The very important World Council of Churches Faith and Order paper, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, speaks of ordained ministry being exercised in ‘a personal, collegial and communal way’.² Since the publication of *BEM*, these three terms have increasingly been used in the discussion of ministries of oversight (*episkopé*). ‘Personal’ is self-explanatory. ‘Collegial’ oversight entails a group of people (usually ordained, and, indeed, ordained to the same order of ministry) jointly exercising *episkopé*. An English example is the House of Bishops of the Church of England. ‘Communal’ *episkopé* is exercised by a council or assembly, which may to a greater or lesser extent be ‘democratically’ elected, and which may include both lay and ordained people. The Methodist Conference is an example. The word ‘corporate’ is sometimes used in place of ‘communal’ in this context, as it is in the resolution (see 2 above) adopted by the 1998 Conference. In this report, the terms ‘corporate’ and ‘communal’ are used interchangeably.
9. The words ‘Connexion’ and ‘connexional’ are so familiar to Methodists that it may seem strange to refer to them in this section about terminology. Yet it is important to note that both words, and especially the adjective, can be used in two ways. The Connexion is usually taken to mean the whole of the British Methodist Church, embracing every District, Circuit and local church. There is another usage, however, in which the Connexion is distinguished from the Districts, Circuits and local churches, as in references to the Church ‘at connexional level’, as opposed, say, to ‘District level’. Both usages are present in this report; it is hoped that in every case the context will make the meaning clear.

C. THE EXERCISE OF *EPISKOPÉ* IN BRITISH METHODISM

1. Communal *Episkopé*

a) The Conference

10. Any treatment of the Methodist experience of *episkopé* must begin with the Conference. The early Methodist Conferences were dominated by John Wesley, who set the agenda, summed up the conversation (the conferring) that ensued, and at the end announced what the programme or policy was to be. One preacher, after the 1774 Conference, was heard to remark: ‘Mr Wesley seemed to do all the business himself.’³ But Wesley believed that his power was God-given. As far as he was concerned, the Conference had no rights other than those which he conferred upon it. As he said:

I myself sent for these, of my own free choice; and I sent for them to advise, not *govern* me. Neither did I at any one of those times divest myself of any part of that power above described, which the Providence of God had cast upon me, without any design or choice of mine.⁴

Clearly, then, the first form of *episkopé* to appear in Methodism was personal *episkopé*, the ministry of oversight (both pastoral and authoritative) of one man. But by Wesley's express design, that was to change after his death.

11. After Wesley's death, the Conference was given legal continuity by the Deed of Declaration, which Wesley had executed in 1784 to bestow upon the Legal Hundred those powers which he himself had held. The Legal Hundred (whose original members were selected by Wesley to provide a cross-section of the itinerant preachers) was the 'official' Conference, though other preachers were eligible to attend and it was the whole Conference which exercised general oversight within the Connexion. From that time onwards, the Conference exercised, as it still exercises, *episkopé* over the people called Methodists.
12. Though the character and constitution of the Conference has changed over time, the Conference continues to exercise a corporate rôle of *episkopé* over the connexion. This can be illustrated in a number of ways. First, the Conference exercises *episkopé* by directing and leading the Church's thoughts and actions. It makes authoritative statements on matters of faith and order, thus seeking to preserve and transmit the apostolic faith, and on social and ethical issues. It also seeks to discern the will of God in the world and to enable the Methodist people to respond to their missionary calling.
13. Second, subject to, and indeed in accordance with, the Methodist Church Act and other legal instruments, it is the Conference which can and does establish the constitution of Methodism at every level. In the case of significant changes in polity, the 33 Districts (and sometimes the Circuits and local churches) are consulted. But the final word rests with the Conference.
14. Third, we may consider the Conference's rôle in relation to ordained ministry. It is the Conference which approves those who are to be trained for diaconal or presbyteral ministry. It is the Conference which admits them, in due course, into full connexion with itself and which authorizes their ordination. Those who ordain do so only with the specific authority of the Conference to ordain named individuals. Almost all ordinations take place during the annual meeting of the Conference, in the region where the Conference is meeting, rather than in the Districts in which the ordinands serve. It is the Conference which stations the ministers and deacons. In all these matters, the Conference acts on the advice of other bodies – the Connexional Candidates Selection Committee, or the Stationing Committee, for example. But in every case it is the act of the Conference itself which is decisive.
15. Fourth, all who preside at Holy Communion in Methodism are authorized by the Conference to do so – ministers, by virtue of their ordination which took place on the authority of the Conference, ministers of other communions who are 'recognized and regarded' or 'authorized' by the Conference, and, exceptionally, lay persons or deacons who, where eucharistic deprivation

would otherwise exist, are authorized by name by the Conference, with the matter subject to annual review.

16. Between the Conferences, the Methodist Council performs an oversight rôle. The Council is authorized to act on behalf of the Conference and is charged to keep in constant review the life of the Methodist Church, to study its work and witness throughout the Connexion, to indicate what changes are necessary or what steps should be taken to make the work of the Church more effective, to give spiritual leadership to the Church.⁵

In discharging its responsibilities, the Council is to ensure that the decisions of the Conference are fully implemented and to supervise the general work of the connexional Team.⁶ Thus it may be said that the Council exercises delegated *episkopé* on behalf of the Conference.

b) The Circuit and the Local Church

17. Moving away from the Conference, it is important to note that at every other level of Methodism's life, some sort of communal *episkopé* is exercised too. Each local church has its Church Council, which has authority and oversight over the whole area of the ministry of the church, including the management of its property. Aims and methods, the determination and pursuit of policy and the deployment of available resources are its proper responsibility.⁷

18. Yet in terms of oversight, the rôle of the Circuit is even more significant. To quote from *Called to Love and Praise*, a Statement adopted by the 1999 Conference:

The grouping of local churches in Circuits reflects the Methodist belief that no local church is an autonomous unit complete in itself. Rather, it is linked essentially and structurally to the wider Church. Circuit structures represent interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility and submission to mutual jurisdiction. Indeed, the Circuit, rather than the local church, has been the primary church unit in British Methodism. The appointment of Superintendent Ministers, with overall responsibility for the sharing within the Circuit of pastoral work, and for the preaching plan indicates the communal, interdependent character of the Church. The Circuit system also makes possible the deployment of resources in an area wider than that of the local church.⁸

19. This report will consider the rôle of the Superintendent Minister later. But first, it is instructive to look at the *episkopé* which belongs to the Circuit Meeting. This body is made up of the ministers and deacons appointed to the Circuit, various circuit officers, and representatives of each local church. It is the Circuit Meeting, not the local church, which invites ministers to serve in a Circuit (though such invitations are dependent upon the approval of the Conference, which, in the last analysis, stations ministers). It is the Circuits which provide funds for the stipends of ministers, from contributions received from the local churches. The Circuit is

the primary unit in which local churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help.⁹

The Circuit Meeting . . . shall exercise that combination of spiritual leadership and administrative efficiency which will enable the Circuit to fulfil its purposes . . . and shall act as the focal point of the working fellowship of the churches in the Circuit, overseeing their pastoral, training and evangelistic work.¹⁰

c) The District

20. There are approximately 660 Circuits, with an average of ten local churches in each. Each Circuit in turn belongs to a District, of which there are 33 (not counting overseas Districts). This much larger unit is ‘an expression, over a wider geographical area than the Circuit, of the connexional character of the Church’.¹¹ It

