

18. Methodist Membership in the 21st Century: Further Issues

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland, Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolution	18/1. The Conference receives the Report.

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To explore remaining issues identified in <i>Methodist Membership in the 21st Century</i>
Main points	Space and Place Membership and Connexionalism Membership and Governance Membership and Accountability Multiple Membership
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	Called to Love and Praise Our Calling God for All Methodist Membership in the 21st Century

1. Introduction

1.1. The Methodist Conference of 2022 received the report *Methodist Membership in the 21st century*,¹ which identified some further matters relating to the Methodist understanding and practice of membership. The report notes:

3.11. Three particular contexts in which challenges to membership have arisen are local ecumenical partnerships, new places for new people or fresh expression or pioneer communities, and online communities. These raise some specific questions, not least questions about how such communities relate to Methodist polity. There are particular questions about understandings of 'local' and the importance of geographical place, and about how the particular community relates to the wider church (who makes decisions about admission to membership if there is no church council, for example). As expressions of ecclesial life develop still further it will be important to find ways of expressing the essence of belonging in

¹ https://www.methodist.org.uk/documents/11832/conf-22-pc-29-membership_T1gZ2mc.pdf

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Methodism. Some of these questions are long standing whilst others have emerged more recently, but they all merit further attention.

- 1.2. The Methodist Conference of 2022 directed that the Faith and Order Committee undertake further work in relation to paragraph 5.3; resolution 29/3 of the report:

...that the Faith and Order Committee consider some of the questions requiring attention, including those questions around ecclesial identity and the extent to which membership is essential to Methodist identity, especially in relation to ecumenical, online and New Places for New People contexts as identified in 3.11 above; and how different understandings of membership in Methodist Churches around the world impact on those who also wish to belong to the Methodist Church in Britain, for example through the Fellowship Groups.

- 1.3. The committee has gathered information and perspectives from the groups identified in the report and reflected on common issues emerging within these areas of the Methodist Church's ministry. The committee also consulted the [then] assistant Ecumenical Officer in the Connexional Team, members of the Evangelism and Growth team, and representatives from the Cultural and Linguistic Fellowship groups.²

2. Considering space and place

- 2.1. *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century* sought to offer a Methodist understanding of membership, both theologically and practically. However, the contemporary lived experience of Methodist people, particularly surrounding differing understanding of ecclesial identity, within the Methodist Church of Great Britain (MCB) and ecumenically, presents some complications. To offer a way of interrogating these perspectives further, an understanding of space and place is offered.
- 2.2. The influence of the Fresh Expressions (FX) movement and New Places for New People (NPNP) over the last twenty years has expanded the ways that Methodists understand church and the formation of sacred space in which churches gather. Methodist church communities may gather in traditional church buildings, a variety of rented accommodation, and online. This is a significant departure from much of our recent history which has been focused on churches as those groups who meet for worship and engage in mission with a dedicated church building which often bears their name. Those who were part of the Methodist movement

2 This is the language used connexionally for such groups.

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in its early years would undoubtedly have a different perspective on space and place from those who experience the contemporary Methodist Church. Lester Ruth notes that the basic building blocks of early Methodism were the class meeting and the band meeting.³ Class and band meetings were often private and could take place in a variety of spaces, including homes. The life of “the community was the message”⁴ of the movement, and as such it did not rely on particular spaces to embody that message, as later may have become the case. The early Methodist understanding of sacred space may, therefore, have been shaped by these practices which lead to a wider appreciation of ‘place’ as a way of sustaining identity and spiritual formation.

- 2.3. FX and NPMP, while not the only influences, have caused Methodists to ask questions about how they nurture growth in holiness, how members support one another’s discipleship and how membership fits into these patterns. Specifically, how does a church create a place in which membership is a vital and dynamic expression of faith?
- 2.4. It is important to note that space and place are not the same. Space may be understood as a location in which people interact, which Cresswell calls “the basic coordinates for human life”⁵ - in the context of church, the basic coordinates in which community is formed. Place, however, is not necessarily physical or visible but “become[s] vividly real through dramatization,⁶ it allows a way of “seeing and knowing the world”⁷ through community, which is created through experience within a particular space or spaces.
- 2.5. For many churches the fabric of their building is important, but Katie Day⁸ points out “bricks and mortar, doors and windows, steeples and altars are not neutral or random elements of a shelter for a worshipping people. Rather all these elements are dynamically related to the religious identity of the faith community”. Therefore, the fabric, or space, of a building is not enough alone to create a sense of place. A church community may consider certain spaces as sacred because of the nature of the experience there, rather than simply its fabric. The designating of spaces as sacred can happen unconsciously as community life and faith is lived in context.

