

15. Faith and Order Committee

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	15/1. The Conference received the Report. 15/2. The Conference directed the Secretary of the Conference, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, relevant members of the Connexional Team and appropriate partner organisations, to establish a task group to review the Conference's position with regard to assisted dying and to report to the Conference not later than 2028.

Summary of Content and Impact

Subject and Aims	A general update on the work of the Faith and Order Committee. A proposal regarding a review of the Conference's position on assisted dying. An update regarding consideration of the pattern of ordination services.
Main Points	• Introduction • Ways of working • Assisted Dying • Pattern of Ordination Services • Other items of work

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Faith and Order Committee is appointed by, and accountable to, the Methodist Conference. On behalf of the Conference it helps to ensure that what the Methodist Church in Britain says and does is true to its self-understanding, mission and purpose. It therefore seeks to encourage a deepening of theological understanding, engagement with the Methodist tradition, and shared critical reflection, in order to help to discern Methodist perspectives and responses in all aspects of the Church's life.
- 1.2 Under SO 210(11) the Faith and Order Committee has a specific role requiring it to be consulted on all matters directly concerning the faith and order of the Church presented to the Conference by other bodies, and now also on any matters directly concerning the faith and order of the Church to be decided by the Connexional Council under its own authority. The committee is conscious in the new structures and ways of working that work in the Ministries and Mission Committees, in particular, may fall into either of those categories and the Secretary of the Committee is glad to attend both as an observer. Considering such matters often requires consultation with the full committee, and potentially some collaborative working, and the committee is therefore grateful for early conversations to establish effective and constructive ways of working and reflecting as the work develops. Conversations as the group is set up and the process for developing the work is established are particularly appreciated. All reports, questions and communication to the committee should be sent in the first instance to the Secretary of the Committee.

2 The Work of the Committee

- 2.1 The committee is always deeply grateful to the many people who volunteer their time to enable its work. In this connexional year, we welcomed seven new members to the committee and two further nominations are being presented to this Conference. As well as bringing a broad range of experience and theological knowledge, these new members have helped to widen the diversity of the committee, a process to which we continue to be committed. The Revd Neil Stubbens is stepping down as Convener of the Liturgy and Worship Subcommittee (though remaining a member of the committee). The Revd Dr Judith Rossall and Mr Craig Price, who has also served as a member of the Faith and Order Executive, complete their terms of office at the end of this connexional year and the Revd Dr Adrian Burdon and the Revd Dr Simon Sutcliffe have resigned from the committee. The committee wishes to express its thanks to them all.
- 2.2 Each year the committee reflects on its ways of working and seeks to work as effectively as possible. The committee is aware that there are various expectations of what the committee does, what it is responsible for, and the kind of decisions it can make. The role and remit of the Faith and Order Committee is set out in Standing Order 210.
- 2.3 A common misassumption is about the role that the committee plays in the theological life of the Church. Although it does have a responsibility to "stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church" (SO 210(4)), it is important to note that the Faith and Order Committee is just one part of the process of theological reflection. It does have a particular role to play in helping the Conference and the Connexional Council make decisions which have implications for the faith and order of the Church. This often involves both a broad theological understanding and particular (and often detailed) knowledge of Methodist theology, polity and the relevant theological subject areas, which are more than just academic expertise. In addition, much of the work of the committee requires the ability to read and process significant paperwork, too often at short notice, and with a careful attention to detail. Whilst not every member of the committee needs to be proficient in every area, these are the gifts and knowledge needed to be able to carry out the committee's work.
- 2.4 Given that the committee is not, and should not be, the only place where theological thinking happens, it therefore has a concern for the theological life of the Church and how theological thinking is facilitated in Local Churches, Circuits, Districts, the Connexional Team, and in connexional working parties, committees and other bodies. Its own desire to play a part in stimulating theological thinking has often been thwarted by a heavy workload and immediate demands. This is likely to be mirrored in many other contexts, and continues to be an issue of concern.
- 2.5 When the Conference directs the committee to undertake a piece of work on a specific topic the committee would usually work with other people, either through establishing a working group that

draws on a variety of people with different experience and perspectives relevant to the subject, or through reflection days, conversations or different forms of consultation. For many of the reports it brings to the Conference, therefore, it has worked with people outside of the committee and from many parts of the Church's life.

