

32. Revising *The Methodist Worship Book*

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	32/1. The Conference received the Report. 32/2. The Conference adopted the proposal to revise <i>The Methodist Worship Book</i> as set out in paragraph 3.1. 32/3. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to report to the Conference of 2026 on: - liturgical style and language, including the theology relating to them, and offering principles to guide liturgical revision; - proposals regarding areas for which authorised liturgical resources should be provided; and - a proposed order of work for the revision and publication of authorised liturgies, including the level of revision proposed in each case and consideration of the format(s) in which new resources might be published. 32/4. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the questions of de-authorisation and withdrawal of liturgical resources and to report to the Conference of 2027.

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To set out proposals for revision of <i>The Methodist Worship Book</i>
Main points	• Introduction • Authorised liturgy in the Methodist Church • Outline of the proposal • Authorisation and De-authorisation
Background context and relevant documents	<i>The Methodist Worship Book</i> (1999) <i>Inclusive Language and Imagery about God</i> (1992)
Impact	This is a major project and will require significant work by the Faith and Order Committee.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Faith and Order Committee was asked by the Secretary of the Conference to consider whether the time had come for a fundamental revision of *The Methodist Worship Book*. As reported to the Conference in 2023, the committee agreed that it was. However, the construction of an appropriate proposal regarding revision of *The Methodist Worship Book* has proved challenging. It is clear from discussions in both the Faith and Order Committee and Liturgy and Worship Sub-Committee as well as conversations held with the Survivors' Group and Solidarity Circles for Disability and for Women, that there is a wide range of hope and expectation relating to this work. At the same time, it is very clear that the needs and patterns of the Methodist Church are changing and are likely to change yet further during the time of any project. We are also conscious of the need to use resources well and ensure that anything that is proposed is manageable, deliverable and appropriate.
- 1.2 The Church and society in general are in a time of transition as to how published resources are accessed and used. Printed books have dominated the life of protestant churches since the Reformation, which might be argued to have been made possible by the advent of the printing press. Books have had a significant place in public worship and in private devotion alike. They are symbolically as well as practically important: consider in how many churches an open Bible is prominently displayed. For Methodists, the hymn book has long been an important personal devotional resource as well as something to be used during public worship.
- 1.3 The availability of liturgical and worship resources online has been changing this pattern for a considerable time now. Like the printing press in its day, this is an historic trajectory which is

changing, and will continue to change, our worship, our personal devotion and how we function as a church. This consideration of the revision of *The Methodist Worship Book* takes place in the midst of this transitional time. Ongoing reflection will be needed throughout this process not just on how the Church supports public worship but how liturgical resources support private devotion, the development of discipleship and our formation as God's people.

- 1.4 The general approach connexionally in terms of published resources is now 'digital first'. Feedback in the recent consultation about reprinting the booklet versions of *The Methodist Worship Book* demonstrated a significant preference for electronic provision. The committee does not believe that the production of a new book would be the right way forward in the context of the Methodist Church of today, let alone of the future. Nevertheless, there is a demonstrable need for revision to our authorised texts, for reasons including taking account of developments in our life since 1999 and attending to questions of inclusive and expansive language.
- 1.5 This proposal has been developed having regard to those considerations. The Faith and Order Committee offers it to the Conference as a way forward which is both constructive and manageable. The Ministries and Mission Committees were consulted about this proposal and both were in favour of the direction of travel set out.

2. Authorised liturgy in the Methodist Church

- 2.1 Authorisation of liturgy in Methodist Church is a significant process, beginning with commendation of the new resource by the Conference for a period of experimental use. At the conclusion of this period, the resource, amended if need be, is presented to the Conference for authorisation.¹ By contrast to some ecumenical partners, there is no requirement for authorised liturgy to be used in Methodist worship but it stands as a 'norm for guidance'² and represents a statement of Methodist teaching and belief as well as an example of best practice. Alongside authorised liturgy, the Methodist Church makes available a wide range of other liturgical resources which follow more streamlined approval processes.³ Until now, the Methodist Church's authorised liturgies have generally been published together in a particular book.

3. Outline of the proposal

- 3.1 The key elements of the proposal are as follows:
 1. That the Conference adopt a principle that authorised liturgy is defined simply as that which has been authorised by the Conference, rather than as that which is contained in a particular book
 2. That these resources can then be produced in appropriate formats, digital and print, according to need which may vary through the life of the resource. Given that all the resources will be available online, a single book containing everything is not required.
 3. That a rolling programme be instituted of adding to and/or renewing existing authorised liturgy. An order of work will need to be determined and agreed.
 4. That consideration is given to what actually needs to be resourced with authorised liturgy and what can be appropriately resourced in other ways (including by approved and recommended resources).
- 3.2 It is intended that this provision should be flexible and allow those preaching and leading worship as well as Methodists more generally (and others who are interested) to access our authorised liturgies. All resources will be made available online in (a) format(s) appropriate to their use, for example powerpoint presentations, word documents and ready-to-print pdfs. It is intended to work in a way which will seek to ensure that the resources can be produced in alternative formats to attend to changing needs or that were not available at the time of initial publication. At the same time, many contexts will still appreciate the convenience and simplicity of easily accessible printed versions that can be purchased. While not proposing the production of a single book containing everything, it is intended that booklet versions be produced containing liturgies regularly used in Local Churches or where it may be convenient for ministers and others engaged in pastoral ministry to be able to carry

¹ This process is mandated by SO 210(10).

