

## GENERAL SYNOD

***Mission and Ministry in Covenant:***  
**Update on work to address areas for further reflection**

**Summary**

This paper is being circulated to update Synod members on progress in addressing areas for further work regarding the proposals in *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, as asked for by the General Synod in February 2018 and by the Methodist Conference in July 2018. It focuses on what has been happening since GS Misc 1197 was circulated prior to the sessions of the General Synod in July 2018. At that point, it was hoped that the work would be completed in readiness for a further debate on the proposals at the forthcoming sessions of Synod in February, but this is now expected to take place in July instead.

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1. While there were some differences of emphasis, the motions passed by the General Synod and by the Methodist Conference in their initial debates on *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* in 2018 both identified three broad areas for further work regarding the report's proposals:
    - i. The journey towards unity – if this is a further stage on the journey towards unity, what is the destination and how far will this take us towards it?
    - ii. The proposed role of the President-bishop in the Methodist Church – can this be further clarified, including how it relates to Anglican understanding of the historic episcopate?
    - iii. The working out of interchangeability in practice – how far can issues be addressed in advance that would be raised by presbyters / priests ordained in one church offering to serve in the other?
  2. In addition, the General Synod in an amendment to the original motion asked for attention to be given to:
    - iv. the relationship between episcopal ordination and eucharistic presidency, as this touches on the full visible unity of our two churches.

The Methodist Conference through a parallel procedure asked that:

    - v. a report on the progress of the work relating to the interchangeability of deacons be included in any further reports.
  3. The original motion put to the General Synod in February 2018 asked the Faith and Order Commission to report back to the Synod in July 2018. As with *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, the Commission is working in partnership with the Methodist Faith and Order Committee, which is responsible for reporting back to the Methodist Conference.
  4. In part because of the additional work subsequently called for regarding (iv) and (v) above, it is taking longer than was envisaged to prepare documentation for presentation to the General Synod and the Methodist Conference. The current aim is for the faith and order bodies of the two churches to approve a document summarising the fresh work that has been done on these five areas in time for this to be considered by the Church of England's House of Bishops in May 2019, in preparation for a potential further debate in the General Synod in July 2019.

5. This would be followed by a parallel debate at the Methodist Conference in 2020. The Methodist Conference usually meets just before the July sessions of the General Synod, and it has been an important principle that so far as possible key votes in the Church of England should precede at each stage those in the Methodist Church, given the circumstances in which previous moves towards greater unity between our churches in the 1960s and early 1970s failed to proceed.
6. As explained in GS Misc 1197, initial work on the five areas set out above has been undertaken by a joint subgroup set up by the two churches' faith and order bodies. The co-chairs are the Bishop of Lichfield and the Revd Ruth Gee, a former President of the Methodist Conference and currently the Methodist Church's Connexional Ecumenical Officer.
7. The other members from the Church of England are the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, the Bishop of Stockport, the Revd Dr James Hawkey and Ms Lucy Moore. The Church of England membership was chosen with the breadth of opinion within the General Synod on the proposals in mind. All are members of the Synod apart from Dr Hawkey, who is an expert in Anglican ecumenism. The other members from the Methodist Church are the Revd Dr David Chapman, the Revd Dr Jane Leach and Professor Judith Lieu. All are members of the Faith and Order Committee (Professor Lieu is the chair), and Dr Chapman and Dr Leach were part of the drafting group for *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*.
8. The joint subgroup has now met on four occasions. Regarding areas (i), (ii) and (iii), the task was described in the papers for the General Synod and the Methodist Conference from the respective faith and order bodies as 'refining and clarifying' the proposals. It has been primarily a matter of providing more detail on questions that are dealt with at various points in *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*. What is said there about (i) and (iii) is relatively brief, while (ii) is the subject of an entire chapter.
9. A specific challenge in responding to (i), the journey towards unity, is the lack of consensus within the churches as to what the goal of ecumenical relations should actually be. There would be resistance in both our churches to the idea of creating a single new united church or of one of them being absorbed into the other. *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* focuses on what it means for two distinct churches to deepen their communion with one another as they share together in God's mission in this nation. The group has been considering how this could open up new practices of consultation and shared oversight, leading to a 'reconciliation of structures' that unites us more fully for common mission. The goal of unity to which we have covenanted ourselves need not mean the erasure of all distinctly Anglican or distinctly Methodist structures, but it does require that such structures are not separate, so that they can express and enable our interdependence.
10. Throughout the Covenant process, the Church of England and the Methodist Church, which serves Wales and Scotland as well as England, have been conscious that the Methodist Church has two other Anglican partners: the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church. It is clearly desirable that the Methodist Church in moving towards deeper unity with the Church of England should find appropriate ways to grow in relationship with them. There would also be something anomalous from the point of view of the Anglican churches in the Methodist Church being in communion with one of them but not the other two. Two informal meetings have now been held with representatives of all four churches, with much encouragement for continuing this important conversation.

