

31. Faith and Order Committee: Oversight and Trusteeship

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Resolution	31/1. The Conference receives the Report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	Response to Resolution 25/8 (2020), consideration of the work on oversight and trusteeship
Main Points	To encourage further work and reflection on the purpose of all connexional committees and their ways of working, the underpinning values, and the priorities around which it would be possible to be structured.
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	The 2020 Conference report <i>Reaffirming Our Calling: Oversight and Trusteeship</i>

Faith and Order Committee: comment on the work on oversight and trusteeship

1. The 2020 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the report *Reaffirming Our Calling: Oversight and Trusteeship* and to report to the 2021 Conference on the faith and order issues that the proposals raise (Resolution 25/8). The Committee has been grateful for conversations about the work on the proposed Connexional Council and the evolving structure of connexional committees, and for sight of reports as they have developed. It will continue to work with others in thinking through the faith and order matters involved. This report comments on some of the relevant faith and order questions so that they can be further considered as the work develops. Much of the content of this report has already been seen by the Methodist Council and those involved in the work, but is reported to the Conference not just in response to Resolution 25/8 but also as a resource for Local Churches and Circuits as they think through their committee structures, ways of relating, and processes of discernment and decision-making.
2. The Faith and Order Committee notes that questions about effective trusteeship and good governance have been one of the factors prompting this work. Such questions prompt the Methodist Church to think about how it organises itself (including through its structure and ways of working) in order to share in God's mission in the world. One of the key emphases of Methodist ecclesiology is "that the Church should be structured for mission, and able to respond pragmatically, when new needs

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or opportunities arise”¹ The Committee therefore suggests that there is further opportunity in all parts of the Connexion for some bold and creative thinking about how the Methodist Church orders its life and about how Methodists work together so that the structures and ways of working of the Methodist Church enable it to share in God’s mission in 21st century Britain.

3. The Methodist Church’s way of being, and the ways in which its members work together, expresses and reveals its identity as the Body of Christ.² Any restructuring should therefore reflect the priorities of the Methodist Church. Good governance matters because it helps the Church to engage in mission effectively and be the Body of Christ in the world, but it is only one aspect of this. Re-structuring around priorities would offer clarity of purpose for different bodies (or committees) of the Church and enable the whole Church better to express and focus on its agreed priorities. As the Conference is being asked to reaffirm *Our Calling* there is an opportunity to look at how this may be achieved and expressed, not least through the committee structure of the Methodist Church. If the restructuring is not based on such principles and priorities then the Committee is unclear what thinking, theology and ecclesiology underpins any proposed new structure and the Connexional Council, and it is essential that this is given attention.
4. The Faith and Order Committee suggests that there is therefore an opportunity to consider a more radical restructuring as the Methodist Church continues to respond to God’s call today. (It noted that the 1976 Act lists the first purpose of the Methodist Church as “the advancement of the Christian faith in accordance with the doctrinal standards and discipline of the Methodist Church”.³ In other words, a legal purpose of the Methodist Church as a charity is the advancement of the Christian faith.) A restructuring around priorities would, in turn, give shape and purpose to each body within the Methodist Church and enable the development of a pattern of governance which would help the Church to fulfil its purpose (and help to enable its trustees at all levels of the church to carry out their responsibilities effectively).
5. Its structure is only one aspect of how the Methodist Church orders its life, and its ways of working are equally important; not just because the way in which different committees and bodies function relate to how effective they are, but also because how we live together reflects who we are as the body of Christ. The Faith and Order Committee notes that questions about how we relate and function are relevant not just for this work, but also for the review of the Conference and reflection on how local churches, circuits and districts fulfil their priorities, exercise good governance

1 *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.7.1

2 *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 2020, 5.1

3 *The Methodist Church Act 1976*, section 4.

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and share in God's mission in their contexts. There are particular emphases in Methodist theology and ecclesiology which help us to reflect on this, and the Committee offers three examples:

- 5.1. The first is an emphasis on **'relatedness'** as essential to the concept of 'church', finding expression in the 'connexional principle'.⁴ Alongside reflection on how different parts of the church interconnect, this might also mean looking at how connexional structures and ways of working could model something to districts, circuits and local churches, and thus be a gift to the whole church. For example, the Committee notes that the current Methodist Council (like many bodies in the Church) meets a few times a year and has a large agenda before it, whilst it heard an example of a trustee body for another organisation which met frequently and had more ongoing involvement in scrutiny, support and matters of governance. Reflection on how a trustee body might best function seems timely, and there are various alternative ways of working which might be explored. Questions of how such a body (and its committees) relate to and work with the Connexional Team are also important; as is some consideration of the power dynamics within and between different bodies and the effects this has on conferring. Attention to ways of working enables openness, conversation, trust and confidence to develop. Questions about how a body is enabled to be productive, effective, and robustly held to account are particularly relevant.

