

What is the **METHODIST** **CONFERENCE?**

Some tips to
help you prepare
well and
participate
fully





What is the Methodist Conference?

The Conference is the governing body of the Methodist Church under God. The Methodist Church is a connexional Church, and the Conference is one expression of that. There is interdependence and mutuality throughout the Connexion which is articulated through our decision-making processes. You are a member of a body whose history goes back continuously to 1744. So it is not surprising that over the years it has developed some traditional ways of doing things. It is a big gathering and there are legal requirements to be met, so rules and procedures are important to avoid muddle and get things right. These pages are offered to help you find your way and make your contribution.

An important point to make at the start: you are a representative, not a delegate. If you are a district representative you have been selected because your District Synod trusts your judgement, but it cannot bind you to vote or speak in a particular way. You gather with other representatives to consider the issues before you and in the light of the debate, your knowledge of the district and all the other factors to seek the wisdom of God.

The Conference has responsibility for the oversight of the whole life of the Church and it meets annually in both its Representative Session and Presbyteral Session. The business of the Conference is done, and decisions are made, by seeking the will of God through conferring together. We recognise that within the Conference our prayer and worship, and our conferring together are both means of grace. We know that God is present among us while we gather prayerfully and faithfully as the Conference. This attending to and engaging with God as the Conference is an encounter with Christ who shares our life and who changes forever what our lives might mean. We are, in the Conference, invited to reflect together on the work of God who calls the people called Methodists to live faithfully, serve lovingly and speak confidently of the great love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We will, in the Conference, be invited to make decisions about how we might do that most effectively. In doing so, members of the Conference hold a trustee responsibility.

The Conference sets the Standing Orders by which the whole Church is governed. It is the Conference which makes decisions, on the recommendation of committees which report to it, about the progress of those who are exploring a call to ordained ministry. The Conference receives presbyters and deacons into Full Connexion, thereby entering into a covenant relationship of mutual care, responsibility and accountability with its ministers.

Those who are received into Full Connexion who are not already ordained are ordained during the Conference to a ministry of word and sacrament (for presbyters) or to a ministry of witness and service (for deacons).

The Conference annually stations all its ministers and probationer ministers, as one expression of the covenant relationship.

The Presbyteral Session

This session, comprising the presbyters who are members of the Representative Session together with others permitted by the District Synod to attend, meets before the formal opening of the Representative Session. Most of the above notes apply, although there are usually far fewer formal resolutions. The session is an opportunity for presbyters to confer on matters of common concern. It is open to them to discuss any item of Representative Session business and express a view on it, but the formal decision in such cases lies with the Representative Session. Much of the business, dealing with candidates, students and probationers, will be in closed session, and only those who are also members of the Representative Session are permitted to be present for this.



Preparing well for the Conference



Once you have been elected or appointed as a representative to the Conference, you need to start your own preparation. To help you to do that:

- You will receive a number of emails (or written communications if you don't have email) during the year from the Secretary of the Conference and from the Connexional Events Coordinator. Please read and save these – they include details specific to the coming Conference.
- The Conference web pages (www.methodist.org.uk/conference) will be regularly updated with specific details you need for the coming Conference as well as helpful background information. You can read about the officers of the Conference and their roles, especially those who sit on the platform.
- Some of the major reports to the Conference will be available on the Methodist Church website as they progress through the Methodist Council in October, January and March/April each year (www.methodist.org.uk/council). You will find it a helpful part of your preparation to read the reports and to talk with your Methodist Council Representative about the decisions the Council has made. You can contact your Synod Secretary to find out who this is.

- The final reports to the Conference will appear in the Agenda, which you will receive by post. Volume one is sent to Conference representatives three to four weeks in advance of the Conference, and Agenda volume two about two weeks ahead.
- The Conference Rules of Procedure and the First Report of the Business Committee printed in the Conference Agenda (volume one) set out the way in which the business of the Conference is conducted.
- All Agenda items will be available to representatives on the Conference web pages as downloadable PDFs, as soon as they are ready, during April and May. Please make sure you set aside time in your diary to read everything carefully. There can be a large amount of material.
- Do bring the Agenda and accompanying paperwork with you, including this Guide, a pen, highlighter pen and markers for various items in the Agenda.

Travel

Start to make your travel plans in good time. The costs to the Church can be greatly reduced if you travel by public transport and book early enough to get cheap tickets. Only come by car if you can share with other representatives, or if you have mobility needs. At some venues parking is very restricted.