3 Ruth, L (2005). *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*. Abingdon Press.

4 Richey, R in: Ruth, L (2005). *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*. Abingdon Press. p.259

5 Cresswell, T (2015). *Place: An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell. p.16

6 Tuan, Y-F (1977). *Space and Place*. University of Minnesota Press. p.178

7 Cresswell, T (2015). *Place: An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell. P.18

8 Day, K (2014). *Faith on the Avenue*. Oxford University Press. p.41

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2.6. The importance of place to faith communities is explored by John Inge,⁹ who suggests that western intellectual tradition has sought to downgrade the importance of place in recent history, through the processes of colonialisation and empire, which has often dehumanised people whose place is destroyed or desecrated. Inge calls for a reimagining of the importance of place in the Christian tradition and claims that a sacramental experience of faith can explain how church spaces are perceived to be “special”. He argues that the place in which an individual has a sacramental encounter holds a significance for them.¹⁰ A space becomes holy when an individual’s experience or their perception of it, moves them to name it as a place where an encounter with the ‘other’ could take place. Space that is understood as ‘special’ may be thus considered holy. However, the spaces that may be considered special or holy, are not limited to traditional church buildings, and indeed the online space may be considered as a place in which faith is experienced sacramentally. It is the encounter with God that for Inge makes all the difference in moving from space to place, the unique interaction in a context of people, space and God allows the visible signs of grace to communicate the invisible grace in a sacramental way. In the Methodist Church in Britain, there is a diverse appreciation of sacred place, and what it means to belong to a community who find their home there, which naturally leads to different understanding of where membership should properly be vested.

2.7. Reflecting on a biblical understanding of place, Walter Brueggemann notes:

Place is a space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is a space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the uncompromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment and undefined freedom.¹¹

2.8. Brueggemann recognises that people form connections both consciously and subconsciously, and the value they give to certain events and experiences play a

9 Inge, J (2003). *A Christian Theology of Place*. Ashgate.

10 Inge, J (2003) pp. 89 - 90

11 Brueggemann, W (1977). *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. Fortress Press. pp. 4 - 5

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part in forming a sense of place, as Inge¹² notes “human experience is shaped by place”.

- 2.9. This leads to the understanding that a sense of place helps people understand the world in which they live. “There is no pure seeing” comments Hjalmarson,¹³ because “seeing” is grounded on experience and the interpretation of it, which is always done in and through place. A sense of place allows individuals and communities to know themselves better, to have a greater clarity on the nature and purpose of the community itself.
- 2.10. The experience of faith in community is more than words, or certain liturgical practices in a particular space; it is revealed in the lived experience of that community. The ecclesial spaces in which people live and worship are a complex synthesis of social relationships, physical realities, and sacramental experience from which place is created as sacred.
- 2.11. The current context of the Methodist Church in Britain means that we live with different expressions of Methodism and church life, all of which interpret space in different ways. It is not enough to suggest that only a church building can be a sacred place for individuals or communities rather it is necessary to understand the way sacred places are created and sustained in community. This allows us to consider how membership may be properly expressed and celebrated as a sign and symbol of faith and growth in holiness, both as part of a local emplaced community (for instance NPNP or Cultural and Linguistic Fellowship groups) and the wider Methodist Community.

3. Membership and Connexionalism

- 3.1. Membership in the Methodist Church of Great Britain is an expression of faith and discipleship. To be a member is to live as Christ’s disciples in all aspects of life; membership in the Methodist Church is therefore a key part of Methodist identity. The *Deed of Union* expressed membership as a covenantal relationship which is entered freely into by God’s grace which does not create a contract or other legal relations.¹⁴
- 3.2. To be a member has been reaffirmed in a number of previous reports including *Methodist Membership in the 21st century*¹⁵ which outlines the importance

12 Inge, J (2003) p. ix

13 Hjalmarson, L (2015). *No Home Like Place*. Urban Loft Publishers. p.132

14 *Deed of Union*, Clause 9 (b)

15 https://www.methodist.org.uk/documents/11832/conf-22-pc-29-membership_T1gZ2mc.pdf

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of membership. This is highlighted in the purpose of membership which is expressed as a group of people meeting to 'pray together, receive a word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love'.¹⁶ To pray, worship and be accountable for one's faith are key elements of Methodist membership.

