

RECOGNITION, RECEPTION AND CONFIRMATION (1992)

A) Introduction

1. The Conference of 1991 referred the following Notice of Motion (No.58) to the Faith and Order Committee and the Law and Polity Committee:

Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to consider the inter-relationship of the terms "Recognition", "Reception" and "Confirmation", as used in the Deed of Union and Standing Orders, and report to the Conference, making such recommendations as would assist the Methodist Church to clarify its understanding and practices relating to the admission of members.

2. The Notice of Motion was presented after an item of Provisional Legislation, dealing with these issues and seeking to amend the Deed of Union, had failed to achieve the three-fourths majority required for its ratification. The debate on this item in the Conference revealed that there was widespread confusion about its intended purpose and effect.

3. We must also note Suggestion S3 (1991) from the Isle of Man Synod:

This Synod believes that the Service of Public Reception into Full Membership or Confirmation should now be called simply the Confirmation Service.

The Conference adopted the recommended reply:

The Memorials Committee points out that the 1990 Conference adopted Part A of the report, "Church Membership and Christian Nurture", prepared by the Division of Ministries in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee. This recommended that, in the interests of accuracy, clarity and consistency, it should be made evident in the Church's liturgy and constitution (1) that people are admitted into membership by the Church Council and (2) that they are confirmed in an act of worship at which it is appropriate to recognize them as having been admitted into membership. In the light of this, the Conference adopted a proposed amendment to the Deed of Union, which, as provisional legislation, will be before the Conference of 1991. Furthermore, the Conference will be asked to authorize a service entitled "Public Recognition and Confirmation of Full Members", which has been prepared by the Faith and Order Committee. The Memorials Committee recommends, therefore, that the reply of the Conference is contained in its own resolutions.

4. The Conference's own resolutions, however, did not directly address the point made by the Suggestion, inasmuch as the relevant item of provisional

legislation was not ratified, and Notice of Motion No.58 was referred to the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees. The present report has been prepared by the Faith and Order Committee. The Law and Polity Committee has been consulted but, as indicated in paragraph 19 below, is unable to support the report's recommendation as to the best way forward.

B Membership

5. Methodism's self-understanding, and its attempts to express that self-understanding in words, reveal a fundamental tension. On the one hand, we reflect our origins as a *society* within the Church of England; on the other hand, after two centuries of growth and development under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we perceive ourselves, and others perceive us, as a *Church*.
6. One consequence of the continuing use of language appropriate for a society within the context of a Church is the variety of models which underlie our use of the word 'membership'. We assert that baptism confers membership 'of God's family the Church' (*MSB*, pp.A7, A21). This membership, however, is distinct from membership of the Methodist Church as understood by the Deed of Union and Standing Orders.
7. The Deed of Union refers sometimes to 'membership' and sometimes to 'full membership', indicating that the two terms are inter-changeable:

'member of the Methodist Church' and 'full member of the Methodist Church' are equivalent expressions and mean a person recognized as a member of the Methodist Church under the provisions of this Deed and of Standing Orders. (*Deed of Union*, Clause 1 (xviii))
8. The term 'full membership' was adopted by the Conference of 1962 on the advice of the Faith and Order Committee in an attempt to find language which would accommodate two convictions: first, that baptism confers membership of the Church, and, second, that the membership conferred by baptism is in some sense incomplete until it is accompanied by personal faith and commitment. Thirty years later, it has to be admitted that the term 'full member', though an improvement upon the earlier term 'new member', is not satisfactory. While it is certainly true that to live the Christian life requires personal faith and commitment, it is wrong to suggest that the membership of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, which is conveyed by baptism, is incomplete. Membership of the Methodist Church, as understood by the Deed of Union and Standing Orders, is a concept which arises from our origins as a society and the epithet 'full', when used to describe it, suggests more questions than it can answer. The proposal will therefore be made that the use of the word 'full' be discontinued before the word 'member' and related words.