² Preface to the Methodist Service Book (1975) and quoted in preface to *The Methodist Worship Book* (1999).

³ These are known as *approved* and *recommended*. Approved resources have been considered by the full Faith and Order Committee while recommended resources are scrutinised by a single person on its behalf.

a copy with them. Similarly, this flexibility allows for different approaches for personal devotional use which could include anything from resources easily accessible via smartphones to pocket-sized booklets.

3.3 As part of this process it will be necessary to give further and more detailed attention to specific areas of the work. The first of these is about liturgical style and language. There are a number of areas where current liturgical style and language (and the theology embedded within them) needs attention. These include, for example, but are not limited to:

- Gendered language, for people and God
- Language relating to ability and disability
- Power language
- Language of light and darkness
- Themes relating to safeguarding and the experience of survivors of abuse

At the same time, it will be important to ensure the possibility of a wide range of imagery and poetic usage so that worship is richly resourced.

3.4 As the work progresses, it is likely that further areas requiring consideration will be identified. As a first stage in the revision process, the Faith and Order Committee would propose to bring a report to the Conference of 2026 regarding liturgical style and language seeking to set out some principles for adoption in these areas, in order to enable a consistent approach to subsequent liturgical writing and revision. The committee is also aware that there is a wider conversation – and some concerns – about liturgical language used in our worship more generally, and it is hoped that this report might be a useful resource to encourage conversations (for example, in Local Preachers' meetings) about practice in this area.

3.5 In planning the order of work there will be several stages to consider:

- What needs to be resourced with *authorised* liturgy? There may be currently authorised liturgy that no longer needs to be resourced in that way. Equally, there may be new areas where it would be appropriate that an authorised liturgy be created.
- For what areas would it be appropriate to produce completely new liturgy? For which areas might a more modest updating of the existing provision be adequate? Are there areas where the existing provision continues to be appropriate? In considering these questions, attention will also need to be given to the resource available: it will probably not be possible to produce completely new liturgy for too many different areas.

3.6 Alongside the work on style and language, the committee would also intend to bring to the Conference of 2026 an outline of the plan of work and level of revision proposed for the different areas to be resourced by authorised liturgy.

3.7 Assuming the Conference of 2026 were to adopt the report and plan of work presented to it, work could begin on new liturgies in the connexional year 2026/7 with the expectation that the first new liturgies to be commended for experimental use would be brought to the Conference of 2028, with subsequent authorisation in 2030, in order to allow for a sufficient period in which they could be used and feedback could be received. Subsequent stages of revision would follow in the ensuing years. The report to the 2026 Conference with the plan of work will set this out in more detail.

4. Authorisation and de-authorisation

4.1 It has not up to now been the Conference's custom to remove status from superseded liturgies. In the past, when authorised liturgies were contained in books, the publication of a new one tended to mean that the older (gradually!) fell out of use. If liturgical texts are being made available in a variety of forms, including digital, then the question arises as to how to deal with older versions.

4.2 In the light of the proposed rolling programme of updating our authorised liturgy, the question arises as to whether the Conference should start de-authorising liturgies? If so, an appropriate process for that would need to be created. Alternatively, it may be that a simpler process by which older resources are 'withdrawn' and no longer published or made available on the website would be sufficient. As well as the question of the most suitable resources being available for public worship,

there is also the question of appropriate access to historic resources for archival and academic purposes.

- 4.3 Coupled to this there are also questions about when an official text becomes inappropriate for some reason: for example, perhaps there are safeguarding concerns relating to its author or perhaps it expresses sentiments that we would now challenge. How should the Methodist Church handle authorised texts about which such questions arise?
- 4.4. In the same way that there is no requirement on those leading worship in Methodist churches to use authorised resources, de-authorisation or withdrawal would not imply that Methodists would be forbidden to use those resources. A decision to forbid the use of a particular resource would be a very striking one in the context of the Methodist tradition of worship which places considerable emphasis on the responsibility of the person appointed to preach or lead worship to ensure that what takes place is not contrary to our doctrines and is fitting for the public worship of God. One way of thinking of it may be that to de-authorise a resource would be to say it no longer represented one or more of a 'norm for guidance', the teaching of the Methodist Church or best practice in our worship.
- 4.5 These questions are complex and require further consideration. The committee proposes that a policy setting out how they might be dealt with should be brought to the Conference of 2027. This would still be well in advance of the time the first new liturgies would be authorised.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The Conference resolved in 1990 to begin the work that led to the publication of *The Methodist Worship Book* in 1999. While, at one level, the proposal here is more modest than what came before it, to embark upon a revision of our authorised liturgy is a significant task. It is for the Conference to determine if the time for that is indeed now. It is the committee's hope that the way forward proposed here provides a suitable way in which we may serve the present (and future) age and fulfil our calling.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

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