. . . serves the local churches and Circuits and the Conference in the support, deployment and oversight of the various ministries of the Church, and in programmes of training.¹²

21. The District relates both to the Conference and to the Circuits. The District Synod, in its Representative Session, is the forum in which aspects of the agenda of the Conference are received in a more localized setting and issues affecting the life of the Circuits are discussed. The Synod orders District affairs and develops District policy. Unlike the Conference, the Synod cannot direct the Circuits, except in some matters of finance and property, but by exploring important issues and by fellowship and sharing it has the capacity to lead and inspire. Most of its lay members are representatives from the Circuits, but all ministers and deacons in the active work and probationers are required to attend, unless given a dispensation from doing so. It is to the Synods that the Conference refers proposals for significant changes of polity. It is by the Synods that the vast majority of members of the Conference are appointed.
22. It is clear that, at four levels of the Methodist Church’s life, communal *episkopé* is to be discerned. Moreover, there is a sense of representation at every level. Most people who serve on Church Councils are elected by the local members; most Circuit Meeting members are appointed by Church Councils; most Synod members represent Circuits; most Conference members are elected by District Synods.
23. On this point, *Called to Love and Praise* is again worth quoting:
- 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.¹³

24. The communal exercise of *episkopé*, especially by the Conference, but also throughout the Church's life, is characteristic of Methodism's way of exercising oversight. But what of collegial and personal *episkopé*?

2 Collegial *Episkopé*

a) The Connexion

25. The Representative Session of the Conference is, as we have seen, an example of Methodism's communal exercise of *episkopé*. The Ministerial and Diaconal Sessions, however, are better described as collegial. In each, members of the same order of ministry 'watch over' each other and take counsel together about the work of the Church, with particular regard to their own order. In former times, ministers (presbyters) valued being in the succession of 'Mr Wesley's preachers'. Collegiality was nurtured in initial training in Methodist theological colleges and sustained through an itinerant ministry that often entailed moving to a new Circuit every three years. Ministers came to value 'the brotherhood (as it then was) of the ministry' and together had a wide knowledge of the Connexion. In the last fifty years, however, changes in patterns of training, in invitation and stationing, and in the increased time ministers now spend in fewer Circuits and fewer Districts, as well as the development of non-itinerant forms of ministry, have diminished this sense of collegiality.
26. The Methodist Diaconal Order, however, is consciously a religious order as well as an order of ministry. Its exercise of collegial oversight is found not only in the Diaconal Session of the Conference but also in the Convocation, which all deacons, diaconal probationers and student deacons are required to attend, unless a dispensation is received from the Warden. Convocation provides an opportunity not only for study, reflection and fellowship, but also for decision making and mutual accountability. Though the Warden exercises personal *episkopé* within the life of the Order, oversight is frequently seen to be exercised collegially through the Staff Team.
27. The connexional Team exists to support and encourage the Church in its ministry and mission. The Team works under the oversight of the Methodist Council and the Methodist Conference. Both its supportive rôle and its accountability to oversight indicate that the connexional Team is not intended, constitutionally, to embody collegial *episkopé*. Nevertheless, in practice the Team may be said to exercise a limited form of collegial *episkopé*. Part of the ministry of support and encouragement to the Church exercised by the Team involves considerable day to day responsibility for the Church's work. The Methodist Council further charges some connexional Team members with the responsibility of representing the Church's views, for example in areas of public policy. The exercise of such responsibilities by the connexional Team entails a kind of collegial *episkopé*, one derived ultimately from the Conference.

b) The Districts and the Chairmen

28. Like the Ministerial Session of the Conference, the Ministerial Session of the Synod is an example of collegial *episkopé*. All members of this 'college' are expected to attend, unless given a dispensation. The Ministerial Synods play an especially important rôle of oversight in relation to probationers.

29. Later in this report, there will be some consideration of District Chairmen and the personal *episkopé* which they exercise within their Districts. It is relevant here, however, to consider three developments which have occurred in recent years with regard to the Chairmen collectively, which suggest a growing collegial exercise of *episkopé*. The first is that the Chairmen have officially become much more active in the process of stationing ministers in Circuits. They meet together to try to deal with matters of stationing with a connexional approach in mind, rather than acting as individuals, concerned mainly if not exclusively with their own Districts.
30. The second development is that the Chairmen now officially meet together at least three times a year, not only 'for the discussion of stationing issues' but also for the consideration of 'other matters of mutual concern and reflection upon the work of God in the Districts and Connexion'.¹⁴ The Chairmen's Meeting, however, has no specific powers, legislative or otherwise.
31. Third, at the Blackpool Conference of 1996, a statement was read out on behalf of all the Chairmen. This may be regarded as a significant development, suggesting the Chairmen acting as a 'college', part of the Conference and yet, in this instance, a distinct body within it.

c) The Circuit and the Local Church

32. There is a sense in which, within a Circuit, the Staff Meeting exercises collegial *episkopé*, as ministers, sometimes with deacons and lay workers, confer about the work of the Circuit. An extended form of this occurs when the Staff meet with the Circuit Stewards. Circuit and local church Leadership Teams could also be regarded in this way, although they may more closely approximate to the communal model.
33. The Local Preachers' Meeting, which includes ministers as well as local preachers among its members, is another example of collegial *episkopé*. Oversight is entrusted to this meeting with regard to the approval and training of those answering a call to be local preachers, to continuing local preacher development, and to matters of character, fitness and fidelity to doctrine.¹⁵
34. Within a local church, the collegial model of oversight is most clearly seen in the Pastoral Committee, where *episkopé* is exercised jointly, usually by consensus decision.

d) Forms of Collegiality

35. In paragraph 8 above, it was said that 'collegial oversight entails a group of people (usually ordained, and, indeed, ordained to the same order of ministry) jointly exercising *episkopé*'. That is an accurate account of how collegiality is practised in most Churches and it is found in Methodism in, for example, the Ministerial Session of the Conference and the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order. There are, however, other ways in which 'colleges' are constituted in Methodism, involving not only those ordained to one particular order of ministry. Ministers, deacons, probationers and other lay people (church stewards, class leaders and pastoral visitors) may all be members of the same local church Pastoral Committee, for example.