- 2.6 In order for the committee to be able to fulfil its responsibilities it requires not only the skills and knowledge indicated above, but also a commitment of time and attention. As in many areas of the Methodist Church's life, committee members are volunteers. In a context when many people are already overloaded, finding people who have time and availability can be a challenge.
- 2.7 The committee also notes that, like many others, it undertakes much of its work under pressure in order to meet Conference and other deadlines. This affects the extent and nature of any consultation (which, if done well, always takes time, attention and resourcing), the opportunity to engage in more proactive and creative thinking, and the time and ability to develop skills for faith and order work. The committee has given thought to how it might help to develop the particular skills and expertise needed for its work and has explored and is exploring various possibilities including mentoring, creating further opportunities for involvement in its work, training or study days or sessions in particular areas and paying attention to different ways of identifying people for particular pieces of work. It has been encouraged at the response to the recent advertisements, both for the committee itself and for the Liturgy and Worship Subcommittee. We continue to be keen to identify people with potential for faith and order work even if they do not have all the skills needed at present.

3 Assisted Dying

- 3.1 Members of the Conference will be aware of the current public debate regarding assisted dying, resulting from the introduction of a Private Member's Bill¹ to Parliament on the subject. The question of assisted dying is not new and the Methodist Church has had cause to consider it previously. A statement issued by the Secretary of the Conference set out this background.² At the time of writing this report, there is uncertainty relating to the timetable for the Bill and if or when it might be implemented.
- 3.2 The Conference in 1974 adopted a statement on Euthanasia³ expressing its opposition to any steps which would intentionally end a patient's life. A debate in the Conference of 2015 included a variety of views and the two notices of motion⁴ that had been submitted were referred to the Methodist Council. The Council resolved to make available resources to enable churches better to respond to the needs of patients and carers facing decisions and choices about end-of-life. These resources remain available on the Methodist Church website.⁵ While these discussions and resources highlight that there is a wide range of perspectives on these matters among the Methodist people, no change was made to the position of the Conference.
- 3.3 The committee has considered these matters and attention has also been given to them within the Connexional Team. The committee is aware that, as well as the theological questions that are raised by the proposals, there are also questions of politics, justice, ethics, practicality and much more on which different teams and committees within the Church, as well as partner organisations, will have important perspectives to contribute. Whatever the result of the current parliamentary process, the questions will not go away and the formal position of the Church requires addressing. As consideration of the bill continues, it is important that the Church is resourced to speak with authority on the topic and, if the bill is passed, there will be a need to support those in pastoral ministry as they care for patients who may consider seeking an assisted death. If the bill is not passed this time, the subject is nevertheless likely to return to Parliament in the future and a well-considered and up-to-date expression of the Conference's view will help the Methodist Church to respond well at that time. Mindful of the wide range of perspectives and expertise needed to support this, the committee is proposing that a broad working group consider the matter and report to the Conference.

¹ Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, available from <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3774>

² <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/news/assisted-dying/>

³ https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/pi_euthanasia_74_bNiGJld.pdf

⁴ https://www.methodist.org.uk/documents/6674/conf-2015-daily-record-complete-0715_zZyxNHX.pdf

⁵ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/faith/life-and-faith/death-and-dying/>