C Admission/recognition/reception into membership

9. Clause 8(b) of the Deed of Union reads as follows:

After a probation of not less than three months those approved shall be admitted to full membership by the Church Council on the recommendation of the Pastoral Committee and be publicly recognised at the earliest opportunity at a service to be known as the Service of

Reception into Full Membership or Confirmation conducted by the minister in the presence of the Local Church and including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

10. This clause highlights a major problem. It is stated that those approved are *admitted to full membership by the Church Council*. In other words, it is the decision of the Church Council that admits people into membership of the Methodist Church. But the service required by this clause is to be known as 'Reception into Full Membership or Confirmation', which suggests that it is in the liturgical act that people become members. The statement in the 1975 service itself, 'We welcome you into the full membership of the Christian Church and the society in this place', implies that members are 'made' during the service.
11. Thus clause 8(b) points up a confusion which is undoubtedly felt among many of our people: *when* does a person become a member – when the Church Council votes, or when he or she is received into membership during the service of Reception? Is the service meant to 'make' members, or to *recognize* them as members whom the Church Council has already admitted into membership?
12. Clause 8(b) employs all three concepts, *recognition*, *admission*, and *reception*. It is clearly desirable that this clause be amended in order to dispel confusion.

D Confirmation

13. A further complication arises from our use of the word "Confirmation", which we have often employed as though it were synonymous with Reception into Full Membership. But, as the Report to the 1962 Conference (cited above) makes clear, 'the two titles . . . are not simply interchangeable, but refer to different aspects of a complex whole'.
14. The origins of Confirmation lie in the rite of Baptism itself, from which, in the West, Confirmation became detached in the early Middle Ages. The traditional understanding of Confirmation among Christians of the Roman, Anglican and Lutheran communions, reflected in previous Methodist writing on the subject, identifies two major elements in the rite. On the one hand, the Church prays that God will confirm (that is, strengthen) his servants for lifelong service. On the other hand, the candidates themselves confirm their membership of the Church, conferred by Baptism, and it has been characteristic of some Methodist thinking to see confirmation as a means of marking ritually the experience of coming to personal faith. To these important elements we might add a third: the concept of the Church as a confirming community, surrounding the candidates with prayer and love, and affirming their place within the corporate fellowship. But the emphasis should always be on God's confirming work: "Lord, confirm your servant *N* by your Holy Spirit, that he/she may continue to be yours for ever." First and foremost, it is God who confirms.
15. There is a distinction to be drawn between Confirmation and (full) membership. Membership of the denomination may lapse, but a confirmed person never ceases to be a confirmed person. This sort of distinction is

already familiar to us in respect of ministers, who are both ordained and received into full connexion. A minister may cease to be in full connexion, but never ceases to be an ordained person even though he or she may not be allowed to act as such within the discipline of the Church. He or she may be received again into full connexion, but cannot be ordained again. Similarly, a person who has ceased to be a member of the Methodist Church may, later, be restored to membership, but cannot be confirmed again.

16. It is important to recognize, therefore, that confirmation and reception into (or recognition of) membership are distinct events, with different significance. The title, 'Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation' suggests that the two terms are alternative ways of describing the same thing, and thus obscures an important distinction.

There is therefore a case to be made for the emendation not only of clause 8(b) of the Deed of Union, where this title is used, but also of clause 8(c), which reads:

If any have not received Christian baptism that sacrament should be administered either before or in connection with the Service of Reception into Full Membership or Confirmation.

E Possible Ways Forward

17. It would, of course, be possible simply to let matters rest where they are, making no alteration to Clause 8 of the Deed of Union; but in view of the confusions mentioned in sections B, C and D above, this option does not seem satisfactory.
18. A second option would be to dispense with the concept of 'membership' entirely, perhaps in favour of a system akin to the Anglican electoral roll, on which all baptized persons associated with a local church can be registered. If this were to happen, the liturgical emphasis would be solely on the act of confirmation, as the Suggestion from the Isle of Man Synod proposed. But such a development would require not only major changes to the Deed of Union and Standing Orders, but also an abandonment of a significant part of Methodism's societal heritage. There is no evidence to suggest that there would be widespread support for such a momentous change of policy throughout the Connexion; and indeed many of the views expressed during the debate on these issues in the 1991 Conference suggest the opposite.
19. A third possibility is that the Deed of Union be amended in order to reinforce what is surely the intention of Clauses 8 (b) and (c) of the Deed, while removing ambiguities. On this basis, the admission or reception of members would be seen as the responsibility of the Church Council, and the subsequent service would be one of confirmation, during which those recently made members by the Council could also be recognized and welcomed. Such a course would clearly distinguish between membership and confirmation, an elegant reminder of Methodism's dual identity as society and Church. The societal element (reception into membership) would take place in the Church Council; the 'Church' element would be the act of confirmation. This is the option which the Law and Polity Committee favours, but the Faith and Order Committee believes that a stronger case can be made for a fourth course.

