

How our Churches work: an introduction to the URC Mission Council and the Methodist Council

Basic Information

Contact Name and Details	Richard Mortimer richard.mortimer@urc.org.uk 020 7916 2020 Ken Howcroft howcroftk@methodistchurch.org.uk 020 7486 5502
Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	For information
Draft Resolution	n/a
Alternative Options, if Any	n/a

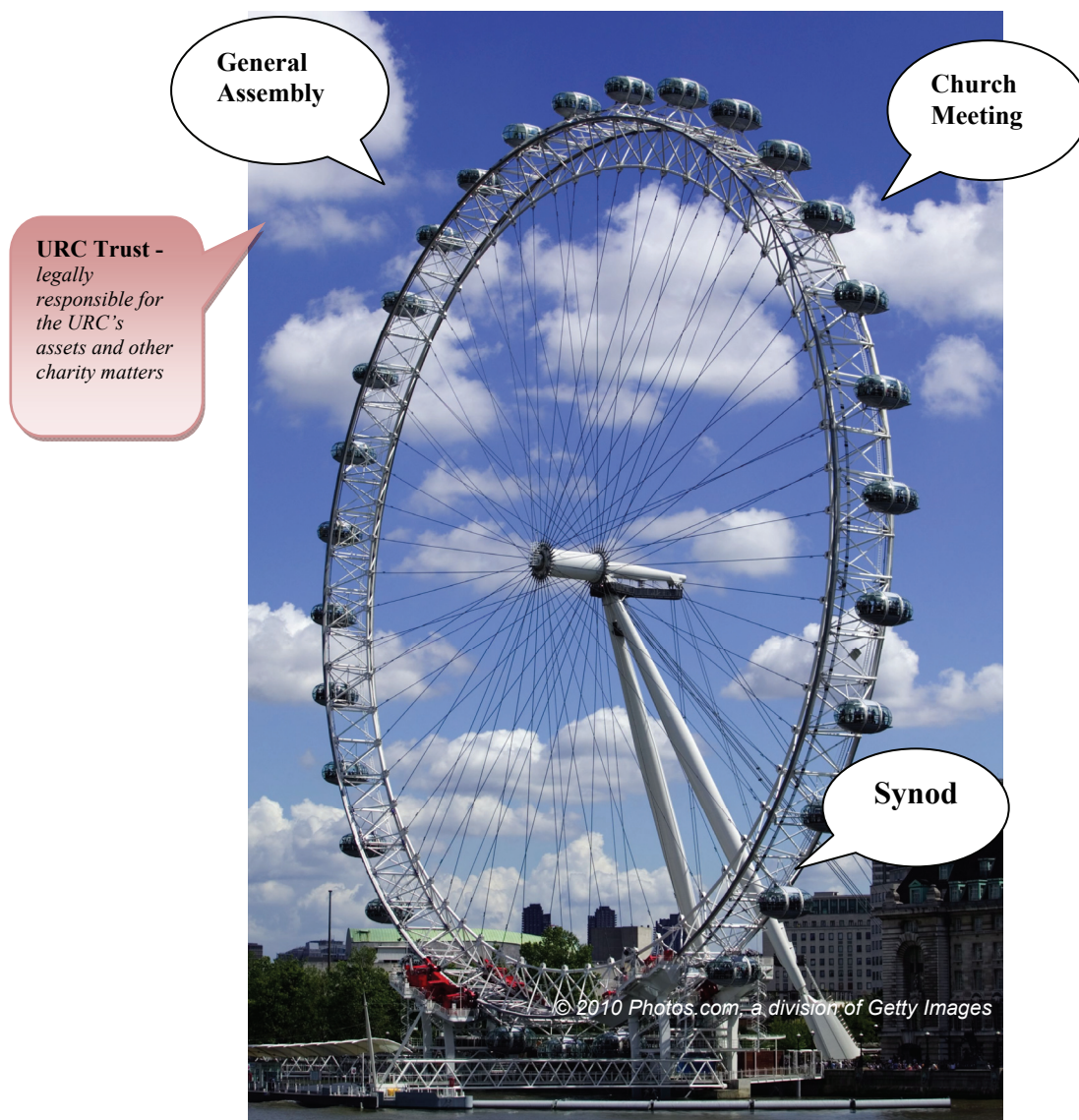
Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To give members of the URC Mission Council and the Methodist Council some background information about the structures of their two Churches, particularly with regard to oversight and governance
Main Points	The first section gives information about the URC; the second about the Methodist Church
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	The context is the first joint meeting of the two Councils under the title "Better Together"

How the United Reformed Church works

To understand the way the URC works you can read several Acts of Parliament, the URC Manual and a book shelf of General Assembly resolutions since 1972. The Clerk to the Assembly is always happy to provide magisterial guided tours.