11. Regarding area (ii), the proposed role of the President-bishop, there had been requests from members of both churches for more thinking to be done on how the model of the President-bishop would work in practice. The concerns, however, were not necessarily the same. Some Anglicans were seeking reassurance as to how well a President-bishop would fit with the historic episcopate; clearly, this would be a form of episcopal ministry quite different in some ways from that of a diocesan bishop in the Church of England, but *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* argued it would be a legitimate expression of the process of local adaptation referred to in the Lambeth Quadrilateral. On the other hand, some Methodists were concerned as to how episcopal ordination might alter the relationship between the President and other roles, including that of the Vice-President.
12. With area (iii), interchangeability in practice, the initial challenge has been to set out more precisely the new opportunities that would be available were the proposals to be adopted, and what issues might arise as people sought to take them. The Further Reflection Group has considered a number of different scenarios, including a minister from one church retaining their post but offering to assist in the other, the creation of a new joint post and a minister from one church seeking to serve full-time in the other.
13. Area (iv) names a key reason for reservation about the proposals of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* for many Anglicans. Is the agreed norm for Anglican ecclesiology, that only priests ordained by a bishop within the historic episcopate may preside at the eucharist, in fact a rule that permits of no exceptions? Chapter 3 of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* argued that an exception could be made on a temporary basis in the case of current Methodist presbyters in light of various factors, including that the Methodist Church would be permanently adopting the Anglican ecclesiological norm of episcopal ordination for all presbyters and entering into a new relationship of communion with the Church of England on the way to full visible unity. The language of 'bearing an anomaly together' was used in the report, although it has since been suggested that it would be more helpful to think in terms of a 'moment' or 'season' of grace. It became clear in the initial reception of the report, however, that not all were persuaded by these arguments.
14. The joint subgroup has thought carefully about how far it might be possible to meet these concerns without undermining the fundamental parameters for the approach set out in *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*. Anything formally constituting a further ordination for current Methodist presbyters would have that effect and would in any case not be acceptable to the Methodist Church; similarly, anything creating two 'classes' of Methodist presbyters so far as the Church of England is concerned, one eligible to serve in the Church of England and one not. There is, however, scope to reflect on how both churches could acknowledge that they have been diminished by the separation between them and pray for the fullness of God's grace to be received as they enter a new relationship as churches in communion. Such acknowledgement and prayer could form a part of the service described in paragraph 93 of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* as inaugurating that new relationship. It is noted there that 'Recognition of the changed relationship of presbyters / priests from one church towards the other church should be included within the liturgy,' and the group has considered what prayer for the fullness of God's grace might look like in that specific context. It might also be appropriate for there to be a formal commissioning of ordained ministers from each church who are willing to serve in the other, as part of the fresh commissioning of the whole people of God in both churches for mission together in England.

15. Area (v) presents a different set of challenges. *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* made a deliberate decision to put to one side the question of the diaconate, on a number of grounds. There are some significant differences in understanding and practice regarding diaconal ministry that do not exist in the same way with the presbyterate, while the Methodist Church is engaged in a major internal review of the diaconate which is not due to report to the Conference until 2019. At the same time, the extent of overlap between the ordination rites for the diaconate in the two churches is considerable, indicating an underlying commonality of approach. For two churches to be in communion is for them to be committed to enabling the interchangeability of all ordained ministries, and *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* was clear that the churches would need to return to the issue of the diaconate in due course.
16. The joint subgroup has made good progress in establishing what can usefully be achieved in terms of further work at this stage on the five areas identified by the General Synod and the Methodist Conference. The Faith and Order Commission and the Methodist Church's Faith and Order Committee will hold a joint meeting in March 2019, at which they will be considering documentation addressing these areas and how it can be finalised for release and discussion in the two churches.

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