

17. Presbyteral Session: Reviewing its nature and purpose

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The Presbyteral Session Business Committee wishes to ask the Presbyteral Session of the Conference to consider whether to instigate a review of the nature and purpose of the Session.

The last review of the Session took place as part of the Review of the Conference which reported to the 2006 Conference, with further reports coming in 2007 and 2008.

The 2006 report noted that the origins of the Conference lay in a series of meetings which John Wesley held with his Preachers, Helpers and Assistants, as the Methodist movement developed. 'Those who attended were the predecessors of those who became ordained Methodist ministers as the movement developed into a separate Church and later, Churches, after the death of Wesley. Yet as the movement grew into a Church and fragmented into a number of Churches, there were a series of gradual developments at different times in those various traditions in which lay persons came to share in the ultimate oversight of the Church in the Conference. Since Methodist Union in 1932 this trend has continued. In line with the Deed of Union it is the Representative Session of the Conference that has the final authority for establishing the Methodist understanding of faith and interpreting its doctrines, for creating the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, and for setting the policies and overseeing the mission of the Church.' (para 68)

The Presbyteral Session (then known as the Ministerial Session) has particular responsibilities and powers. Almost all of these have to do with judgements about individual cases of fitness to belong to the presbyteral order of ministry. The Presbyteral Session adopts the final version of the text of obituaries for presbyters. It makes recommendations to the Representative Session concerning the granting of permission for presbyters to become supernumerary. It makes recommendations to the Representative Session concerning the acceptance of candidates for presbyteral ministry and of judging that people are ready to be received, reinstated or transferred into Full Connexion with the Conference and, where appropriate, ordained. The Representative Session cannot accept a candidate or someone for reception into Full Connexion who has not been recommended to it by the Presbyteral Session or the Conference Diaconal Committee as appropriate. The Presbyteral Session has exclusive jurisdiction in cases such as the continuance or discontinuance of student presbyters or presbyteral probationers, and the hearing of appeals to the Conference arising out of charges against a presbyter, student presbyter or presbyteral probationer.

The Deed of Union further sets out that the Presbyteral Session shall 'engage in pastoral consideration of the number and state of the Societies and in pastoral conversation on the Work of God and pastoral efficiency.' It may 'discuss any subject in the Agenda of the Representative Session or any other subject within the jurisdiction of the Conference and communicate its views thereon to the Representative session by resolution or otherwise' (DU 23)

The 2006 Review therefore identified the following three main purposes for a Presbyteral Session:

- a. To confer about their presbyteral vocation and identity and to support, encourage and 'watch over one another in love' about their presbyteral practice.
- b. To confer about the 'work of God' from their presbyteral perspective and to discern whether they have any collective presbyteral mind or particular insight to contribute to the Representative Session in its conferring.
- c. To make decisions which have been delegated to it or are in its exclusive jurisdiction.

The Presbyteral Session Business Committee considered the purpose of the Session as it is presently constituted and felt that the time was right to ask the Presbyteral Session whether it wishes to review that, in the light of the reduction in the size of the Conference (and therefore of the Presbyteral Session), the changes in the governance arrangements for the Church and the length of time since it was last reviewed. It particularly noted that, while a number of presbyters attend the Session under their own arrangements, these tend to be drawn from a relatively small pool and that the number is affected by the location of the Conference. Members of the Committee were cognisant of the very small number of memorials and notices of motion that are brought to the Presbyteral

Session. The Committee discussed the relationship of the Session to Presbyteral Sessions of the Synod, and how the business of the Synods relates to the business of the Conference.

The Conference is therefore invited to discuss, in its Presbyteral Session, the purpose of the Session. The Committee wishes to explore ensuring that the Session can provide a meaningful gathering for fellowship, renewal, and discussion. This could include considering the schedule so that, for example, 'business items' are confined to the first afternoon session with the remaining time focusing on collegiality and conferring. It might also want to think about the methods that are used for conferring and making its views known to the Representative Session (or the wider Connexion). For whom does the Conference seek to discern God's will and share perceptions?

Along with questions of 'what', 'how' and 'to what end', the Conference might also want to explore 'who confers'. Noting the earlier comments about the small and varying numbers of those attending under at their own expense, would the Conference wish to encourage more presbyters to attend under their own arrangements? The committee noted that there are (smaller) Conferences and Connexions where all presbyters are (formally or informally) expected to attend the session. Alternatively, given that all presbyters are obliged to attend Synod, should the Conference introduce a formal way of referring to and hearing from the Presbyteral Sessions of the Synods on broader questions?

Should the mind of the Presbyteral Session be to review the Session, a resolution will be brought directing the Secretary to initiate the necessary process.

The Conference received the following additional report:

The Role and Purpose of the Presbyteral Session: Report from the Presbyteral Session to the Representative Session of the Conference

The Presbyteral Session engaged in a discursive conversation about Agenda Item 17. It noted among other points that 20 years (in which much has changed) have elapsed since the 2006 review, that the conferring in this year's Conference had been rich and relevant to the global situation, and that some members feel that the opportunity to be part of the Conference in some way should be made more widely available to presbyters. It also reflected on the importance of the Presbyteral Session of the Synods and of connecting the conferring that takes place there with the conferring in the Presbyteral Session of the Conference.

The Conference agreed that it was timely to review the role and purpose of the session, bearing in mind these points and those made in the report, and resolved:

The Conference directs the Secretary of the Conference in consultation with the Business Committee to draw together a working party (including representation from the Law and Polity and Faith and Order Committees) and to report back with recommendations no later than 2027.

PS/1. The Conference adopted the Report.