Accommodation

Your accommodation will be booked for you unless you state when you register that you wish to make your own arrangements. Feel free to stay in your own home if near to the venue, or with friends, but make this clear when you register. Accommodation is usually booked for presbyteral representatives from Thursday (or Wednesday, if they are travelling from far away) and for lay and diaconal representatives from Saturday (or Friday, if travelling long distances). Arrival dates for each district will be published on the Conference web pages and you will receive a reminder with your letter of invitation to register. It may be possible to arrange accommodation if you wish to arrive earlier than the date specified for your district, but this will normally be at your own expense.



Arriving

The first thing to do when you arrive is to register at the Conference Registration Desk.

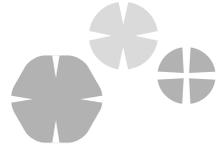
The Presbyteral Session starts on the Thursday before the Representative Session. It will include a pastoral address from the retiring President; a Service of Thanksgiving and Remembrance for presbyters who have died during the year; and various items of business. In addition to representatives, some presbyters attend the Presbyteral Session 'at their own expense' with the permission of their Synod; they are not representatives with voting rights.

The whole Conference, lay and ordained, then gathers on Saturday afternoon in its Representative Session. The ringing of a bell is the signal to stand and sing together, unaccompanied, the hymn "And are we yet

alive?”. Many visitors will be present, including guests to witness the induction of the new President and Vice-President. Sometimes, to accommodate everyone, weekend sessions are held in a different venue from the weekday sessions.

The Fringe

There are a number of fringe events at lunchtimes and in the evenings. You will find details of fringe events in the Conference Handbook and on the website.



Conference behaviour

The Conference usually chooses to levy a fine on anyone whose mobile phone rings during sessions. The level of the fine and the beneficiary are set by the President on Monday morning. In the past, the fine was £15.

The Conference is streamed live on the Conference website with a Twitter feed, but do note that it can be distracting to those either side of you to be constantly using your phone for texting or social media during a session. Remember to be wise in your choice of words; speak well of others and communicate carefully and thoughtfully.

Participating fully in the Methodist Conference

(NB There is a glossary on page 12-13 of some commonly used terms.)

What the Conference does

The Conference deals with different kinds of business.

1. The 'meaty' items are generally **Reports** on some issue, often commissioned by the Conference in a previous year, defining policy and calling for decision. The content may prove to be controversial. So you will want to concentrate on these. The pre-Conference meeting of district representatives will help to identify them.

Many reports however are routine, the 'housekeeping' reports of bodies legally accountable to the Conference. Sometimes the Conference may be asked to express a view on an issue or make an appointment, but most often it is just a matter of saying, in effect, "thank you, carry on". Many such reports will be voted on *en bloc*.
2. There are **Replies to Memorials** sent in by Synods and Circuit Meetings during the year. Each must be given a reply – either the one offered in the Agenda by the Memorials Committee or a revised version of it, or a totally new one. Alternatively, it could be referred to a committee to consider during the year and prepare a reply for the next year's Conference to send.
3. Sometimes a Synod will offer a **District Resolution** for debate.

4. During the Conference itself there will be **Notices of Motion** proposed by Conference members. See page 13.
5. There are many **Appointments** to be made, for example chairs of district and members of committees, and, most important, the election of the President and Vice-President and the designation of those who are to succeed them the following year. There are also lists of those to be received into Full Connexion as presbyters or deacons, and those permitted to become supernumerary; also ministers of other Churches to be recognised or authorised to serve in Methodist appointments.
6. Three particular categories of business need to be noted:
 - a. The Budget Committee will present its report early in the Conference, leaving time for discussion and amendment, and it will be voted on near the end of business.
 - b. Special Resolutions – sometimes, because of the importance of the issues involved or for legal reasons, the decision of the Conference has to be provisional and must be referred to a committee, or to the Synods, and confirmed (or not) the following year. In the case of changes to the Doctrinal Standards the process is even more extensive, involving Circuit Meetings and Church Councils as well, over a two-year period.
 - c. The Law and Polity Committee is responsible for ensuring that the decisions taken are clear, coherent, and in accordance with the law of the land and with the Church's own Standing Orders, and a sub-committee at the Conference has a watching brief and will intervene from time to time.

7. Overarching and underpinning all this is the **Conference Worship**. The Conference is neither simply a business meeting nor a debating chamber, but a gathering of representatives of the Methodist people to confer together and seek the will of God. The opening sessions, the President's and Vice-President's addresses and the Sunday and daily worship are a vital part, setting the tone for the whole. The ordination services on the Sunday are equally part of the Conference's business.
-

The Order Paper

For each session a small business committee is appointed by the preceding Conference to recommend how each day's business should be dealt with. Its recommendations are printed in the Order Paper.