- 3.3. In thinking about these *Rules of the Society* today, we recognise that the area that has less emphasis now than in the earliest days of Methodism is regarding 'watching over one another in love.' To embody *Our Calling*¹⁷ is to live out the principles of membership in the whole of life.
- 3.4. Part of Methodist identity is expressed through the connexional principle of belonging, mutuality, and inter-dependence. The Conference report, *The Gift of Connexionalism*¹⁸ is a reminder that connexionalism is fundamental to the way Methodists understand Church. Membership should therefore be considered an expression of connexionalism.
- 3.5. A sense of belonging may vary between New Places for New People (NPNP) contexts and that of 'traditional' Local Church as each expression of NPNP is individual and its articulation of belonging may also vary. As many NPNP are in their infancy, any consideration of how each group relates to wider Methodism may not yet be fully defined. There may be more of an emphasis on attendance which may then have an impact on membership in the future. The understanding of membership as people meeting together to 'work out their salvation'¹⁹ remains important although it is recognised that, for some, there is little interest in articulating a sense of belonging to the wider Methodist Church.²⁰ This can be addressed through the local leadership promoting membership as an expression of faith and discipleship and encouraging a culture of membership within each group. There may be issues around polity which arise at the early stage of NPNP which are beyond the scope of this report.
- 3.6. We acknowledge that Cultural and Linguistic Fellowships often have a strong sense of belonging within their groupings. For most, the expectation is that their Methodist membership would be held within one of the churches of the local Circuit, with the Fellowship acting as an additional space for worship and

16 *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of The Methodist Church*, Volume 1, (2014) p.66

17 <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/>

18 <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2017-37-The-Gift-of-Connexionalism-in-the-21st-Century.pdf>

19 *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of The Methodist Church*, Volume 1, (2014) p.66

20 *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century*, 2022, par. 3.5

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discipleship. Connexionalism is expressed through the 'multiple belongings' of each group.

- 3.7. When being received into membership, the liturgy of the *Methodist Worship Book* emphasises that people are being welcomed into membership 'of the Methodist Church, and of the church in this place.'²¹ This places a dual emphasis on a relationship of belonging with the wider church of the Methodist Church in Britain as well as the local congregation. The promotion of membership as an expression of discipleship and spiritual growth within a broader context of the connexional church is essential. Where new ecclesial communities are being established consideration should be given as to how they are embedded within, and relate to, the Circuit, District and Connexion, and therefore how connexionalism is lived and experienced within those communities.
- 3.8. Where a person is received into membership who has not previously been baptised, then this sacrament is administered. For some, a barrier to membership can be that they feel they have already been welcomed into the catholic Church through baptism, and therefore do not feel the need for another rite of initiation in the Methodist Church. This perhaps highlights a misunderstanding that exists concerning membership in the Methodist Church, which, while connected to Christian initiation, is an expression of discipleship and commitment to the Methodist Church and the church in a particular place. Consideration in conversations with people regarding membership may, in certain situations, need additional emphasis on the distinctive nature of membership in a Methodist context, while maintaining a strong emphasis baptism as a mark of the church catholic.
- 3.9. The articulation of membership in a (predominantly) online church raises some questions, primarily in relation to issues of governance within such communities who would seek to function as a church under Methodist Standing Orders, these issues are explored in more detail in the next section of this report. The articulation of membership in a (predominantly) online church will need reflection as part of the ongoing work in that area, including the way membership is expressed as being both 'local' and connexional.