3. Personal *Episkopé*

36. Personal *episkopé* is widely exercised in Methodism. Ministers in local churches, Circuit Superintendents and District Chairmen are valued as pastors and leaders, and their office is recognized as conferring authority and influence. They are respected as representative persons; and this is particularly true of the President of the Conference, whose *episkopé* in other respects is limited by the short-term nature of the office.
 37. It is important to the Methodist ethos that personal *episkopé* should wherever possible be exercised in a collegial or a communal context. While pastoral care is often best given on an individual basis, matters of pastoral discipline are normally resolved by groups charged with this responsibility. A very common model of leadership is the ‘minister in council’ model, where the minister meets to make decisions with other ministerial or lay colleagues (the latter often elected representatives). Sometimes the exercise of personal *episkopé* means that the minister stands ‘over against’ the other members of the meeting, as, perhaps, when he or she is representing the interest or missionary needs of the wider Church; but the more characteristic model is leadership from within, and personal *episkopé* is characteristically exercised where the minister lives and works among the people.
- a) The Connexion
38. The President of the Conference has considerable authority under the Methodist constitution, but this is derived authority; the President acts as the representative of the Conference. There is a sense in which the President oversees the work of the whole Connexion, but since he or she serves for only one year, this is not a sustained ministry of oversight. The President’s chairing of the Methodist Council is essentially different from the ‘minister-in-council’ model, because of the discontinuity of the office.
 39. There is, however, continuity in the office of the Secretary of the Conference. This, combined with the unique overview of the Connexion which the rôle provides, has meant that, more at some times than at others, the Secretary has had considerable influence, if not formal authority. Some Secretaries have exercised a significant ministry of pastoral oversight. But an instinctive resistance to too much power or influence being vested in the holder of any office has ensured that this has been personal authority accorded to individual Secretaries, rather than an acceptance of the office as conferring *episkopé*.
 40. Prior to restructuring in the mid 1990s, the General Secretaries of the Divisions and their equivalents in the earlier Departments, who, with one exception, were ministers, exercised personal *episkopé*. In their relationship with the Boards, they may be thought to have approached the minister in council model (except that they did not chair Board meetings). The move towards opening most positions within the connexional Team to ordained or lay candidates has been made without addressing the serious question of how *episkopé* – whether collegial or personal in form and whether by ordained or lay people – is to be exercised at Connexional level in a way that is consonant with its exercise elsewhere. Though such sharing of responsibility is consistent with the Methodist belief in the ministry of the whole people of God, it contrasts with staff teams elsewhere in the Connexion, which usually consist largely of ministers and are usually ministerially led. Connexional

Team members are less likely than staff in Circuits and Districts to understand their work in terms of personal *episkopé* either (compared with Superintendents and Chairmen) over their colleagues or (compared with circuit ministers or lay members of Circuit Leadership Teams) over the work which they are servicing.

41. The previous paragraphs suggest that personal oversight at connexional level is less clearly understood and effectively exercised than elsewhere in Methodist polity, and is not as satisfactorily provided for as are communal and collegial oversight. The Faith and Order Committee is conscious of the fact that the recently introduced connexional structures are still developing (see paragraph 27 above, for example) and does not therefore consider it appropriate to make specific recommendations about this matter at the present time. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that this is a matter of church order which it ought to keep under review; it undertakes to do so and to report further to the Conference in due course.

b) The District

42. Because, in Methodism, the geographical unit closest to a Roman Catholic or Anglican diocese is a District, the Chairman has often been perceived as exercising a rôle comparable with that of a bishop. But there are significant differences.
43. For example, a Methodist Chairman would not normally confirm, and has no authority to decide who shall be ordained, nor indeed, does he or she ordain, unless he or she is the President or is acting as the current President's deputy (a rôle almost invariably undertaken by a former President). As we have seen, the authorization of ordinations is an act of the Conference, and it is the senior representative of the Conference, or a deputy, who carries out the act. Constitutionally, the Chairman has little authority, though in practice most holders of the office enjoy considerable respect and have considerable influence.
44. The rôle of the Chairman is, in many ways, that of a circuit minister writ large. What the minister is to the congregation, the Chairman is to the District. It is a preaching, teaching and sacramental rôle. It has a large element of pastoral care; the Chairman is specifically charged with responsibility for the pastoral oversight of the ministers, deacons and probationers in the District. The Chairman also has the duty 'to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and ministerial probationers of the District'.¹⁶ While the Chairman's rôle in the formal disciplinary procedures of the Church is not now as great as it once was, he or she may nevertheless have considerable personal influence and a significant informal rôle in disciplinary matters.
45. The Chairman has an important representative rôle, representing the wider Church in the local churches and the local in the wider, often shouldering connexional responsibilities, while also representing the Methodist Church in ecumenical circles and in the community at large. The Chairman is a focus of unity, and acts as a 'link-person' within a District. This involves, for example, communication, transmission of information and teaching. The Chairman may exercise a prophetic and visionary rôle, initiating new ventures in fellowship, discipleship, training and mission.

46. The nature of the rôle has developed considerably since 1957 when ‘separated’ Chairmen became the norm. This has happened in response to the requirements of the Church and the expectations of the people. Though Chairmen do not normally confirm or ordain, as we have seen, their office does seem to be increasingly regarded as ‘episcopal’.

c) The Circuit

47. It is often said that, in many ways, the most striking example of personal *episkopé* in British Methodism is to be found in the Circuits, in the person of the Superintendent. The Superintendent is, among the ministers of the Circuit, first among equals. He or she is responsible for the making of the preaching plan for all the churches in the Circuit. He or she has the right, seldom exercised, to preside at all official meetings. He or she is responsible for ensuring that the Church’s discipline is upheld within the Circuit, and its doctrines not violated. In addition to these constitutional responsibilities, there are traditional expectations of the Superintendent’s ministry: he or she is expected to exercise a preaching, pastoral, representative ministry across the Circuit, bringing leadership and co-ordination to its life.
48. The rôle of the Chairman as a minister of *episkopé* is severely qualified by Standing Orders, in favour of the Superintendent. Although ‘it is the duty of the Chairman to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and ministerial probationers in the District’,¹⁷

It is the responsibility of the Chairman to strengthen the hand of the Superintendent and uphold his or her authority and rights under the Methodist constitution . . .¹⁸

Each Chairman is authorized to visit officially any Circuit in the District to which he or she is invited by the Superintendent or respecting which, after consultation with the Superintendent, he or she is satisfied that his or her assistance or intervention may be necessary for the advancement of the work, the preservation of peace and order, or the execution of the connexional economy and discipline. The Chairman of the District shall not so far set aside the office and responsibility of the Superintendent as to intervene in the administration of a Circuit or to preside at any meeting for the administration of discipline or for any other circuit purposes in any Circuit except when, in special circumstances, the Synod otherwise directs, or by the invitation or with the consent of the Superintendent. Even in such circumstances, unless the Synod otherwise directs, the Superintendent shall be responsible for administering, after consultation with the Chairman and his or her own colleagues, any measure of discipline which may be deemed necessary.¹⁹

49. For such reasons, when the Conference of 1981 considered the possibility of introducing episcopacy into its polity, there was deep division about whether this should be done by developing the rôle of the Chairman (as the President’s Council believed) or by developing the rôle of the Superintendent (as a major report before the Conference proposed). In the event, the Conference commended the report for study, without expressing any judgment on its conclusions.²⁰

50. Every minister in pastoral charge of a local church also exercises *episkopé*, supplying leadership, teaching the faith, and offering pastoral care. Commonly used terms like ‘pastoral charge’ and ‘pastoral oversight’ themselves bear witness to this fact.

d) Accountability

51. It is important to note, at the end of this brief glance at the personal *episkopé* exercised connexionally and in Districts and Circuits, that the Methodist way of doing things ensures the accountability of those who exercise oversight. Superintendents, in common with their colleagues, are subject to the processes of invitation and re-invitation. Chairmen serve for a fixed term, which is renewable by the Conference on the recommendation of the District. Officers of the Conference similarly serve for a fixed term. Personal *episkopé* can be exercised only with the consent of those among whom and with whom it is exercised. Occasionally, there may be tension between the exercise of personal *episkopé* by a minister, who by virtue of his or her ordination is a focus and representative of the calling of the whole Church, and the exercise of communal or collegial *episkopé* and decision making.

D. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATIONS OF EPISCOPACY

52. It is abundantly clear that oversight, *episkopé*, is exercised within the Connexion, and that it is exercised in personal, communal and collegial ways. For a variety of reasons, over a period of years, the Methodist Conference has considered the questions whether, when, and in what circumstances, it would be appropriate to move beyond the recognition that *episkopé* is exercised within the Connexion to the introduction of **episcopacy**. The 1998 report (see paragraph 2 above) quoted extensively from the many statements about episcopacy which had been made in Methodist documents since the time of Methodist union. It is neither necessary nor desirable to reproduce all those quotations here, but it may well be helpful to summarize them as follows.
- a) The Conference has recognized that *episkopé* is already exercised within the life of the Methodist Church.
 - b) The Conference has asserted its view that episcopacy is not essential to the existence or apostolicity of the Church, but has also expressed its belief that ‘the coming great Church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order’.
 - c) The Conference has declared that the acceptance of the ‘historic episcopate’ would not violate the Methodist doctrinal standards.
 - d) In the context of proposals towards closer unity, the Conference has on several occasions indicated its willingness to embrace episcopacy, while insisting that Methodists should have no less freedom of interpretation than Anglicans enjoy in respect of the ‘historic episcopate’.

E. MODELS OF THE EPISCOPATE FROM THE WORLD-WIDE CHURCH

53. The 1998 Conference, in commissioning the present report, directed that it should ‘explore models of the episcopate from the world-wide Church’. This section of the report sketches out a selection of such models, beginning with

Churches from the Methodist tradition, then in the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Moravian traditions. The concluding paragraphs of the section consider the place of episcopacy within a number of united Churches and important ecumenical agreements.

1. The United Methodist Church

54. The United Methodist Church (a global Church based in the United States of America) is an example of a Methodist Church in which *episkopé* is exercised by bishops. Although John Wesley disapproved of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury being called ‘bishops’, he ‘appointed’ them (or ‘ordained’ them, as he sometimes wrote) to superintend the work in America. Within Wesley’s own lifetime, the term ‘bishop’ was in use in American Methodism. The bishops of the United Methodist Church are elected by a Jurisdictional or Central Conference and usually consecrated at a session of the same Conference. They are regarded as elders (presbyters) exercising a particular office, rather than members of a distinct order of ministry, though on retirement they are eligible to attend the Council of Bishops without voting rights. It is their responsibility to lead and oversee ‘the spiritual and temporal affairs of the United Methodist Church, and particularly to lead the Church in its mission and service to the world’,²¹ and to transmit, teach and proclaim the apostolic faith. The bishops appoint district superintendents, consecrate bishops and ordain elders and deacons.
55. The United Methodist Church places great emphasis on the collegiality of bishops:

Bishops, although elected by Jurisdictional or Central Conferences, are elected general superintendents of the whole Church. As all ordained ministers are first elected into membership of an Annual Conference and subsequently appointed to pastoral charges, so bishops become through their election members first of the Council of Bishops before they are subsequently assigned to areas of service.²²

The Council of Bishops is thus the collegial expression of episcopal leadership in the Church and through the Church into the world. The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world, and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity . . .²³

56. *Episkopé* is exercised in the United Methodist Church not only by bishops, but also by district superintendents. The rôle of the latter is largely pastoral. The Book of Discipline indicates that they are to give pastoral support and supervision to the clergy of the district and encourage their personal, spiritual and professional growth. They are to enable programmes that may assist local churches to build and extend their ministry and mission with their people and to the community. They are also to participate with the bishops in the appointment-making process and to assist the bishop in the administration of the Annual Conference.²⁴ There is strong emphasis on the bishops and district superintendents as leaders in mission:

The task of superintending the United Methodist Church resides in the office of the bishop and extends to the district superintendent . . .

The purpose of superintending is to equip the Church in its disciple-making ministry.²⁵

57. It should be noted that the United Methodist Church does not claim that its bishops stand within the 'historic succession'.

2. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the Methodist Church in Portugal.

58. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) and the Methodist Church in Portugal (IEMP) both provide examples of Methodist Churches that have recently moved from non-episcopal to episcopal forms of Church life.
59. The MCSA began as an overseas District of the British Methodist Church. After becoming autonomous, it continued to be structured along similar lines to British Methodism. In the 1980s discussion about whether to retitle MCSA's District Chairmen 'bishops' gathered pace. In ecumenical contexts, and in relation to the media and political authorities, some argued, the term 'District Chairman' did not achieve sufficient recognition. Amongst opponents of the proposed change there were suspicions about the 'trappings' of episcopal office and serious anxiety about an erosion of the democratic accountability of Church leaders if the Church decided to have bishops. In due course the Conference of the MCSA decided to change the title of District Chairmen to 'Bishop'. Greater autonomy has been given to Districts. The Annual Conference has become a triennial Conference. Between Conferences a Connexional Executive oversees the Church; nearly half of its forty members are Bishops.
60. For the first century and a quarter of its existence the Methodist Church in Portugal was also an Overseas District of the British Methodist Conference. In 1996 the 'Iglesia Evangelica Metodista Portuguesa' became an autonomous Church. It chose to entitle the leader of the Church 'Bishop'. *The Basic Doctrines and Statutes of the IEMP* affirm that, for reasons of 'order, discipline and efficiency', the IEMP sets aside by ordination a diaconal ministry and a ministry of Word and Sacrament. They continue:

The Episcopate of the IEMP is not a ministerial order different from, or hierarchically superior to, the Presbyterian order, but an office within that order. Its functions comprise a pastoral ministry, which embraces the whole Church and includes the pastoral care of all the other presbyters, and the preservation and elucidation of the faith. The Episcopate is a symbol of Church unity and the Bishop is primarily responsible for the official representation of the Church on all occasions and in all places where such representation is required.²⁶

3. British Anglican Churches

61. For British Methodists, considerations of episcopacy notably take place in the context of their experience of it in the three churches of the Anglican Communion in Wales, Scotland and England. At the present time, Methodist representatives are participating in important ecumenical conversations in England, Scotland and Wales, each of which involves an Anglican Church and in each of which, therefore, episcopacy is an issue to be addressed.

62. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, a report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission, helpfully sets out the current Anglican understanding of the 'historic episcopate':

Within Anglicanism, the historic episcopate denotes the continuity of oversight in the Church through the ages from the earliest days, expressed in a personal episcopal ministry, the intention of which is to safeguard, transmit, and restate in every generation the apostolic faith delivered once for all to the saints. It is not the only way by which the apostolic faith is safeguarded and transmitted, nor is it exercised apart from the Church as a whole. It is exercised within the Church, recalling the people of God to their apostolic vocation. It is exercised in an interplay with the whole people of God, in which their reception of that ministry is a crucial element . . . It is a personal episcopal ministry, but always exercised collegially (i.e. together with other bishops, and with the clergy within each diocese), and also communally (i.e. together with the laity and clergy in synod, convention or council).²⁷

63. It is not to be assumed, however, that because the Church of England, the Episcopal Church of Scotland and the Church in Wales are all members of the Anglican Communion, the same model of episcopacy is to be found in all of them. Episcopacy may be exercised with different 'styles' and may 'feel' different in different contexts. For example, the episcopal office in the Church of England, which is the Established Church in that country, carries with it certain differences of function and perhaps status from those obtaining in the non-established Anglican churches in Scotland and Wales. Bishops of the Church of England are nominated by the Church, but, unlike their counterparts in Wales and Scotland, appointed by the Crown.

a) The Church of England

64. Within the Church of England, the bishop in his diocese is the chief pastor and principal minister. He ordains priests and deacons. He confirms. His responsibilities include 'conducting, ordering, controlling and authorising all services . . .' and 'of granting a faculty or licence for all alterations, removals, or repairs to the walls, fabric, ornaments or furniture . . .'.²⁸ He institutes clergy to vacant benefices. He may well perform a function in affairs of state as a member of the House of Lords. He represents the whole Church in and to his diocese, and his diocese in and to the councils of the Church. 'He is thus a living representative of the unity and universality of the Church.'²⁹ With his fellow bishops he has the responsibility to guard the Church against erroneous teaching.
65. But the concept of a single bishop in a diocese has been modified. There are suffragan bishops or area bishops, who exercise some of the functions of the diocesan bishop, sometimes in clearly-defined sections of a diocese, sometimes throughout a diocese. They act under delegation from their diocesan bishops. There are now the Provincial Episcopal Visitors, recently consecrated as bishops to provide ministry and pastoral care to those within the Church of England who are opposed to the ordination of women and who do not feel able to accept sacramental ministry and pastoral care from diocesan or suffragan bishops who have ordained women to the priesthood. Numerous

reports to the General Synod, on matters related to the exercise of episcopacy, make it abundantly clear, not only that practical changes have occurred, but also that there is a developing understanding of what episcopacy means.

66. The Church of England describes itself as 'episcopally led and synodically governed'.³⁰ The rôle of the bishops within that synodical government appears to be highly significant. The Synodical Government Measure of 1969 provided for the formation of the General Synod and enabled 'the laity to take their place alongside the clergy in the Councils of the Church'. Diocesan Synods also now exist and are designed to be democratically representative. The bishop presides at the Synod, though others may do so at the bishop's invitation.
 67. The General Synod is presided over by the two Archbishops. Within it, the House of Bishops exercises a certain amount of collegial power. Matters of doctrine, liturgy, ceremonial and the administration of the sacraments go before the House of Bishops before going to the Synod and then are referred back for final approval, thus reflecting the bishops' continuing authority over matters of oversight and the guardianship of faith and order. On occasion the House of Bishops is responsible for bringing before the Synod legislation which is largely of its own (the House of Bishops') making, for example, the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993 which provided for extended episcopal oversight, including Provincial Episcopal Visitors.
- b) The Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales
68. The 'feel' of Anglicanism in Scotland and Wales is significantly different from that in England. This may in part result from the fact that the Anglican Churches of Scotland and Wales are not established. Furthermore, because there are comparatively few bishops (six in Wales and seven in Scotland) and because the churches themselves are relatively small, both episcopal collegiality and a sense of closeness between bishop, clergy and people are perhaps more evident than in the Church of England. Bishops are individually involved in a wider range of national church activities than is the case in England.
 69. In the Interim Report of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union, episcopal ministry in the Scottish Episcopal Church is described in the following terms:

Paramount in the personal dimension of this ministry of oversight is the need for pastoral care and leadership in mission in a way that brings cohesion . . . In the Scottish Episcopal Church bishops serve in collaborative ministry with each other, other ministers and the councils of the Church at all levels. For the discharge of their duties they are answerable to the Church. They have a constitutionally defined rôle alongside others in the governance of the Church.³¹
 70. The Church in Wales, like the Methodist Church, is one of the Covenanted Churches which are exploring the possibility of an 'ecumenical bishop'. Though the outcome of this exploration cannot at present be known, the engagement in it of the Church in Wales illustrates a willingness (expressed in the Welsh Anglican/Methodist talks of 1965) 'to look forward to what

episcopacy may become, as we live together'. In Scotland too there is a recognition that episcopacy is evolving.

71. The Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Church in Wales and the Church of England have all experienced developments in their understandings and styles of episcopacy. Especially in ecumenical conversations, they have revealed an openness to further developments. In the context of a discussion of 'the Apostolicity of the Church and Ministry', the report of the Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran Churches, declared that 'all our churches are churches in change... Anglicans, for example, are presently concerned to find the right balance between synodical government and episcopal oversight.'³²

4. The Roman Catholic Church

72. The Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical understanding of episcopacy. Episcopal consecration confers 'the fullness of the sacrament of orders . . . the apex of the sacred ministry'.³³ The bishops are the successors of the apostles. They care for the flock of Christ by governing it and teaching it.³⁴ Each 'individual bishop . . . is the visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular church'.³⁵ Bishops 'have the sacred right and the duty before the Lord to make laws for their subjects, to pass judgement on them, and to moderate everything pertaining to the ordering of worship . . .'.³⁶ The Second Vatican Council stressed the collegiality of the episcopate, referring to the ecumenical councils held through the centuries. 'But the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is simultaneously conceived of in terms of its head, the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor . . .'³⁷ who 'has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church'.³⁸ Thus, bishops have considerable authority and power within their dioceses, but it is always exercised under the higher authority of the Pope. Diocesan bishops are sometimes assisted by Auxiliary bishops who act under their authority. Bishops ordain and usually confirm, though this latter responsibility is sometimes delegated to presbyters.
73. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic understanding of episcopacy has advanced in parallel with the recovery of the understanding of the Church as *koinonia* (fellowship, communion), and bishops are seen as leaders of their local churches and active collaborators with the Pope, rather than simply as his agents. It is also true that much modern Roman Catholic theology emphasizes the duty of bishops to listen to and represent their local churches. Yet the Roman Catholic model of episcopacy remains essentially hierarchical and the bishops' collegiality is based on the principle of 'hierarchical communion' with the Pope, juridically enforced.

