

# Mission and Ministry in Covenant

A Reader's Guide





## The Proposals

*Mission and Ministry in Covenant* proposes that the Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England, in covenant with one another since 2003, are ready to take a new step towards full visible unity by entering a relationship of communion as churches. This would not require structural unity or an end to our distinctive forms of church polity, but it would bring down some of the barriers that still exist between us and be a powerful act of healing, reconciliation and witness to the gospel. It would enable new and creative initiatives in mission and ministry to be taken, where this is the desire of people from both churches.

The report consists of four main chapters. The first chapter sets the context for the proposals by showing how they are grounded both in the commitments made by the two churches in *An Anglican Methodist Covenant* in 2003 and in their common calling to share in the mission of God. It outlines two interrelated and inseparable actions that our churches could take.

**First, they would make a formal declaration of a new stage in their relationship.**

**Second, they would undertake two formal, public commitments, beyond those made in the 2003 Covenant:**

- a) To share the ministry of the historic episcopate as a sign of the apostolicity of the Church of God;**
- b) To welcome all presbyters / priests serving in either church as eligible to serve in both churches.**

An outline of what these proposals mean and why they are profoundly challenging for both churches is set out in the middle of this Reader's Guide.

It is important to note that in 2014 the Methodist Conference and the General Synod affirmed this direction of travel and asked for these proposals to be developed. The proposals build on the work already undertaken in the forming of the Covenant and by the Joint Implementation Commission; work that has been received and commended for study by both churches.

## The Covenant Relationship

On 1 November 2003, The Church of England and The Methodist Church entered *An Anglican Methodist Covenant* consisting of interdependent *Affirmations and Commitments*. These form the foundation of the *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* report. They make clear what the two churches have already said about and to each other.

From 2003 until 2014 the **Joint Implementation Commission (JIC)** produced a series of reports which included further reflection on significant areas:

*In the Spirit of the Covenant* (2005) contains some reflections on the meaning of covenant and three major areas of unresolved difference between the two churches: the Eucharistic elements and the reverent disposal of remaining consecrated elements; presidency at the Eucharist, particularly the question of non-presbyteral presidency; and the interchangeability of ordained ministries.

*Living God's Covenant* (2007) offers discussion on issues of church and state, lay ministry, and Eucharistic theology.

*Embracing the Covenant* (2008) considers the vision of fuller visible unity, how decision-making could be shared, issues of episcopate and episcopacy, and the tension expressed in the historic terms 'Calvinism' and 'Arminianism'.

*Moving Forward in Covenant* (2011) includes reflections on the diaconate, episcopacy and the two churches, and opportunities for shared ministry and mission in Covenant Partnerships in Extended Areas.

*The Challenge of the Covenant: Uniting in Mission and Holiness* (2013) reflects on the progress of the covenant over ten years, addresses the doctrine of Christian Perfection, and considers how the churches might move into deeper communion including what united oversight might entail. Following a period of consultation, the final report of the JIC, *The Challenge of the Covenant: Uniting in Mission and Holiness* (2014) details specific challenges and makes the recommendations which led to the production of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*.

## A CHALLENGE FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH:

# A President Bishop

Chapter two of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* addresses the question of what it would mean for the Methodist Church to express the Conference's ministry of oversight (episkope) in a personal form of connexional, episcopal ministry (bishops) in such a way that the Methodist Church can be recognised by Anglican churches as sharing in the historic episcopate. It affirms that the idea developed by the JIC of a 'President-bishop' can be recognised by the Church of England as a sign of continuity in faith, worship and mission in an apostolic church, and that it fits with the distinctive theology and self-understanding of the Methodist Church (in particular the centrality of the Conference for episkope).

### Why it is important for the relationship of communion

The Church of England is a church ordered within the historic episcopate, with bishops ordained 'to be shepherds of Christ's flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles, proclaiming the gospel of God's kingdom and leading his people in mission'. Anglicans around the world have consistently maintained that the historic episcopate is one of the four elements required to enable a relationship of communion with another church. The Church of England understands that the historic episcopate is: personal (it is a particular expression of personal episkope, and there is no substitute for person-to-person pastoral ministry, with all its risks and vulnerability), historic (an expression of the visible historical continuity of the Church today with the Church of the apostles), and received (although there are different expressions in different contexts, a church cannot simply bring it into existence by and for itself).

### What is proposed: the President-bishop

In the Methodist Church the sense of continuity in apostolic faith and mission is maintained through the corporate oversight (episkope) of the Conference through the years. Although it does not accept that the historic episcopate is essential for the faithful exercise of ministry, the Methodist Church has, on several occasions, stated that it is willing to receive the historic episcopate as a sign of Methodism's continuity with the Church universal and for the sake of greater visible unity. The proposals offer a way for the Methodist Church to establish the office of a President-bishop and thereby receive the historic episcopate as a sign of its apostolicity in a manner that is consistent with Methodist ecclesiology. It would mean that the presbyter inducted as President of the Conference would always also be ordained as a bishop. Such an episcopal ministry would be exercised differently from episcopal ministry in the Church of England, with both being faithful interpretations of the sign of the historic episcopate, 'locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church' (Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral).

The appropriateness of a President-bishop for the Methodist Church in Britain rests on three theological premises:

- a) the Methodist Church constitutes a single unit of oversight;
- b) the Conference exercises oversight over the Methodist Church; and
- c) the President of the Conference exercises a personal, connexional and representative form of oversight on behalf of the Conference and presides over the ordination of ministers, thus ensuring continuity in the apostolic faith and mission, with no other officeholder in the Methodist Church representing the Conference in the same way or exercising such a broad range of responsibilities on its behalf.