Or you can think of a ferris wheel. Key pods include the Assembly (with the Trust linked in) the Synod and the Church Meeting. Different pods are at the top at different times as none is automatically supreme.



The tasks and composition of Church Meeting, Synod and Assembly are summarised below.

In some places Synod functions are delegated to a URC-Methodist United Area.

Church Meeting

Local mission
Ecumenical relations
Call ministers, CRCWs
Elect & ordain elders
Elect officers, leaders
Admit/transfer members
Send ministry candidates
Buildings & finance
(Local trusteeship)
Wider issues – send
resolutions to Synod,
which may be passed on
to Assembly

Led by:

*Members, elders,
ministers of Word and
Sacraments, Church
Related Community
Workers, lay preachers,
local church leaders*

Synod (United Area)

Regional mission
Ecumenical & international
relations
Oversight of churches
Oversight of ministers, CRCWs
Church planting
Authorise lay presidency
Local Mission & Ministry
Review
Concur with calls to ministers
Ordain Ministers
App't non-stipendiary ministers
Synod trusts hold the property
Send ministry candidates
Approve people for ordination /
commissioning
Send resolutions to Assembly

*Synod Moderators, Synod
Clerks, Training and/or
Mission Development Officers,
Children's and Youth
Development Officers, Trust
Officers*

General Assembly

*Mission Council acts for
Assembly in between its
biennial meetings*

General oversight
Witness & welfare of URC
Ecumenical relations
International relations
Constitutional matters
Doctrinal matters
Approve ministry candidates
Train ministers/CRCWs
Elect/appoint officers
Create committees and appoint
people to serve
Judiciary – appeals, discipline
Such other things as need
doing

*Moderators of Assembly (2,
serving for two years), Clerk,
General Secretary, Deputy
General Secretary, Mission
Council, Committees, staff at
86 Tavistock Place*

HOW THE METHODIST CHURCH IN GREAT BRITAIN WORKS

The Methodist Church in Great Britain is marked by the fact that its members still speak and subconsciously think of themselves primarily as “the people called Methodist”. They began as a discipleship movement within the wider Church, a society of people seeking holiness and engaging in worship and mission. In Wesley’s time and through succeeding generations they have continually adapted to changing circumstances in order to fulfil that calling as effectively as possible. The current expressions of that dynamic are the programme *Our Calling* which has led in turn to the *Priorities for the Methodist Church*; the process in which Local Churches, Circuits and Districts review their life, worship and mission under the heading *Regrouping for Mission*; and the *Team Focus* review of how the staff and other officers who are appointed to serve the whole of the Methodist Church (“the Connexional Team”) can best serve those Local Churches, Circuits and Districts as they regroup and are renewed in the ways they fulfil their calling.

Methodists therefore participate in a discipleship movement. Some people participate in that movement as welcome fellow-travellers (who used to be known as “adherents” or as “those on the community roll”) or as baptised and confirmed members of the universal Church (whether they were baptised and confirmed in a Methodist Church or not). But those who are confirmed as members of the universal Church through the agency of a Methodist Church or are transferred into the membership of a Methodist Church from another denomination are at the same time received into membership of the Methodist Church as a whole, not just of a particular Local Church. In other words, membership is connexion-wide in scope, but then held and embodied in a Local Church on behalf of the whole. This sense of Methodist membership comes from the discipleship movement beginning its life as a Society. So for Methodist members, discipleship includes accepting a share of the responsibility of sustaining and developing the movement for themselves and for others.

All Methodist members therefore participate in the *oversight* of the Church, i.e. the process of ensuring that the Church remains true to the gospel, to Christian (particularly the Methodist) tradition and to the promptings of the Spirit. Ministers (presbyters) who are ordained to a ministry of the Word, Sacraments and Pastoral Responsibility and who have been received into Full Connexion with the Methodist Conference [i.e. “Methodist ministers (presbyters)” who exercise their ministry under the jurisdiction of the Methodist Church] or are recognised and regarded as such have what the foundational documents of the Church call “a principal and directing part in these great duties” of oversight by virtue of exercising the particular characteristics of the ministry to which they are ordained. But they do not have the only part or role in oversight, and they do not exercise their ministry exclusively but in collaboration with others. Deacons are admitted into membership of a dispersed religious order within the Church, but are also received into Full Connexion with the Conference and ordained to a ministry of Witness through Service, by virtue of which they make their distinctive contributions to the exercise of oversight. Lay officers of the Church, and lay people in general, also have important and distinctive roles to play.

