

## METHODISM AND EPISCOPACY (1978)

The purpose of this section of the report is to set out some of the implications of a possible future decision of the Conference to accept some form of episcopacy in British Methodism. The paper is not concerned with the arguments for or against such decision.

It is taken for granted that the Conference would never make the decision unless two conditions were fulfilled:

- (i) that the action would clearly advance ecumenical relations generally and particularly those in which Methodism was directly involved.
- (ii) that within the limits implied in (i) Methodism would be free to develop a form of episcopacy that was consistent with her doctrines and usage.

### Questions to be discussed

1. Does Methodism wish to incorporate bishops into its own structure (Method A) and thus be able to conduct its own episcopal ordinations, or does it wish other covenanting churches to take part in future ordinations, in which case there need be no Methodist bishops (Method B)? The second alternative would not suffice unless the covenanting churches included an episcopal church.
2. Does Methodism regard episcopacy as a gift which other churches can confer on her and which makes up some lack in Methodist church life, or does Methodism regard episcopacy as a feature of Methodism already which simply needs to be overtly expressed and ordered in a way that episcopal churches recognize?
3. Does Methodism wish to distinguish between various features of episcopacy giving some more weight than others? The following call for consideration:
  - (i) the bishop may exist to secure the ministry of the church by conducting ordinations that have a wide, if not universal, acceptance.
  - (ii) the bishop may be regarded as a figure to whom all in a locality owe spiritual allegiance so that he is a sign and focus of unity.
  - (iii) the bishop may be a general pastor, especially a pastor of the ordained ministry.
  - (iv) the bishop may be a symbol of authority to secure the preaching and teaching of the church.
  - (v) the bishop may be largely an administrator.
4. How can the notion of personal episcopacy be made consistent with the Methodist notion of general oversight by Conference? Will the responsibilities of Conference need to be modified?

5. Can episcopacy be fitted into the present Methodist structure by making existing functionaries into bishops, or will a new structure be necessary?
6. How many bishops should Methodism have at any one time and how large should be the area of jurisdiction? There appear to be at least five possibilities:
  - (i) a single bishop or group of bishops for the whole of Methodism.
  - (ii) a bishop for each present Methodist district (32).
  - (iii) a bishop for each Roman (19) or Anglican diocese (43).
  - (iv) a bishop for groups of circuits forming a natural sub-district.
  - (v) a bishop for each circuit.
7. How would the adoption of episcopacy affect the constitutional position of the Presidency?
8. Supposing it satisfied the first condition in the preamble, would the practice of appointing bishops for limited terms suit Methodism better than a permanent episcopate?
9. Supposing temporary bishops proved unacceptable, would the existence of permanent bishops conflict with the itinerancy and with annual stationing?

*(Agenda 1978, pp. 55f)*

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In Questions to be discussed, 1, the phrases 'Method A' and 'Method B' refer to the proposals of the Churches' Unity Commission for introducing episcopacy into non-episcopal churches.