5. The Moravian Church

74. The Moravian Church, which profoundly influenced early Methodism, is an example of an episcopal church, in the historic succession, in which Church-governmental and administrative functions are not necessarily linked to the office of a bishop. The bishop is seen as 'a living symbol of the continuity of the Church's ministry'. His primary responsibility is spiritual; he has a special duty to intercede for the Church; he is a pastor to the pastors; he should visit congregations in order to deepen their spiritual life and his opinion should be sought in matters of doctrine and practice. The Bishop represents the whole

Church in the act of ordination, but ordains only on the authority of a Provincial Board or Synod.³⁹

6. The Church of South India

75. The twentieth century has witnessed a number of important schemes for Christian unity and some significant ecumenical agreements. Whenever episcopally-ordered Churches (especially those which claim the historic episcopate) have been involved, episcopacy has been an issue to be addressed.
76. The Church of South India (CSI) is an example of a United Church into which Methodists entered, and which involved acceptance by Methodists and other non-episcopal churches not only of an episcopal Church structure, but also of the historic episcopate.
77. Acceptance of the historic episcopate within the CSI was a much debated issue by the participating Churches in advance of Union. Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and other Reformed Church representatives agreed to lay aside their historic reservations about episcopacy for the sake of Union. Methodist missionaries from Britain, who originated mainly in the Wesleyan tradition, self-consciously provided a bridge between Anglicans and the 'Free Churches' on this issue. To achieve Church Union compromise was necessary, not least on episcopacy. The CSI Constitution, written before Union, deliberately did not include the expression of a particular understanding of episcopacy.

7. The Uniting Church of Australia

78. By contrast with the CSI, the Uniting Church of Australia is an example of a uniting Church that considered accepting the historic episcopate, but resolved for the time being not to do so.
79. The Uniting Church of Australia brings together Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist traditions. In the earliest stages Anglicans were also involved. *The Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union* looked in detail at episcopacy and recommended accepting the sign of the historic episcopate on the basis that the office of bishop was present in the Church from the earliest times. It was recommended that the sign be recovered from the Church of South India, because the Joint Commission understood that Bishops in the CSI avoided 'prelatical episcopacy'. The pattern of 'bishop in presbytery', the Report suggested, might find wide acceptance in the proposed Uniting Church in Australia. Ultimately, Church Union proceeded along non-episcopal lines, and without Anglican participation.

8. Episcopacy in the Leuenberg, Meissen, Porvoo and Reuilly Ecumenical Agreements

80. The Leuenberg Agreement is an ecumenical accord between Churches of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Most of the Methodist Churches of Europe, including the British Methodist Church, have accepted it and are members of the Leuenberg Fellowship of Churches. The Meissen Agreement is between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany (a federation of Churches from Lutheran, Reformed and United Church traditions). The Porvoo Common Statement marks an agreement between the

British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. The Reuilly Common Statement resulted from conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Because British Methodists are part of Leuenberg, but not of Meissen and Porvoo, the Leuenberg Agreement is of particular interest.

81. The Leuenberg Agreement allows for areas of doctrinal disagreement between member Churches. It provides for church fellowship, but does not seek formal church union. In the original Agreement little is said about understandings of ministry, and nothing specifically of episcopacy. Yet the Agreement does declare ‘mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for inter-celebration at the Lord’s Supper’.

82. In a subsequent document, *Sacraments, Ministry, Ordination*, participating Churches state a set of theses on Ministry, which include the following:

In ecumenical discussion there is . . . increasing talk of a ‘service of *episkopé*’. In the New Testament there is no clearly recognizable difference between presbyters and *episcopoi*. Certainly not all congregations had *episcopoi*. Nevertheless the ‘historic episcopate’ did develop in the tradition.⁴⁰

83. In Reformed churches, it adds, presbyters have exercised a service of *episkopé*, and in the Lutheran Churches there is an episcopal ministry. But, despite different practices, ‘the Churches of the Reformation are unanimous that they do not regard the churches as founded on the office of bishop. They understand the ‘service of *episkopé*’ exclusively as a service to the unity of the church, not as an office (*Amt*) over the church, but as a service (*Dienst*) in the church.’⁴¹

84. The German churches, which are signatories to the Leuenberg Agreement, are also part of the Meissen Agreement. In Meissen, the crucial paragraph is #16. This spells out a disagreement at the heart of the Meissen Agreement:

Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches, though being increasingly prepared to appreciate episcopal succession ‘as a sign of the apostolicity of the life of the whole Church’ hold that this particular form of *episkopé* should not become a necessary condition for ‘full, visible unity’. The Anglican understanding of full, visible unity includes the historic episcopate and full interchangeability of ministers. Because of this remaining difference our mutual recognition of one another’s ministries does not result yet in the full interchangeability of ministers.⁴²

85. In Porvoo, even this obstacle is absent, and consequently the Nordic and Baltic Churches, which have the historic episcopate, are in the same degree of fellowship with the Anglican Churches of the British Isles as Provinces of the Anglican Communion outside the British Isles.

86. The Reuilly Common Statement was published as recently as 1999. It includes the following sentences:

Anglicans believe that the historic episcopate is a sign of the apostolicity of the whole Church . . . Anglicans hold that the full visible unity of the Church includes the historic episcopal succession

. . . Lutherans and Reformed also believe that their ministries are in apostolic succession. In their ordination rites they emphasize the continuity of the Church and its ministry. They can recognize in the historic episcopal succession a sign of the apostolicity of the Church. They do not, however, consider it a necessary condition for full visible unity . . . Anglicans increasingly recognize that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been preserved in churches which have not retained the historic episcopal succession. However, Anglicans commend the use of the sign to signify: God's promise to be with the Church; God's call to fidelity and to unity; and a commission to realize more fully the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles. Because of this remaining difference . . . our mutual recognition of one another's ministries does not yet result in the full interchangeability of ordained ministers.⁴³

9. A Development in the United States of America

87. The *Concordat of Agreement* between the Episcopal (Anglican) Church of the United States of America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which currently has bishops who are not in the 'historic succession', offers a model for reconciliation between a Church claiming the historic episcopate and one not claiming it. The *Concordat*, which has been approved by the Lutheran Church and awaits approval by the Episcopal Church, will, when fully ratified, enable full interchangeability of ministries and a degree of mutual consultation and accountability. To enable this to happen, the Episcopal Church will temporarily suspend the restriction that no one shall exercise ministry as a bishop, priest or deacon who has not been ordained within the historic episcopate.⁴⁴ The two churches will acknowledge each others' ministries as 'given by God . . . in the service of God's people'.⁴⁵ The Episcopalians will acknowledge that the historic episcopate is not 'necessary for salvation or for the recognition of another Church as a Church'.⁴⁶ The two churches will remain free to keep their existing links of communion with other churches, whether episcopal or non-episcopal. The Lutherans will receive the sign of the historical succession through the future consecration of bishops by others who stand in that succession, though they are not thereby required to affirm that such episcopacy is necessary for the unity of the Church.⁴⁷

10. The World Church

88. The development of British Methodist understanding of *episkopé* and of episcopacy does not take place in isolation from the World Church. The British Methodist Church is committed to an enriching and challenging pattern of relationships with partner Churches from Methodist and other traditions. From the brief sketches above, it is clear that British Methodism's partners in the World Church have explored very similar questions to those addressed in the present report. They have come to a wide range of conclusions. Some have continued without bishops; some have introduced bishops, but not within the historic episcopate; yet others have accepted the historic episcopate.