Oversight in Methodism is therefore shared between those who are lay and those who are ordained. It is exercised primarily through corporate bodies and then secondarily through individuals who represent those bodies [e.g. the President of the Conference (who is a presbyter) and the Vice-President (who is a deacon or lay person); the Superintendent minister and the Circuit Stewards]. The nature of those corporate bodies varies somewhat depending on to which part of the Methodist Church they relate. As a movement, the Methodist Church understands itself as a “Connexion”, a single entity or “organism” whose inter-dependent parts make up an inter-related whole. The various parts express different aspects of the whole on behalf of the whole. Thus the Local Church is the primary place where people express their worship and discipleship and experience nurture and care. The Circuit is the primary place where resources of finance, personnel and property are deployed to sustain the Local Churches in their inter-dependence and to further mission in the locality [n.b. presbyters and deacons are appointed to Circuits not to particular Local Churches: which Local Churches they relate to is a matter of Circuit policy and may change from year to year]. The District is the primary vehicle for relating to ecumenical and secular bodies in the wider region; for supporting the Circuits; for deploying ordained ministry to them in the process known as “stationing” [n.b. presbyters and deacons are in full connexion with the Conference and are then deployed by the Conference to particular Circuits or other types of appointment: in other words they are ministers of

the Conference for a particular Circuit or other type of appointment, not ministers of that Circuit or appointment]. The oversight bodies for these parts of the Connexion (the Local Church Council, the Circuit Meeting, and the District Synod respectively) therefore vary somewhat in their make-up in ways that are appropriate to the aspects of the whole of the connexion that the particular part embodies. But in each of these “Councils and Courts” of the Church both lay and ordained people share in their various ways in the exercise of connexional oversight.

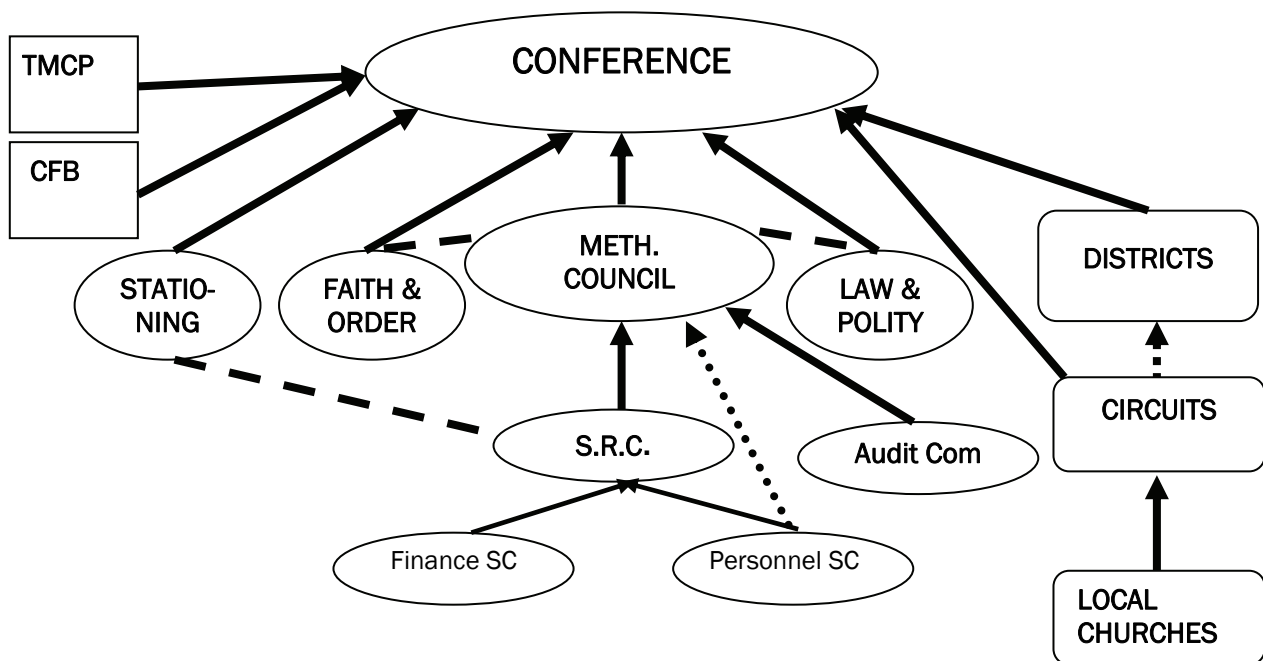
The Conference is the governing body of the Methodist Church under God. Because the Connexion is a single entity, the Conference is the most important oversight body for each of the constituent parts as well as the Church as a whole. It has 306 full, voting members, of whom 14 are deacons and the rest more or less equally divided between presbyters and lay people. Some are *ex officio* members [e.g. the President and Vice-President; the Secretary of the Conference/General Secretary of the Methodist Church (a dual role held by the same person); the officers of the Conference Secretariat supporting the role of Secretary of the Conference; the Connexional Team Secretaries supporting the role of the General Secretary in strategic leadership]. Others are appointed by subsidiary bodies, principally the Districts, to represent them or by the Conference itself to represent particular wisdom or expertise. It is important to note that they are all representatives, not mandated delegates, and that they all have a vote. In addition to the full members, however, there are 26 associate, non-voting members representing partner Churches overseas or in Great Britain.