- 5.2. The second is an emphasis on **participation**. This also flows from the centrality of 'relatedness' and is an aspect of the Methodist understanding of oversight as something that is shared. The Faith and Order Committee notes that this has often found expression in language about representation, but this is too frequently interpreted in a particular and narrow way which relies on a small number of individuals representing diverse bodies or (sometimes) large constituencies within the life of the Church. It is the summative skill and experience of a body which is important, rather than solely a consideration of individual attributes. A focus on participation might be more helpful as it provokes bodies to think about how well they are listening to all parts of the church, to ask who might feel marginalised and why, to pay attention to questions of power, to strive to be transparent, to think about effective communication, to look at what the body needs at a particular time, and to be willing to be changed by engaging with different communities within the Methodist Church.

4 *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.7.1

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- 5.3. The Committee notes that a draft proposal for the Connexional Council suggested that people will be “chosen for their competence, experience, expertise and availability in giving the time necessary to do the task well”. This might, however, conflict with a suggested membership which includes a comparatively significant number of people representing a few particular bodies or groups in the life of the Methodist Church. A focus on enabling greater participation through creative ways of working and ensuring that the Connexional Council as a whole sufficiently reflects the life and membership of the Methodist Church, might be more helpful (and effective). The Conference has previously noted that being connected involves hard work⁵ and that collaborative and consultative working demands time, energy, commitment and intention.
- 5.4. Further consideration of the oversight role of other bodies and committees and the part they play in the decision-making process might help to tease out when and how a Connexional Council might effectively and appropriately relate to them. This may also help to determine whether there are any particular groups, committees or individual offices which need to be part of the membership of a small Connexional Council, and to provide clarity about the reasons for this. Exploring alternative ways of functioning and different ways of relating might also bear fruit.
- 5.5. The third, is the Methodist Church’s emphasis on **conferring**. The process of Christian conferring has been described as “the bedrock of the Methodist movement”.⁶ Christian conferring is a gift of God through which people take spiritual and theological counsel together in order to grow together in holiness. It is “prayer-guided, gracious, heart-to-heart engagement” which shapes disciplined and faithful discipleship.⁷ The Methodist Conference has noted that it is:

“a process of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue to which there are two important, complementary strands. As they confer, people intentionally, prayerfully and thoughtfully seek to describe and analyse their experience and to listen to others doing the same, and they give and receive guidance, advice, challenge and support. In this they are exercising both mutual accountability and supervision. These complementary strands are two sides of the one coin.”⁸

5 *The Gift of Connexionalism*, 2017, 9

6 *The Nature of Oversight*, 2005, 2.13

7 Richey, R, 2009, “Connection and Connectionalism” in Abraham, W J and Kirby, J E, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.226

8 *The Nature of Oversight*, 2005, 2.15

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- 5.6. Two things have particularly shaped Methodist practice and understanding: Wesley's calling together of preachers to confer, and his identifying Christian conferring as a means of grace. Although it is now common to think of conferring in terms of how Methodists make decisions, the original emphasis was more on discernment and spiritual growth. It began to take a particular form when John Wesley invited a number of preachers to join him in discerning God's will for the movement in a form similar to that of the Class Meetings: it was guided by prayer, it demanded robust and honest personal engagement as participants reflected on their experience and exercised mutual accountability, and it was to help shape a disciplined and faithful discipleship within his preachers as they together sought to discern God's will and catch a vision of what God required of them. Wesley developed particular questions for preachers: what to teach, how to teach, what to do – questions which relate to content, method and strategy. Although Wesley's conferences were to support people in their faith and discipleship, they were not easy gatherings. They required honesty, a willingness to account for one's spiritual life, to listen and to be challenged. They were to be as searching as possible, and as one American Methodist historian has said "He pushed the preachers to think more constructively about the most effective means of preaching, the most responsible way to handle funds, the most appropriate way to address conflicts with other theological views. Conference was not for the faint of heart."⁹
- 5.7. Wesley also identified conferring as a means of grace, believing that Christian conversation was a means of drawing people into a closer relationship with God and that God is always present in its practice. It involves a preparedness to be changed by the experience.
- 5.8. Methodist conferring typically involves a series of conversations involving Local Churches, Circuits, Districts and the Conference. This still shapes the structure of the Methodist Church, but it is perhaps timely to consider whether something of the importance of 'holy conversation' has been lost. The Minutes of the Conference continue to be produced and published but they are now a pared down record of final decisions. The Minutes of the early Conferences were a record of the conversation, produced in a question and answer form to capture the conversation and not just the end result. (Although, it should be noted, they were far from verbatim records and heavily edited by Wesley.) Within the formal structures of the Methodist

