

Guidelines for use of the Synods in designating single congregation local ecumenical partnerships

Introduction

The Methodist representatives to the Methodist-Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission (MAPUM) are, among other things, required to provide guidelines for use of the Synods in designating local ecumenical partnerships and other local schemes involving constitutions for shared churches.¹

It was in 1964 that 'Areas of Ecumenical Experiment' were first authorised; they were renamed 'Local Ecumenical Projects' and then 'Local Ecumenical Partnerships'. In 1975, in the Foreword to its report *The creation of Local Ecumenical Projects* (a revision of the 1969 British Council of Churches' report, *The Designation of Areas of Ecumenical Experiment*), the Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England (CCLEPE) said:

We re-affirm the Preamble to the 1969 Report:

The effectiveness of an ecumenical experiment will always stand or fall by the motive which lies behind it. If the motive is the Church's mission of reconciling men and women to God through Christ and of redeeming society it will stand. If the motive is church maintenance it will fall, since God calls us not to save our life but to lose it in the loving service of mankind [sic].²

The following are guidelines for use of the Synods in designating so-called 'single congregation local ecumenical partnerships'³ and are offered on the basis that a local Methodist church already exists. It is assumed that the partners in single congregation LEPs will, in the vast majority of circumstances, have a Sharing Agreement under the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969. In some situations they may also be partners with others in a Churches in Covenanted Partnership LEP.

Guidelines

1. The role of the District Synod

- 1.1. The District Synod has authority to designate local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs) within the District and to approve their constitutions.⁴ There is no provision for this authority to be delegated to another body or individual.

¹ Standing Order (S.O.) 334(2).

² This paragraph was also quoted by CCLEPE in the 'Introduction' to its *Local Church Unity: Guidelines for Local Ecumenical Projects and Sponsoring Bodies*, revised edition (BCC, 1986), p.3. In a section on 'Matters for the attention of denominational authorities', CCLEPE went on to say (para 13):

The recognition of a local ecumenical project presupposes the existence of a scheme worked out in detail in terms of mission and presented to the denominations after it has been agreed locally.

³ The term 'so-called' is used because it is not the number of congregations but the governance structure that is relevant. Only one local Methodist church can be the Methodist party to a single congregation local ecumenical partnership (LEP) but that church and the LEP may use more than one chapel/church building (see S.O. 605(4) and S.O. 942(1)).

⁴ S.O. 412(2); such designation should be made where possible in conjunction with a Sponsoring Body on which the Methodist Church is represented. The Sponsoring Body is responsible for registering the LEP. Model governing documents for single congregation LEPs, consisting of a constitution and schedule, are available

- 1.2. This authority shall not, however, be exercised unless the District Policy Committee (DPC) has complied with S.O. 434(3)(v) and so reported to the Synod.⁵
- 1.3. When designating a single congregation LEP or later, the Synod may give a direction under S.O. 611(1). It may also revoke such a direction at any time.⁶ The DPC is required to consider and report to the Synod on all proposals for the issue or revocation of such directions⁷ and the Synod needs to be aware of the implications of such a direction for decision making, particularly when the Methodist Church Council will be exercising managing trustee responsibilities.
- 1.4. After the Synod has designated and/or approved the constitution of a LEP its decision(s) shall be reported to the (connexional) ecumenical officer⁸ and a copy of the constitution sent to him or her.⁹ It also needs to report to the (connexional) ecumenical officer when it gives a direction under S.O. 611(1) or revokes one under S.O. 611(2).¹⁰
- 1.5. Although standing orders do not require it, it is highly desirable for the Synod to report to the (connexional) ecumenical officer when it gives its approval to the dissolution of a LEP.¹¹

2. The role of the District Policy Committee¹²

- 2.1. S.O. 434(3)(v) says that the DPC shall:

be responsible for recommending to the Synod the establishment of ecumenical partnerships in extended areas that do not require shared governance, the designation of local ecumenical partnerships and the approval of local constitutions, but only after submitting each such constitution to the ecumenical officer and the Faith and Order Committee and taking into account their advice.

- 2.2. Although a single congregation LEP can have significant implications for a Circuit in fulfilling its purposes,¹³ there is no explicit, formal role for the Circuit in the process of designating a LEP.¹⁴

from CTE or Cytûn for England and Wales and from ACTS for Scotland; these models meet the requirements of the Charity Commission for England and Wales and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator respectively. Amendments to a constitution may only be made with the approval of the Sponsoring Body and of the appropriate authority of each of the participating denominations.

⁵ S.O. 412(3); see below for the role of the DPC.

⁶ S.O. 611(2).

⁷ See below for the role of the DPC.

⁸ That the Standing Order is referring to the connexional ecumenical officer, see the first Note under S.O. 434(3)(vii).

⁹ S.O. 412(3).

¹⁰ See S.O. 334(4).

¹¹ See below.