Each day you will receive the Order Paper for the day, any Notices of Motion, and the Daily Record (ie the record of what happened the day before). The Order Paper details the timing proposed for the business of the day, and includes additions and corrections to the printed Agenda. You can also find the Order Paper on the website from 8am each day. It is important to allow time to read the Order Paper carefully before the start of the day's business.

The Daily Record is helpful as a reminder of decisions made. In total, it forms the record of what the Conference decided; you will find it useful when you return home and are telling others. A few days after the Conference you will also receive the web link to the complete Record.

Some commonly used terms (glossary)

Agenda item: the name and number of the business being discussed, as it appears in the Agenda.

Covenant relationship: in this relationship presbyters and deacons “are held accountable by the Church in respect of their ministry and Christian discipleship, and are accounted for by the Church in respect of their deployment and the support they require for their ministry” (SO 700(2), 701(2)).

En bloc: some items of business are not debated, but voted on all together. This is not because they are less important than other items, but because the Business Committee has judged that they do not need a separate debate. Any item can be removed from *en bloc* if the Conference votes to do so. The Report of the Business Committee will explain how to remove an item from the *en bloc* list.

Memorials: proposals sent to the Conference by District Synods or Circuit Meetings. They are considered prior to the Conference by the Memorials Committee, which then suggests what reply the Conference might make. The replies on which the Conference votes are printed with the memorials in the Agenda (usually in their own volume). Most memorial replies are taken *en bloc* if they do not relate to an item of business of the Conference. You can find out how to send a memorial on the Methodist Conference web pages. Detailed information on how memorials are dealt with is in the Agenda (volume one) (within the Conference Rules of Procedure).

Notice of Motion: any two members of the Conference may bring a resolution to the Conference with a number of additional signatories, either in respect of an item of existing business or a matter of concern to the Church. This is also the means by which an amendment to a resolution or a reply to a memorial may be proposed. The details can be found in the Agenda (volume one), both in the Conference Rules of Procedure and in the First Report of the Business Committee. Shortly before the Conference, the names and contact details of three experienced members of the Conference who can give you helpful advice about Notices of Motion will be listed on the website, and in one of the letters from the Secretary of the Conference – do contact one of them if you need any support.

Resolution: all reports have a resolution, and some have more than one. Each resolution has a number that contains both the agenda item number (see above) and the number of that resolution starting with 1 for each report. So the first resolution in agenda item 41 will be resolution 41/1, then it will be 41/2 etc. Resolutions are usually voted on separately.

Trustee responsibility: since October 2009 the Methodist Church in Great Britain has been a registered charity under the terms of the Charities Act. In keeping with its polity, and as the supreme decision-making body of the Methodist Church, the Conference is the trustee body of the registered charity. Therefore members of the Conference have a trustee responsibility.



Debating

All debates follow the same general pattern.

1. First, the proposer summarises the item, then presents the resolution. They address the President or Vice-President and speak for no more than four minutes. Some proposers will be very brief: they might just say "I move resolution 41/1" if they feel that all the information the Conference needs is in the report.
2. For some items of business (eg a Notice of Motion) there is a seconder, who is also in favour of the motion. The seconder may speak immediately after the proposer, but does not have to do so; most choose to wait until near the end of the debate so that they can help by replying to points made by other speakers. Some waive their right to speak at all. Whenever they choose to speak, they get three minutes.
3. Then people speak from the floor, and they have up to three minutes.
4. At the end of the debate, which is whenever the President or Vice-President thinks all points of view have been heard (but may be before everyone wishing to speak has had a chance to do so), the seconder speaks if they did not before, and the proposer sums up in reply to points that have been raised.
5. Finally there is a vote.

Other things can happen to alter this process. At any time, a representative from the floor can attract the attention of the President or Vice-President and make what is known as a **Procedural Motion**. This can call for one of several things:

- that the vote be now taken (ie no more speeches – vote!)
- that the question be not put (ie we do not want to vote on this topic, and thus the Conference will not express an opinion on it)
- that the question be referred to the Methodist Council or a committee (ie we want someone else to deal with it), and the Council or the committee will have to report back to the Conference
- that the debate be adjourned (ie we will come back to this later)
- that the Conference adjourns.

Of these, the first two are most common, but even they do not usually come up more than once or twice each year. The point is that if the Procedural Motion is for the vote to be now taken or not put, then the Conference will first vote on whether it agrees. Then, depending on the outcome of that vote, it may vote on the business itself. So you will possibly get two votes in close succession, the second of which will be the actual vote on the topic.