20. This fourth possibility is the alteration of Clause 8(b) in order to put the emphasis firmly on the liturgical act of confirming and receiving into membership, by indicating that the Church Council's role is to give approval for the reception into membership and confirmation of named persons. This would mean that the Church Council no longer *admitted* into membership; such admission or reception would be deemed to occur within the service itself. The Council's role would be to approve the names of those to be received during the service.
21. This would, admittedly, mark a significant departure from the long tradition that the Local Church's highest court (once the Leaders' Meeting, now the Church Council) has the privilege and responsibility of admitting into membership. That tradition, however, does not reflect popular understanding of what is taking place in the service, namely that it is indeed in the service itself that people are received into membership. Earlier this century, when names of 'new members' were added to pastoral lists by votes in Leaders' Meetings, often without any training of such members or any liturgical act to accompany their reception, the tradition had meaning. But emphasis on training and preparation classes and the very proper requirement that a service of reception should be held have seriously undermined that meaning. None of this should be taken to mean that the Church Council does not have an important part to play in the processes whereby people are received into membership of the Methodist Church, but rather that the Council's role is more appropriately one of approving candidates for membership than one of admitting them into membership.
22. Moreover, the great merit of this fourth option is the prominence that would be given to the act of worship and what occurs during it. Worship is dynamic; in and through liturgical acts God can cause things to happen. It is entirely appropriate that the making of members of the Methodist Church should be seen as taking place, alongside their Confirmation, in an act of worship in the presence of the whole Church, rather than in a meeting of the Church Council. At the same time, the Church Council should retain the responsibility of approving the names of candidates for reception into membership and confirmation.

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the Report.

The Conference adopts the following amendments to the Deed of Union:

- (i) for the existing clause 1 (xviii) substitute:

'member of the Methodist Church' means a person recognised as a member of the Methodist Church under the provisions of this Deed and of Standing Orders;

(ii) for the existing clause 8 substitute:

8 Admission to Membership

(a) All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as members of the Methodist Church.

(b) After a probation of not less than three months those approved by the Church Council on the recommendation of the Pastoral Committee shall at the earliest opportunity be publicly received as members of the Methodist Church and confirmed at a service conducted by the minister in the presence of the Local Church and including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

(c) If any have not received Christian baptism that sacrament should be administered either before or in connection with the service of reception and confirmation.

(d) Provision may be made by Standing Order for the reception into membership and confirmation of persons approved by the Church Council in accordance with sub-clause (b) above but unavoidably absent from the service provided for by that sub-clause.

(iii) In clause 10, delete the word 'full'.

The Conference adopts the following amendments to Standing Orders:

(i) In Standing Order 002(1) (xv) delete the words 'and full member of the Methodist Church'.

(ii) In Standing Orders 633(4), 700(1), 811(2) [twice], 811(3), 811(4), 815, 1070(7) (b) [twice], and 1070(7) (c) (iii), delete the word 'full'.

(iii) For the existing Standing Order 004 (iv) substitute:

(iv) 'member' and 'members' refer to membership of the Methodist Church unless some other body or institution is indicated, and 'membership' has a corresponding meaning.

(iv) In Standing Orders 524(ii) 804 for 'full membership or confirmation' substitute 'membership and confirmation'.

(Agenda 1992, pp.107-113, with the resolutions in the amended form in which they were presented to the Conference)

The Conference adopted the above resolutions, and also the following:

'The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference of 1993 proposals for such further amendments to Standing Orders as may be required if the amendments to Clause 8 of the Deed of Union are confirmed by that Conference.'