¹² For the appointment of a DPC, by whatever name, see S.O. 402(1). In addition to the general provision in S.O. 402(2) that the Synod may determine that particular functions assigned to the DPC shall be fulfilled by some other committee or by an officer appointed by the Synod, the DPC may, in accordance with S.O. 434(3A), delegate its responsibility under S.O. 434(3)(v) to an officer appointed by the Synod. If the responsibility is delegated, it is recommended that provision should be made to ensure that where specific proposals fall to be considered under S.O. 434(3)(v), the appointed officer should be independent of the situation and not involved in the formulation or consideration of the proposals in another capacity.

¹³ See S.O. 500(1): 'The purposes of the Circuit include the effective deployment of the resources of ministry, which include people, property and finance as they relate to the Methodist churches in the Circuit, to churches

Nevertheless, S.O. 434(3)(ii) says that the DPC shall 'promote, develop and co-ordinate ecumenical work within the Circuits'. This should include consultation with a Circuit about the designation of a LEP within it and the results of that consultation should be taken into consideration when preparing the recommendation to the Synod.

- 2.3. It is very important for all those involved in forming a single congregation LEP, including those responsible for its designation, to be confident that it is an appropriate form of ecumenical co-operation for the churches concerned. This was stressed by the Methodist Church's Sub-Committee for Local Ecumenical Development in its report to the Conference in 1996:

It is important to bear in mind that there can be many forms of ecumenical co-operation, other than LEPs, which are to be welcomed. Indeed, one of the realisations that has dawned over the last few years is that whereas some forms of church co-operation will develop their commitment and become LEPs, for others this will not be an appropriate step. It is better to be a good "Churches Together" than to be a half-hearted LEP in the Congregations in Covenanted Partnership category. LEPs should not be entered into lightly.¹⁵

- 2.4. The model governing documents for single congregation LEPs provide for some but not a lot of variation. Nevertheless, the DPC should fulfil its responsibilities regarding constitutions, including any amendments proposed subsequent to the designation of the LEP, before making its recommendation to the Synod.
- 2.5. As noted above, one of the responsibilities of the DPC in connection with single congregation LEPs is to consider and report to the Synod on all proposals for the issue or revocation of directions under S.O. 611.¹⁶ The (connexional) ecumenical officer also needs to be aware of such proposals and is required to obtain the DPC's report on them.¹⁷ In fulfilling this responsibility, due consideration should be given to the precise terms of S.O. 611(1) and (2) and appropriate consultation held with the local church and circuit. It is important to recognise that such a direction does not abolish the Methodist Church Council but provides for an alternative constitution to that specified in S.O. 610. If a direction is given and the members of the Methodist Church Council will be managing trustees of significant local Methodist property, it is also important to clarify the responsibilities entailed with the prospective partner churches.

of other denominations and to participation in the life of the communities served by the Circuit, including local schools and colleges, and in ecumenical work in the area including, where appropriate, the support of ecumenical Housing Associations.'

¹⁴ In its *Guidelines for Local Ecumenical Projects* (1984, revised 1986), the Methodist Church's Committee for Local Ecumenical Development (CLEM) said (p.5f):

It goes without saying that the Superintendent Minister will have been involved from the outset of the discussion [about forming an LEP]. At a fairly early stage in discussion between the two or more local congregations it may be necessary to involve circuit people because what is proposed may well have repercussions on the level of ministerial staffing and the circuit budget. All local constitutions involving Methodist Churches also inevitably involve the Circuit.

¹⁵ Conference Agenda (1996), p.262.

¹⁶ S.O. 434(5)(vii).

¹⁷ S.O. 334(4).

3. Questions relating to the designation of the LEP

- 3.1. Does the ecumenical vision statement show that there is a clear, imaginative, and realistic vision for the worship, life, and mission of the proposed single congregation LEP?¹⁸
- 3.2. How will each church's tradition be represented in and nurtured through the worship, life, and mission of the proposed partnership?
- 3.3. Have the churches that are considering entering into this partnership the potential to develop further their relationship and become a good single congregation LEP?
- 3.4. Will those belonging to each church be able to contribute to as well as receive from the partnership and the other church(es) in the proposed partnership?
- 3.5. How will the proposed partnership relate to other churches in its area and in the surrounding area?

4. Questions relating to constitutional matters

- 4.1. Do the appropriate model governing documents raise any questions that need to be addressed by the local church, circuit, or district?
- 4.2. What advice have the (connexional) ecumenical officer and the Faith and Order Committee offered?¹⁹
- 4.3. What role, if any, has the Sponsoring Body played in the process leading to designation, and, if designated, what role will it play in future? If there is no Sponsoring Body, or one that does not function, what is the outcome of consultation with the appropriate authority for each participating church in the proposed partnership?
- 4.4. Do the Methodists understand that the local Methodist church continues to exist in a single congregation LEP and, therefore, that there is still a Methodist Church Council?²⁰
- 4.5. Has the local church (and circuit) requested the Synod to give a direction under S.O. 611(1)? If so, do the members of the 'ecumenical church council' or LEP Trustees understand the responsibilities they will be expected to fulfil?²¹ If so, what would happen if the Synod were not willing to give such a direction or, having given it, decided to revoke it?
- 4.6. Is a Sharing Agreement under the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969 already signed and registered or being prepared? If the latter, when is it expected to be signed and registered?