You might also hear a **Point of Order**. This is usually a claim by a representative that the rules of debate, or of the Conference, have not been followed correctly. The speaker at the tribune pauses (and the clock timing their speech is stopped) while the Point of Order is made. The President or Vice-President decides on the validity of the Point of Order and – depending on the result – the debate either continues or something else happens. If you are speaking when a Point of Order is raised, wait for the President or Vice-President to tell you what to do.

Speaking

There are two main ways of getting to speak at the Conference. The first way is to be the proposer or seconder of a Notice of Motion. In this case you will be called by the President or Vice-President to one of the tribunes (lecterns) for speakers.

The second way is to join one of the queues of people waiting to speak. The President or Vice-President will often pick the person at the front of each queue from each side in turn. (If you have a first-time speaker card, you may be given priority.)

- Start by addressing the President or Vice-President (Madam/Mr President or Vice-President). You should not address anyone else, such as members, visitors, viewers online.
- State your name and district.
- Address the matter at hand. If a report has multiple resolutions, then address the actual resolution being discussed.
- Keep to time.
- Be brief – nobody ever complained that a speech at the Conference was too short.
- Be clear – you are allowed to read from notes, so don't hesitate to do so if that helps.
- Avoid repeating what someone else has already said.
- Because of the live streaming, it is important to remember that what you say has a larger audience than just those sitting in the hall.

Timing

Proposers of motions have four minutes for their speeches; other speakers are allocated three minutes. If the speech is not made in English, the native language is not timed but the English translation is. Timings are subject to change at the discretion of the platform.

There is a light system on each tribune – it flashes amber with one minute to go; solid red means stop immediately (finish your sentence if you can do it in a few words).

Voting (NB You can only vote if you are in your designated seat.)

There are three main ways of voting.

1. For most matters, the President or Vice-President will ask the Conference if they are agreed.
2. If the matter is more controversial, or requires more than a straight majority, the vote will be by a show of hands. If the show of hands is inconclusive, the vote will be counted by a group of volunteers (drawn from the Conference representatives) called scrutineers. This can take a few minutes, and depending on the resolution, business may continue before the result is announced.
3. The third way of voting, used for solemn votes of affirmation, is by a standing vote.

It is important to note that when you vote on a report you are approving only the resolution or resolutions attached to it. You are not required to agree with every sentence in the report itself. The only exception is when a report is intended to become a Conference Statement (eg clarifying some point of doctrine and intended for future reference). In such (rare) cases there is a special procedure which will be explained at the time.

Elections

The Conference elects the President and Vice-President of the following year's Conference. The President must be a presbyter; the Vice-President must be a lay person or a deacon.

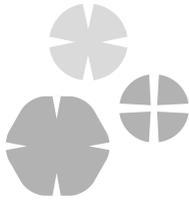
Each candidate must have been nominated by five ministers and five lay people, all of whom must be members of the Conference. The candidate, however, does not need to be a member of the Conference. Nomination forms for the two roles are included with the Agenda (volume one) when it is sent to you.

Along with the signatures of the ten people nominating, each candidate provides a statement of their experience. Copies of these are posted in or around the Conference hall for 24 hours before voting starts. There should be no campaigning or lobbying on behalf of the candidates.

Voting is by ballot on the basis of the Single Transferable Vote. For each role, each voter marks as many candidates as they wish in order of preference, your preferred candidate gets a 1 against their name, the second choice gets 2, etc.

A similar process follows for elections of Conference-elected members of the Conference, and members of the Business Committee.





Confidential business

At least once a year the Conference goes into Closed Session. The timing is known in advance, and only voting members of the Conference are allowed to remain in the hall. The video feed is shut off, the public and press seats cleared, and confidential items are discussed. They must not be discussed after the close of the session, even with a voting member who was not present.



Reporting back

Be prepared. At your autumn District Synod, you will be asked to report on the Conference. So keep notes to aid your memory.



And finally...

The Conference never officially ends. It only ever adjourns and it could reconvene at any time during the year (although this has not happened in recent memory.) You are a Conference representative until the Conference meets again and confirms its membership.

Useful links

For advance viewing of reports received by the Methodist Council:
www.methodist.org.uk/council

For news from the Methodist Church in Britain:
www.methodist.org.uk/news

For news and information about the Methodist Conference:
www.methodist.org.uk/conference

Keep up to date with stories from across Methodism by signing up
to one of our mailings:
www.methodist.org.uk/signup



The **Methodist** Church 

© Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes
Registered charity no. 1132208
Updated 2021