4. Membership and Governance

- 4.1. In this report, we understand governance as referring to the framework as set out in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church for

21 *Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, Service of Confirmation and Reception, p.100

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managing the institution of the church, in this report specifically at a local church level. The governance model the church operates under identifies how decisions are made, and by whom. The Methodist understanding of representative selection²² offers a theological rationale for how such decisions are made and enacted. Membership in the Methodist Church allows people the opportunity to participate in the responsibility of being church, both connexionally and locally, in their place, serving the church in this way is an expression of spiritual commitment. Those who are members of a Local Church have responsibilities in the governance of that church. The Church Council 'has authority and oversight over the whole area of the ministry of the church'.²³ In small churches, all members willing and able to serve form the Church Council. In larger churches members elect most members of the Church Council in the General Church Meeting.²⁴

- 4.2. The number of members within a church is one of the key measures used, including the need to record the number of members in each church and Circuit, on stationing profiles. Ensuring a consistently accurate number of members for each church is therefore important in supporting ministerial stationing within our current stationing procedures. If this understanding is followed, then it may also be important to know the number of members in NPNP and Cultural and Linguistic Fellowship Groups to help understand the effective deployment of resources (including ordained ministers). Promoting membership within new ecclesial communities is important in ensuring that these churches are nurtured within the life of the Circuit and that proper provision is made for them within stationing profiles. Continuing to explore the place of these groups in the Methodist Church in Britain will assist in enabling this.
- 4.3. *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* is clear that in setting the circuit assessment, the Circuit Meeting 'should take into account the needs and ability to pay of each Local Church and not merely their respective membership figures'.²⁵ The implicit link here, however, is that membership figures would play a part in the setting of the assessment, while other factors should also be considered. Each circuit context will differ but encouraging Circuits to share their approach with one another could be beneficial in considering how the

22 *Deed of Union*, Clause 4: The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

23 SO 603

24 SOs 610 and 632.

25 SO 515(3)

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assessment is set. For NPNP, Fellowship groups and potentially predominantly online churches, consideration needs to be given as to how this is expressed and what is appropriate within the context of a circuit assessment. However, as a range of factors should be considered, this should act as an encouragement to churches to welcome people into membership as an expression of faith and discipleship, and not primarily as a way of understanding financial commitment and capacity.

- 4.4. The 'locally resident' requirements for Methodist membership of SO 605/605A do deserve some consideration in the current context of the Methodist Church in Britain's life. Part of this might require that a Methodist understanding of 'local' should be reviewed in the online context, and in relation to a range of church and community groupings. The nature of 'my local church' is challenged by online ecclesial groups and the question of how and where we hold this in our practice and doctrine. Consideration of these and related questions is part of the ongoing online church work.
- 4.5. When considering the current landscape of the church, we recognise that many of the questions relating to our understanding of membership can only be properly addressed when some of the online issues are resolved, therefore, this will likely shape the direction of travel.

5. Multiple Memberships

- 5.1. Many Methodists are members of several organisations as well as churches but there does not appear to be any readily available data on how many people are members of more than one Church. The membership model which we have inherited implies that Christians will normally be members of just one local congregation. A Local Church may 'transfer' members when people move home including when they move to or from another denomination, when this receiving denomination has a similar concept of membership. Otherwise, we would 'commend' them to their new church community. The question of transfer is still perhaps somewhat unclear. SO 052(1) provides for 'members in good standing of any recognised Christian communion' to be 'received as members in accordance with clause 8(b)²⁶ of the Deed of Union', how this is worked out in practice may vary from context to context.

26 *Deed of Union 8(b)*: a candidate for membership requires to be approved by the Church Council in accordance with Standing Orders and shall then at the earliest opportunity be publicly received as a member of the Methodist Church and (if not already confirmed) confirmed at a service conducted by a presbyter in the presence of the Local Church and including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

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- 5.2. Those away from home studying were expected to maintain membership of their 'home' church rather than transferring. However, it is not clear if this is still the case. Until quite recently it was expected that members of other (overseas) Methodist Churches and Connexions would transfer their membership when they move to Britain; irrespective of whether that move is envisaged as temporary or permanent. Today, we recognise that such people often wish to maintain a clear link with their 'home' church and have for several years accepted that such practice is acceptable. This is the context in which the Deed of Union understands dual membership.²⁷
- 5.3. In Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) and other situations of ecumenical cooperation, people may be made members of all the participating denominations. What is less well documented is those who choose to be members of more than one local congregation. Examples of this may include retired ministers of other denominations who have settled in a Methodist congregation after retirement and those who, perhaps after a church closure, settle in a congregation of a different tradition but retain Methodist membership. Membership of a Church of England (CofE) electoral roll is not equivalent to what most non-conformist Christians consider to be 'membership', but it does confer similar constitutional rights and is treated as equivalent in the model LEP constitution. The CofE neither requires nor expects those applying for membership of the electoral roll to renounce any other allegiance, indeed the wording on the relevant form²⁸ allows for multiple membership.