9 Frank, T E, 2009, "Discipline" in Abraham, W J and Kirby, J E, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.249

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Church today, discernment and decision-making are usually undertaken through discussion, debate or dialogue. However, this can sometimes be skewed by unnecessary confrontation and the silencing of some voices. There is now an opportunity to reflect on how such conferring might embody some of the characteristics of conversation, namely openness and flexibility, being responsive to change and new possibilities, and the accommodation of new voices. Reporting a conversation shows how a particular conclusion was reached and which alternatives were considered, and encourages further reflection and communal engagement

- 5.9. Conferring is a vital aspect of discernment and it is timely to give further attention to the question of how we confer well together. What structures and ways of working help us to better confer in all parts of the Church? How might the Conference, Connexional Council, and any connexional committees model different ways of conferring well, which includes paying attention to how they consult, pray, oversee pieces of work, debate, converse and make decisions?
 - 5.10. During the past year much conferring has taken place online and it is important to reflect on the ways in which this changes the nature, possibilities and dynamics of conferring. The Committee will give this further attention.
6. In addition to reflection on the structure and ways of working of the Methodist Church, is the question of who is appointed to particular roles. As mentioned in 4.2 above, oversight is shared. Oversight has always been necessary to the Church because it is the function of ensuring that the Church is true to its calling. It involves the process of reflecting on experience in order to discern the presence and activity of God in the world. It is corporate in the first instance (residing in the Conference) and then secondarily focused in specific individuals and groups (lay and ordained).¹⁰ Clarity about the gifts, expertise, experience and character of those who exercise leadership roles in the Church is therefore vital, as is clarity about the role and responsibilities of any position on a Connexional Council or connexional committee. (The Faith and Order Committee notes that there is a particular piece of potential work which might be helpful in enabling members of the Church better to understand the roles and responsibilities of trustees, which also includes trustees in Local Churches, Circuits and Districts.) This, therefore, raises further questions about discernment and formation.

¹⁰ *Ministry in the Methodist Church*, 2020, 6.5

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- 6.1. All members of the Methodist Church contribute to its life and ministry. The Holy Spirit bestows diverse and complementary gifts on every member of the Body of Christ. These are for the common good of the whole of God's people so that they may support and encourage one another and engage in witness and service in the world. The whole Church, and its different parts, has the task of discerning how and where these gifts are best used and most needed. Those who hold leadership roles in the Church, which would include those who become trustees and members of the Connexional Council, have the responsibility of ensuring that it functions in ways that are rooted in the principles of connexionalism, participation and conferring. They thus require the gifts and experience to 'hold the spaces' in which those things can happen. The process by which such people are identified and through which discernment takes place are therefore crucial to ensure that a Connexional Council is representative of the life of the Church and properly equipped to fulfil its functions. There are different models of appointment to such roles, each of which has strengths and weaknesses; attention to questions of access to and participation in any process is vital.
- 6.2. The question of formation is also relevant. Attention to the ways in which different bodies and committees function requires a willingness to adapt, be accountable, think creatively, and regularly review how things are done and how effective current processes and ways of relating are. There are opportunities to look at the ways in which the Methodist Church might help offer exposure to different ways of working and develop the skills needed to create a culture that is participatory, recognising that creating such cultures requires intentional action, commitment and hard work. (How does the Methodist Church create a vision of a participatory culture for people to grow into?) Such questions relate to the work on vocation and the Ministries Committee's work on discernment processes for senior posts. Alongside this are questions about how the Methodist Church develops (or accesses) the particular professional skills and expertise required in trustee bodies.
7. Finally, whilst questions of trusteeship were one of the initial presenting issues for this work, the concept of 'trust' is theological as well as legal. The Faith and Order Committee notes that understandings of trusteeship and stewardship are integral to this work and warrant exploration. The Committee will therefore give these further consideration.

***RESOLUTIONS

31/1. The Conference receives the Report.