4 The Pattern of Ordination Services

- 4.1 The committee was asked by the Secretary of the Conference, following a discussion in the Conference Planning Executive (CPE), to explore where ordination services should be held. The CPE had been asked by the Ministerial Candidates and Probationers Oversight Committee (MCPOC) to determine that there be two services (one diaconal and one presbyteral) held in the Conference venue itself because of the increasing difficulty and costs (of money and carbon) incurred in using churches in the vicinity of the venue. The CPE had recognised that this immediate practical issue raised broader questions (eg, the nature of sacred space and the relationship of ordination to reception into Full Connexion) and that there were other possible solutions (eg, holding ordinations in Districts or at a greater distance from the Conference) that also merited consideration.
- 4.2 The committee discussed the matter and was unable to reach a consensus, other than that the current practice seemed appropriately to reflect our theology of orders, polity and ecclesiology. It noted that the Law and Polity Committee and Ministries Committee were also to be consulted, and understands that those committees will feed any conclusions they have reached to the Conference separately. It appears that there is at this stage no consensus for change, and therefore no substantive resolution is before the Conference. However, noting the response of the Law and Polity Committee – that there were no legal or constitutional issues about holding the services in the Conference venue but that it would need to consider any specific proposals for change – and recognising that the Ministries Committee will not be able to discuss the matter prior to the deadline for the Agenda, it suggests that the Conference reflects on the question, receiving any feedback from the Ministries Committee meeting in May, and making appropriate decisions. An additional report and any necessary resolutions will be brought on the Order Paper.

5 Other specific items of work

- 5.1 In addition to the work being reported to this year's Conference, the committee has several other items of work currently in progress, which include:
- 5.2 Anglican-Methodist Covenant: The committee is aware of the outstanding directions of the Conference and the Methodist Council in relation to this work. The focus on work on marriage and relationships (LLF) in the Church of England has made this challenging but some joint work is now beginning. The committee will report development to the Conference when it is able.
- 5.3 Online Church: This work is now being taken forward by a working group under the authority of the Secretary of the Conference in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee and due to be reported to the Conference of 2026.
- 5.4 Online Communion: The current period of discernment regarding online celebrations of Holy Communion was extended by the 2024 Conference until 2026. In partnership with the University of Roehampton, the committee is conducting a piece of theological action research on the practice on online communion in the Methodist Church in order that a well-informed recommendation as to the outcome of the period of discernment can be made to the Conference of 2026. This joint project has been made possible by the generous support of the Susanna Wesley Foundation and of the Southlands Methodist Trust and the committee wishes to express its deep thanks.
- 5.5 Criteria for the Transfer of Ministers: When Ministers of Other Churches and Conferences seek status with the Methodist Church in Britain (eg to transfer into Full Connexion, be recognised and regarded and so on), checks have to be made to ensure that their ordination is recognised by the Methodist Church. The Conference of 2024 directed these criteria be updated and work is in progress on this. Alongside this, we are contributing to the wider review of Section 73 of CPD (which governs these processes) overseen by the Ministerial Coordinator for the Oversight of Ordained Ministries, ensuring these distinct, but related, pieces of work are kept in step. The committee is aiming to report this work to the 2026 Conference.
- 5.6 Repentance and Reparations: At the request of the Connexional Team working party working on the response to M22 (2021), the committee is examining theological approaches to repentance and reparation in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. There are possibilities we are continuing to explore of doing this work in collaboration with faith and order colleagues from relevant partner churches.

- 5.7 In addition to the above items, the committee or its representatives are consulted about a wide range of issues in the life of the church. In particular, we have been pleased to support the review of the Conference statement *Hope in God's Future* (presented elsewhere in this Agenda) and to contribute to the review of probation processes.
- 5.8 The committee is planning to report to the Conference of 2026 on the following matters:
- Online Church
 - Online celebrations of Holy Communion
 - Revision of the Criteria for the Transfer of Ministers
 - Response to the report of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission document *God in Christ Reconciling*

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 15/1. The Conference received the Report.**
- 15/2. The Conference directed the Secretary of the Conference, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, relevant members of the Connexional Team and partner organisations, to establish a task group to review the Conference's position with regard to assisted dying and to report to the Conference not later than 2028.**