## Why it is a challenge for the Methodist Church

It would be a big step for the Methodist Church to have bishops and the matter has been under discussion for more than fifty years. The Methodist Church is a connexional church and exercises a corporate and connexional form of oversight. Since Wesley's time it has been reluctant to grant significant power and authority to individuals in representative roles. All ministries, including those of oversight, are exercised within the ministry of the whole people of God and at its service. Oversight is shared throughout the Methodist Church between presbyters, deacons and lay people, and Methodists would need assurance that a developing episcopate, whilst having a responsibility to lead, would be expressed in such a way as to not compromise this principle. The Methodist Church values communal episkope (exercised by representative bodies throughout the church's life), collegial episkope (expressed not only among members of the same order of ministry, but also among lay persons and ordained persons where they share similar responsibilities), and personal episkope in every part of the church's life. It also believes that personal episkope should, wherever possible, be exercised in a collegial or a communal context.

## A CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: **Welcoming All Priests/Presbyters**

Chapter three of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* focuses on welcoming all presbyters / priests serving in either church as eligible to serve in both churches, thus addressing the question of how the existing presbyteral ministries of our two churches might be reconciled so as to enable interchangeability of ministries. It explores the substantial common ground between our two churches regarding the ministry of presbyters / priests, acknowledging that the difference in terminology reflects some differences in understanding. It then turns to the particular question of how the Church of England could offer such a welcome to all Methodist presbyters, given its historic commitment to the norm of episcopal ordination for all priests.

## Why it is important for the relationship of communion

A relationship of communion between two churches means that recognition of one another's ordained ministries can be embodied in the receiving of one another's ordained ministers, without any requirement for fresh ordination. The intention of both churches in an ordination service is to ordain into the ministry of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, which carries with it the expectation of life-long commitment and is unrepeatable. Yet at present, although the Church of England recognises the ordained ministries of the Methodist Church (as was made clear in the Affirmations of the 2003 Covenant), before a Methodist presbyter could serve as a priest in the Church of England they would have to be ordained by a bishop recognised as sharing in the historic episcopate. For many Methodists, the Church of England's willingness to receive all Methodist presbyters as eligible to serve in both churches is the litmus test of its seriousness about being ready to enter into a relationship of communion with the Methodist Church. The proposals offer a way of bringing that about.



## ! What is proposed: welcoming all Methodist presbyters

The Church of England is fully committed to the historic episcopate and to the norm of episcopal ordination for all ordained ministers. If the Methodist Church were to receive the historic episcopate, then the majority of Methodist presbyters would for some time have been ordained by the presbyteral President of the Conference (or a Past-President), and not by a bishop. The proposals provide a means of welcoming all Methodist presbyters as eligible to serve as priests in the Church of England, because there are exceptional and specific circumstances in which an Anglican Church can offer a welcome to ministers not ordained episcopally to serve as ordained ministers. Those exceptional and specific circumstances can be established only when a previously non-episcopal church has (a) received the historic episcopate, (b) become committed to the consistent practice of episcopal ordination for all ordained ministers and (c) entered into a relationship of communion with the Anglican church in question. These parameters are well-established in the ecumenical theology and policy of the Anglican Communion.

It is therefore proposed that, as the Methodist Church receives the historic episcopate, the Church of England introduces legislation that would in effect dispense Methodist presbyters for a limited period from the requirement to have received episcopal ordination in order to serve by invitation in the Church of England. This aspect of the report's proposals rests on the recognition already given by the Church of England to the Methodist Church's ordained ministries and to its exercise of oversight, and on the significance for the whole Methodist Church – including all its presbyters – of receiving the historic episcopate and entering into communion as a church with the Church of England.

### Why it is a challenge for the Church of England

It has been a consistent feature of the Church of England's practice since at least the Restoration that episcopal ordination is necessary for ordained ministry within the Church of England. It would therefore be a significant step for the Church of England to welcome Methodist presbyters, who have not been ordained by a bishop recognised as sharing in the historic episcopate, to serve in appointments within the Church of England. It would involve temporarily suspending a requirement that has otherwise been consistently maintained by the Church of England since the 17<sup>th</sup> century through introducing some specific legislative changes. The proposals in *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* explain this in terms of the well-established concept in Anglican ecumenical thinking of churches seeking unity with one another bearing temporary 'anomalies' together on the way. They do so to bring about a time of grace that gives opportunity to overcome the principal anomaly of disunity. The period of grace would be for a limited time, one step on the way to the unity of our two churches and the full visible unity of the whole Church of Christ.



# What Happens Next?

The final chapter of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* addresses a number of areas in terms of tasks that potentially lie ahead for our churches in moving from covenant to communion. The publication of the report in June 2017 began a new stage of discussion and discernment in both churches, and the faith and order bodies will undertake some further work on aspects of the proposals. It is not anticipated that either church will make any decision on the proposals themselves before 2019.

## Process in the Church of England

In order to enable presbyters ordained in the Methodist Church prior to its introduction of the historic episcopate to become eligible to serve in the Church of England, significant legal changes would be needed. The process of considering legislative change would begin with a debate at the General Synod which would include consideration of outline proposals for legislation. If the Synod approved such a 'paving motion' then, as well as proceeding through the normal Synodical processes, these proposals would be likely to require reference to dioceses and approval from the House of Bishops.

## Process in the Methodist Church

The proposals would be brought to the Conference for debate and decision. If adopted then a two-year process of consultation about changes to include bishops in Clause 4 of the Deed of Union would begin. During this time Church Councils, Circuit Meetings and District Synods would vote on the deferred special resolution that is needed to bring about this change. These are reported to the Conference which makes the final decision about any changes to the Deed of Union.

**The process in both churches would take about two years.**