6. Membership and Accountability

- 6.1. The concept of mutual accountability among the people of God, or its associated issues is not unique to Methodism. Members of early Christian communities engaged in a variety of gatherings and the epistles, especially those to Corinth, encourage followers to understand ecclesiology of their church community in terms of relationship between God, self, and others. The Johannine writings indicate a move from this practice of mutual sharing and accountability to one of suspicion and isolation in less than one hundred years.
- 6.2. While membership of the Society of the 'People Called Methodists' depended on a desire to be saved, ongoing evidence of growth in faith and holiness was

²⁷ *Deed of Union 8e(ii)*

²⁸ The declaration reads: 'I am a member in good standing of a Church (not in communion with the Church of England) which subscribes to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and also declare myself to be a member of the Church of England and I have habitually attended public worship in the parish during the period of six months prior to enrolment.'

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required to retain it. Wesley's rigour in declaring those who did not show the required commitment as having 'ceased to meet' might mean a person was cast adrift from that particular small community, it did not, however, impact their ability to attend and participate in worship at the Parish Church.

- 6.3. As early as 1889, a Wesleyan Conference report instructed ministers not to use non-attendance at class meetings as a sole reason to remove an individual from membership if they retained their sincere desire to be saved.²⁹ This implies a shift in attitude away from small group fellowship and towards an expression of church that was more recognisable as such in that societal context.
- 6.4. In 1938 reports submitted to the Methodist Conference state that, in many cases, 'membership has become a haphazard and all but meaningless practice',³⁰ and that the previous two generations have seen a marked decline in the methods used by the early Methodists to learn about their faith; namely: family religion, scriptural familiarity, fellowship at Class Meetings and sharing of the Word. It states that the spiritual loss as a result has been 'incalculable'.³¹ The 1938 Report on Junior Membership bemoaned a 'distressing ignorance' amongst young people and mature adult members alike as to the basic premises of their faith and requested that people were offered better preparation for membership.³²
- 6.5. *Our Calling* is clear that Methodists are called to live out their discipleship through worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism. Those received into membership commit to worship (including attendance at Holy Communion) and service, daily discipleship, and Christian witness. In practice however, it is not clear if each of these aspects considered equally important, notions of 'commitment' among both members and adherents within the Methodist Church in Britain are plainly subjective. The Deed of Union is clear that any person who is absent from the fellowship for a prolonged period should be removed from the membership roll and cease to be a member of the Methodist Church. It does not, however, imply that disregarding any other area of *Our Calling* should be considered grounds for the removal of a person from membership. The Methodist focus on 'good order' has been key to the nurturing and development of faith, with disciplined discipleship being an important theological emphasis.

29 *Called to Love and Praise*, 4.3.5

30 *Agenda of the Methodist Conference*, 1938 p 359

31 *The Report of the Special Committee Appointed to Consider the Conditions of Membership in the Methodist Church*, Methodist Conference 1938.

32 *Report on Junior Membership: The Minutes of Conference*, 1938, pp 367-368

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- 6.6. Prior to 1992 a discrepancy existed between the liturgy of the Membership Service and the Deed of Union. The issues concerned the question of on whose authority did someone become a member: the congregation, following the approval of the Church Council (MSB) or solely Church Council (DoU)?³³ The resolution led to an amendment of the DoU which indicates an emphasis on relationship rather than process. While such commitment is reaffirmed during the Covenant Service,³⁴ during which we hold ourselves accountable to God in the presence of one another, these services are attended by members and adherents alike.
- 6.7. Methodist structures allow for, and encourage emphases and activities which are, albeit not exclusively, seen in by newer, growing churches, namely pastoral networking, and small groups. While these structures were widely responsible for growth in the Methodist movement, they can appear to be under-valued and largely forgotten in contemporary times. Methodism, however, remains a network of interconnected churches supporting, challenging, and working alongside one another for the good of God's Kingdom. The re-creation of house groups or class meetings is, it might be said, merely an extension of connexionalism and an ideal environment for members to learn and grow in faith and in the expression of 'our calling'.
- 6.8. While contemporary Methodism maintains that becoming a member should be open to all, irrespective of their personal history there is an expectation that certain standards of behaviour are maintained as a member. It is important to consider what resources we offer for those who want to explore what it means to be a member in terms of the ongoing commitment, not simply to the point of decision. Research suggests that although some people leave church before the age of twenty due to a failure to understand church process and teaching, nearly twice as many did so because it was unchallenging and simplified.³⁵ It is perhaps the case that we may tend to underestimate the interest that those who are either outside or on the fringes of the church have in exploring commitment.
- 6.9. *Called to Love and Praise* reminds us that the once familiar patterns of family life have altered drastically, with life for many becoming uncertain and fragmented. Substantial changes in the economy and a growth in social mobility have led to people becoming too reluctant to define themselves by the company they work