As the supreme oversight body in the Connexion, the annual Conference has responsibility for what the foundation documents of the Church call the government, discipline, management and administration of its affairs. It fulfils this responsibility through a process of “Christian conferring”. This involves its members in seeking to discern the will of God through taking counsel together in a mutual, prayerful and thoughtful conversation that leads to collective decision-making in formulating and adopting the principal vision, purposes and policies of the Connexion under the guidance of the Spirit and in the light of Scripture. Much of its exercise of oversight is therefore in the form of governance i.e. exercising final authority over things and adopting rules and guidelines for the life of all parts of the Church (within the parameters set by the Methodist Church Act 1976 and the other foundational documents of the Church). Another major expression of that oversight is in the form of exercising leadership i.e. inspiring Methodist people to be imaginative, to articulate vision and to act faithfully and courageously. Less of the Conference’s activity is to do with expressing oversight through detailed management of activity in any part of the Connexion, the direct exercise of which is the duty of other groups and bodies.

The principal body subsidiary to the Conference is the Methodist Council, which meets three times a year. It comprises some senior connexional officers (including the General Secretary and the Connexional Team Secretaries), representatives of some major connexional bodies, and, predominately, a representative of each district. All are voting members (with officers of the Law and Polity Committee, the Faith and Order Committee and the Audit Committee as participating observers). They again include both lay and ordained people; and are again representatives not mandated delegates. The elected Chair of the Council, the Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee, the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Conference have particular roles to play in the preparing of the Council’s agenda and executing its decisions. The Council has to keep in review the life of the Methodist Church and propose to the Conference changes which will make the Church’s work more effective; and to give spiritual leadership to the Church. This involves elements of leadership, in that the Council seeks to harvest insights from the work of the Districts and the Team, articulate vision for them in return, and motivate and inspire them. It also involves major elements of governance. Many other major connexional bodies are accountable or report to the Council.

The Council is the trustee body for the Methodist Church Fund. It is also the employing body for lay staff in the Connexional Team (and for some such as Training Officers and District Development Enablers who are not members of the Connexional Team), and it nominates to the Conference any presbyters and deacons who are to be stationed to serve in the Team. The Council aspires to adopt best practice in fulfilling these responsibilities and looks for best practice to be applied in the management of staff in the Team. The Council also makes many nominations to the Conference for Committee and other appointments and makes a range of other such appointments itself.

GOVERNANCE OF THE METHODIST CHURCH



The Stationing Committee, Law and Polity Committee and Faith and Order Committee are all at the same level of governance as the Methodist Council. Faith & Order and Law & Polity have participant observer status on the Council. Some of those bodies have sub-groups that report through them. There are also bodies like the Candidates Selection Committees and Connexional Probationers Oversight Committees (both of which deal with presbyters and deacons) that report directly to the Conference.

The Connexional Team serves the Conference and acts to fulfil its wishes and directions. That involves the Team acting to fulfil the wishes and directions of the Stationing Committee, Faith & Order Committee, Law & Polity Committee, their subsidiaries and other bodies like the Candidates Selection Committees and Connexional Probationers Oversight Committees. Those bodies can direct the work of the Team, but do not manage it. Because the Conference has not been a legal person, the Methodist Council has acted as the employing body for those lay people employed in the Connexional Team (and the responsible body making recommendations to the Stationing Committee about the deployment of presbyters and deacons in the Connexional Team). The Team is therefore managed by the Methodist Council, which in turn delegates much of its responsibility in this regard to the Strategy and Resources Committee (SRC).

Districts and Circuits are separate entities. They have their own accounts and budgets. They can employ lay people in the same way that the Methodist Council can (and so can local churches). They are also bodies which make recommendations to the Stationing Committee about the deployment of presbyters and deacons.

Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP) and Central Finance Board (CFB) are totally separate entities. They have their own accounts and budgets, and employ people.

The Methodist Council is responsible for the accounts of all entities in the Church which are not Districts, Circuits or Local Churches; nor separate entities like TMCP. They include the “Connexional Central Services Budget”, which in turn covers the work of the Methodist Council; Stationing; F&O; L&P etc. etc. together with grant-making by connexion-wide bodies (as opposed to districts, circuits etc.). But they also include other things. Overall, they are serviced by the Connexional Team even though not all is in the control of the Team.