¹⁸ This might be influenced by, among other things, the Methodist Church's 'Our Calling' and 'Priorities', the 'Five Marks of Mission' (from the Lambeth Conference of 1988 and taken up by others since), and the URC's 'Vision2020'.

¹⁹ See S.O. 434(3)(v).

²⁰ Cf CLED *Guidelines*, p.9; 'there are times when only a Methodist Church Council can take certain legal decisions, for example in fulfilling its managing trustee role, or in acting as party to a Sharing Agreement.'

²¹ For example, admission to membership of the Methodist Church and managing trusteeship of Methodist property as an unincorporated body.

- 4.7. Do the Methodists understand what are (or will be) the on-going obligations and responsibilities of the Methodist Church Council (whether constituted in accordance with Standing Order 610 or 611) under the Sharing Agreement?
- 4.8. Do the Methodists and the partner churches understand that the obligatory appointments under S.O. 641 still need to be made?
- 4.9. Will the meeting or committee having the responsibilities of a Pastoral Committee continue to be either the local Pastoral Committee composed in accordance with S.O. 644(1) or the Methodist Church Council in accordance with S.O. 644(4), or, if it is to be recommend that the Synod gives a direction under S.O. 611, an ecumenical pastoral committee appointed by the 'ecumenical church council' or LEP Trustees to discharge in relation to Methodist members the responsibilities of a Pastoral Committee under clause 10(a) of the Deed of Union and Section 05 of Standing Orders or, in a partnership with a Methodist membership of 49 or less, the Methodist Church Council constituted in accordance with S.O. 611(1), or a circuit Pastoral Committee? If it is to be the latter, is the Circuit aware of this and does it already have such a committee?
- 4.10. Do the Methodists understand that Church Stewards still need to be appointed in accordance with S.O. 632?²²
- 4.11. Do the Methodists understand that the other churches involved may need to retain appointments and processes from their traditions?
- 4.12. Do the churches in the proposed partnership wish to hold joint confirmations? If so, are they aware of the Methodist procedures relating to membership and confirmation?²³
- 4.13. Are the churches considering entering the partnership aware of any review periods in their own and/or other churches' rules.²⁴
- 4.14. Are all the churches considering entering the partnership aware that the circuit is a very significant body in the life and mission of the Methodist Church so it is essential that appropriate representatives are appointed to the circuit meeting?
- 4.15. 'Each Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnership has to identify which denominational policy it will follow for the purposes of safeguarding.'²⁵ Which policy will be used in the proposed partnership?
- 4.16. What financial arrangements will be agreeable to the churches considering entering the partnership and, where applicable, their respective denominational authorities (eg, the circuit meeting)? What financial year is being proposed and how will that be handled by each of the bodies to which the accounts need to be presented?
- 4.17. What additional agreements need to be recorded outside the model governing documents to reflect the expectations, understandings, practices, and priorities of the churches; eg, matters

²² See also S.O. 622(2); in most circuits one of the Church Stewards serves on the Circuit Meeting.

²³ See Deed of Union, 8 and Section 05 of Standing Orders.

²⁴ For example, Canon B 44 of the Church of England provides for a LEP to be established for a period of up to seven years and extended for further periods of up to seven years.

²⁵ Conference Agenda (2012), p.182, para 3.6(a).

relating to worship (including the pattern of worship, special services such as the Methodist Covenant Service, and the use of non-alcoholic wine at celebrations of the Lord's Supper when a Methodist is presiding), particular patterns of activity in the life of the church (including groups for nurture and fellowship), and particular emphases in mission (including the deployment of resources (people, property, and finance) for service and evangelism)?

5. Dissolution of a LEP

- 5.1. Sometimes, despite the best preparation and the on-going faithful commitment of many people, a variety of factors (external, internal, or both) may lead to a LEP coming to recognise that the partnership needs to come to an end. It is good practice to involve suitable officers of the appropriate authority of each of the participating denominations in this process of discernment. In the case of the Methodist Church, the appropriate authority is the district Synod but it is important that one or more suitable officers of the circuit are also involved.
- 5.2. The model governing documents for a single congregation LEP provide for its dissolution and state that this can be done 'only with the approval of the Sponsoring Body, and the appropriate authority of each of the Participating Denominations.'
- 5.3. In most cases, dissolution of a single congregation LEP will probably entail the termination of a Sharing Agreement under the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969. This is not always the case because the partner churches may wish to continue to share the building for a different purpose. Sharing Agreements provide for their termination and, in the case of the Methodist Church, a notice of termination should be addressed to the connexional ecumenical officer; if, however, the Methodist Church is taking the initiative to terminate the Agreement, it is the connexional ecumenical officer who, with the consent of the district, issues the notice of termination.