33 Membership: Recognition, Reception and Confirmation (1992), Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order: Volume Two 1984-2000: Part One: p 115 - 116

34 *The Methodist Worship Book*, Methodist Publishing House: Peterborough pp 287-290

35 Richter, P, and Francis, L, (1998) *Gone but not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning*, Darton, Longman and Todd: London p. 62-64

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for or the job that they do. Assisting people to balance the commitments of work, life, family, and church is a key task of any church. Perhaps what was once perceived as 'commitment' was the result of church-going being an expectation.

- 6.10. Membership is essential to our understanding and practice of connexionalism, as the global outworking of faith in a local context. However, misunderstandings of the connexional nature of the Methodist Church in Britain have perhaps led to membership being mistreated, and linked strongly to a functional ecclesiology rather than an expression of devotion. The 2023 Conference approved *A Methodist Way of Life* (MWOL) in accordance with the following understanding:
- (1) within the primary framework of *Our Calling and Called to Love and Praise*, an expression of our mission together as a Church: to be a movement of disciples who praise the triune God and respond to the Gospel through living out a common way of life in the world;
 - (2) a foundation for discipleship journeys and a creative pattern open to all people – Methodist members and spiritual explorers alike – to recognise and express the grace of God at work in their lives, and to hear God's challenge to them and to the entire world to be transformed by God's grace; and
 - (3) an effective framework through which to connect the diverse work of the Church in the world and to communicate it clearly to the world.³⁶
- 6.11. This shows that MWOL is intended to be a broader expression of discipleship which will include but not be limited to Methodist members. The Faith and Order Committee explored some of the issues recently and agreed that the commitments of MWOL are different than those made in reception into membership. The committee further recognised the way the *God for All* strategy seeks to embed MWOL in the life of the church which allows for helpful reflections on that which is shared in MWOL and Membership and that which differs.
- 6.12. The questions around Methodist membership and accountability present some significant issues for the church in terms of NPNP, Cultural and Linguistic Fellowship groups, and other new ecclesial communities. If the relationship to a church council is not clear – in terms of presence or representation, or a new community understands itself as a church with its own governance and direction, there may questions as to the creation of models which allow us to maintain

36 <https://d1yuutt686hfi0.cloudfront.net/media/documents/conf-23-pc-22-methodist-council-part-2.pdf>
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the expectations of our polity. It is not clear whether our current models of accountability expressly related to decisions about who may be a member can work appropriately in our current context. It may be that further work is needed to enable this accountability to be more clearly expressed. The Methodist Church should continue to reflect on how new ecclesial communities help us to shape and develop our understanding, rather than simply holding to an expectation that these new groups will conform to the current polity of the Methodist Church in Britain and its existing requirements of Local Church Councils and their work.

7. Concluding Considerations

- 7.1. The Faith and Order Committee recognises that in the current life of the Methodist Church we are often working with diverse understandings of 'church' which the Methodist Church has not previously encountered. The ecclesiology of emerging churches may challenge the way the Methodist Church has expressed itself to this point. Equally we recognise that each time the Conference has been asked to consider membership it has affirmed its significance and place in the theology and practice of the church. The context in which the church currently lives is asking for complicated questions to be resolved, as churches operate in a variety of models and modes, both online and offline. We have attempted to explore the further issues identified by the report *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century* here. As the life of the Methodist Church continues to develop and we continue to see new ecclesial communities challenge and inspire our practice and theology, we will need to continue to consider how to articulate our understanding of membership for new and changing contexts and to ensure that those exploring membership in these contexts are appropriately resourced.

***RESOLUTION

- 18/1. **The Conference receives the Report.**