F. *EPISKOPÉ*, EPISCOPACY AND BRITISH METHODISM

89. The 1998 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to offer 'guidelines on issues of oversight, including those concerning bishops, which may guide Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations and assist the development of our own structures'.
90. It is clear to the Faith and Order Committee that the issue is not simply one of terminology. The expression 'District Chairman' has come to be regarded by many people as unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it violates the principle, strongly endorsed by the Conference, of the use of inclusive language. Second, it is largely unintelligible to the wider community. From time to time, and as recently as 1998, the suggestion has been made that these difficulties could be overcome if the 'Chairmen' were called 'Bishops'. But, while it is clear that 'District Chairman' is not a satisfactory term, the Faith and Order Committee believes that the straight substitution of the term 'bishop' is not an acceptable solution to the difficulty, for the following reasons.
91. First, the proposal to entitle Chairmen 'bishops' takes it for granted that the Chairmen would be the obvious people to be so named. The 1981 report (see paragraph 49 above) took a different view. A change of name should not take place without a serious study of the implications of such a change, some of which are addressed in paragraphs 102 – 109 below.
92. Second, although the Faith and Order Committee does not intend to pass any judgment on Methodist Churches in other parts of the world which have adopted the title 'bishop', the Committee believes that the ecumenical context which obtains in the British Isles renders such a course inappropriate for British Methodism. Only confusion would result if a title extensively used throughout the Christian world, but not previously used in British Methodism, were suddenly adopted and invested with a distinctive meaning, which took no account of the traditional rôle of a bishop, as described in paragraph 94 below. Such a procedure would be likely to hinder rather than to advance the cause of Christian unity, especially in relation to Churches which place great emphasis upon the historic episcopate.
93. This is not to say that there is only one way in which episcopacy can be understood. Section E above briefly illustrated the diversity which presently exists. Nevertheless, there are common features in the picture that emerges from that section. They are as follows.
- 94. It is generally agreed, in episcopal churches, that bishops are to exercise oversight, both within their particular areas of responsibility and in the wider Church. Bishops exercise their oversight both individually and collegially, and in many episcopal churches play a leading rôle, alongside presbyters, deacons and lay people, in church government. They have responsibility for the transmission and safeguarding of the apostolic faith, for providing for the administering of the sacraments, and for leadership in the Church's mission. They ordain presbyters and deacons. Their prophetic rôle includes the responsibility to represent the concerns of the wider Church to their dioceses, as they listen to and share with others the insights and witness of their own local churches.**
95. These common features of episcopacy, as it is generally understood among episcopal churches, would have to be taken seriously by British Methodism if

the introduction of a form of episcopacy to Methodism were to contribute to, rather than to impede, progress towards unity.

96. The report adopted by the 1998 Conference, having surveyed the discussion of episcopacy in British Methodism from 1937 onwards, noted that, while British Methodism does not regard episcopacy as being an essential element of Church order, the Conference has expressed its willingness to embrace the historic episcopate in order to further the cause of Christian unity.
97. In view of the significance which many churches attach to the historic episcopate, it would be misguided to introduce a form of episcopacy into British Methodism which would not be recognized by other churches as being within the historic episcopate. The recent *Concordat* of the Evangelical Lutherans and Episcopalians in the United States of America (see paragraph 87 above) illustrates the point that for significant progress to be made towards the reconciliation of ministries, the question of the 'historic succession' cannot be evaded. If Methodism is to advance towards unity with episcopally ordered churches in the historic succession, then at some stage, it must embrace episcopacy in that succession. This has been acknowledged in the past, as, for example, when, in its response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Conference of 1985 declared:

. . . we await the occasion when it would be appropriate 'to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'.⁴⁸
98. The Conference of 1978 expressed its belief that episcopacy would be one of the characteristics of 'the coming great Church'. It is unrealistic to imagine that the considerable majority of Christians whose churches are episcopally ordered would be willing to give up a sign of apostolicity which they cherish, and indeed it would be unreasonable to expect them to do so. It would be characteristic of Methodism to be open to the possibility that something that had not previously been a feature of Methodist life might contribute to it and enrich it.
99. Hitherto, the Conference has taken the view that such a momentous step should be taken only in the context of a unity scheme, rather than as an independent denominational act. The time and energy that would be involved in doing the latter would be considerable, and could be justified only if it were clear that the introduction of episcopacy to Methodism would either significantly enhance the way in which *episkopé* is exercised among us or that it would help to bring the unity of the Church closer. Since *episkopé* is already exercised throughout the Methodist Church's life (though imperfectly), and since discussions of various sorts are currently underway with the Anglican churches of England, Scotland and Wales, in which episcopacy is one of the issues under discussion, it would be unwise for the Methodist Church to act independently at the present time.
100. The judgment of the Faith and Order Committee is, therefore, that it would be helpful for the Conference to affirm its willingness to embrace episcopacy in the context of a unity scheme or as a significant step to bring the unity of the Church closer, but that the Conference should not seek to develop its own form of episcopacy outside that context. The Committee hopes that the preceding sentence will be read, not as a turning away from considerations of

episcopacy, but rather as a call to engage seriously with partner churches in the search for a form of episcopacy which all can own and cherish.

101. If conversations with a church or churches within the historic episcopate were to lead to a scheme for full visible unity, such a scheme would clearly need to set out a proposal for the way in which episcopal ministry would be exercised in the united Church. It could be, however, that conversations might result in a scheme for much closer relationships and partnerships, including perhaps reconciliation and interchangeability of ministries, while the churches continued to exist as separate entities. If the introduction of the historic episcopate to those churches which previously lacked it were part of such proposals, it would clearly be helpful for the Methodist Church to have a considered answer to the many questions which would need to be addressed before episcopacy could be introduced. These are set out in paragraphs 102 to 109 below.
102. First, who would become bishops? In previous considerations of this question, British Methodism has looked at three possibilities. The 1981 report claimed that

As the bishop is a focus of oversight and unity in the church, it would be natural for the President to be a bishop. Moreover, he engages in the kind of ministry traditionally associated with bishops (for example, in ordaining and in presiding over the Conference to which oversight of doctrine is committed). However to have only the President as bishop would be to remove the bishop from the close contact with the local church and the local minister which is generally seen as one of the most valuable parts of his ministry. Moreover the presence of perhaps ten or a dozen Past Presidents engaged in a ministry that is not necessarily one which focusses oversight and unity would severely distort the rôle of a bishop in the church . . . If the President is to be a bishop, which we judge to be right, then it is important that the more usual expression of episcopacy be elsewhere.⁴⁹

103. Those observations from the 1981 report, with which the Faith and Order Committee concurs, leave two possibilities for 'the more usual expression of episcopacy': the District Chairmen and the Circuit Superintendents. If the latter became bishops, this would presumably require the formation of fewer and much larger Circuits, since it would not be easy for over 300 bishops to relate to the bishops of other churches, or for that matter to each other. What, in these circumstances, would become of the Chairman's rôle? On the other hand, if the Chairmen rather than the Superintendents became bishops, how would their rôle and their constitutional responsibilities, and those of Superintendents, as set out in the Deed of Union and Standing Orders, need to be amended in order that appropriate oversight might be exercised?
104. Second, there is the matter of the relationship between the bishops on the one hand and the Conference and its President on the other. As we have seen, *episkopé* is exercised corporately by the Conference and, derivatively, by individuals, as well as collegially. There is no reason to suppose that the introduction of bishops would detract from the authority of the Conference, since bishops would exercise oversight under the authority of the Conference and be accountable to it.

105. The relationship between the bishops and the President (if the latter were not a bishop) would, however, raise difficulties. The latter, or his or her deputy, acts on behalf of the Conference at ordinations, the vast majority of which take place during the period when the Conference is meeting and within easy reach of the Conference venue. This practice is derived from, and has helped to maintain, the connexionalism that is such an important part of Methodism. Yet it is a universally recognized feature of episcopacy that bishops ordain and such ordinations usually take place within the diocese where those to be ordained serve. It would be extraordinary to have Methodist bishops who did not ordain, and the introduction of bishops would therefore be bound to involve some changes in the way in which Methodist ordinations are organized. Yet it ought to be possible to devise some means whereby bishops, alongside the President or a deputy, could play a leading rôle in ordinations, thus preserving the connexional principle while introducing episcopal ordination. For example, if the Chairmen became bishops, ordinations could take place at the Conference for groups of three or four Districts. The President or a deputy would preside at the services. Each bishop, with the President, could ordain the candidates from his or her District. It would be less easy to see how this problem might be resolved if the Superintendents were to become bishops.
106. There are other issues, however, about the relationship between the President and Methodist bishops. The former fulfils many rôles during the presidential year, for example in visits to Districts and to some extent in matters of discipline, which might be thought to be 'episcopal' rôles. If Chairmen or Superintendents became bishops, some re-evaluation of presidential responsibilities would be necessary.
107. Third, another common feature of episcopal churches is the concept of bishops acting collegially. Reference has already been made to the Church of England's House of Bishops and to the United Methodist Church, in whose understanding 'the Council of Bishops is the collegial expression of episcopal leadership'. At present, British Methodism has no equivalent. The District Chairmen meet together regularly, but they do not have authority to speak or act corporately on behalf of or to the Connexion. Nevertheless, as has already been pointed out, there have been developments in the way in which Chairmen operate collegially, and the introduction of bishops would require closer examination of the collegial rôle that they might properly exercise.
108. Fourth, careful consideration should be given to how episcopacy relates to county, regional and national structures and to how 'subsidiarity' may develop in the way in which authority is exercised within the Church. Would it be appropriate to have more than one type of episcopal area (for example, metropolitan districts, rural areas, small town) some with 'separated' and some with 'non-separated' bishops?
109. Fifth, there is the question of the means whereby British Methodism should receive the historic episcopate. In the context of conversations involving British Anglicans, it would clearly be appropriate for them to be involved in the first Methodist episcopal ordinations. But it would also be appropriate for the Methodist Church to receive the sign from a church or churches within the historic episcopate with which it is already in communion. The Church of South India is an obvious example.

110. The questions raised in paragraphs 102 to 109 above need to be addressed in the context of Methodism's experience of the exercise of *episkopé*, communally, collegially and personally, as described in part C of this report, and in the light of the guidelines in part H. The Faith and Order Committee believes that widespread discussion of these questions is desirable in order to discover how a Methodist episcopate would operate and therefore offers the third recommendation in part G and Resolution 3 to enable such a process.

G. RECOMMENDATIONS

111. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Conference, while taking no immediate steps to introduce episcopacy into Methodist polity, should affirm its willingness to do so in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments, on the basis of the Guidelines set out in section H below.
112. The Committee further recommends that these Guidelines be adopted by the Conference in order (a) to assist Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations faithfully to convey to others the mind of the Conference and (b) to assist in the development of our own structures.
113. Finally, the Committee recommends that this report be commended to the Methodist people for discussion, and that they be invited to comment on the issues raised in paragraphs 89 – 109 above.

H. GUIDELINES

114. The Faith and Order Committee proposes that the following Guidelines be adopted as a summary statement of the Methodist Church's position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 4. In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ's Church, the Methodist Church would willingly receive the sign of episcopal succession on the understanding that ecumenical partners sharing this sign with the Methodist Church (a) acknowledge that the latter has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and (b) accept that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The office [of a bishop] is relational in character and must be exercised in, with and among the community which it is called to serve. The office should not be so overburdened with bureaucratic demands that bishops are prevented from being alongside their people, or that their collegiality with their fellow bishops, presbyters and deacons is diminished. It is a ministry of service which requires an appropriate lifestyle and pastoral demeanour.⁵⁰

***RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the Guidelines set out in this report as a summary statement of its position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.

The Conference affirms its willingness in principle to receive the sign of episcopacy in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments, on the basis of the Guidelines set out in this report.

The Conference receives the report and commends it to the Districts, Circuits and local churches for discussion.

The Conference invites the Districts, Circuits, local churches and individual Methodists to send comments on paragraphs 89 to 109 to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee not later than 31 December 2001, and directs the Faith and Order Committee to report to the Conference of 2002 on the comments received.

REFERENCES

1. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, a Report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission to the World Methodist Council and the Lambeth Conference, 1996, pp.30f
2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Paper No. 111, 1982, pp.25f
3. *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume 1*, 1965, p.242
4. *Ibid.*, p.243
5. *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2*, (cited hereafter as 'CPD'), 1999 edition, Standing Order 211(2)
6. *Ibid.*, Standing Order 211(3)
7. *Ibid.*, Standing Order 603
8. *The Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1999, p.210
9. *CPD*, Standing Order 500
10. *Ibid.*, Standing Order 515(1)
11. *Ibid.*, Standing Order 400A
12. *Ibid.*
13. *The Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1999, p.207
14. *CPD*, Standing Order 230
15. See *CPD*, Standing Order 561
16. *CPD*, Standing Order 424(3)
17. *Ibid.*
18. *CPD*, Standing Order 425(2)
19. *CPD*, Standing Order 425(3)
20. The text of the report, together with the comments of the President's Council and of the Faith and Order Committee, can be found in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, pp. 204-231
21. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, #514
22. *Ibid.*, #527(1)
23. *Ibid.*, #527(2)
24. *Ibid.*, #520 – #522
25. *Ibid.*, #401
26. *The Basic Doctrines and Statutes of the Iglesia Evangelica Metodista Portuguesa*, Article 16
27. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, pp.30f
28. Canon C18
29. *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church: An Interim Statement*, 1958, p.25
30. For example in *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, 1996, p.12
31. Quoted in the *Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1998, p.99
32. *Called to Witness and Service – The Reuilly Common Statement*, 1999, p.30
33. *The Documents of Vatican II*, 1965, p.41

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p.44
36. Ibid., p.52
37. Ibid., p.43
38. Ibid.
39. See *Anglican-Moravian Conversations*, 1996, pp.89f
40. *Sacraments, Ministry, Ordination, Leuenberg Texts 2*, Lembeck, Germany, 1995, p.98
41. Ibid.
42. *The Meissen Agreement Texts*, Council for Christian Unity Occasional Paper 2, 1992, p.18
43. *Called to Witness and Service – The Reuilly Common Statement*, 1999, pp.31f
44. *Called to Common Mission*, #16
45. Ibid., #7
46. Ibid., #13
47. Ibid., #18
48. *The Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1985, p.571
49. *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, p.215
50. *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, p.10

The Conference adopted the resolutions, deleting ‘in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments’ in the second resolution.