

## **22. Membership of the Methodist Church: M13 (2004) and Eligibility to Hold Church Office: M45 (2005)**

### **SUMMARY**

This report deals with Memorials 13 (2004) and 45 (2005) concerning the difficulties faced by some local churches in recruiting sufficient people to hold office due to the requirement for such persons to be members of the Methodist Church. The report suggests that this is a problem that not only affects smaller churches, but many larger ones too, and that there are already a number of ways of dealing with the issue. However, the principle that certain office-holders should be members of the Church is upheld.

### **1. Background**

a) The 2004 Conference considered the following Memorial:

#### **Memorial 13 - Membership of the Methodist Church**

The Halifax (27/1) Circuit Meeting (Present: 62. Vote: 48 for, 14 against) requests that the Methodist Conference reviews the requirement for those holding office to be members of the Methodist Church. Fewer people are coming into membership but many non-members are committed to the Church in every other way, and this is particularly pertinent to small churches.

#### **Reply of the 2004 Conference**

The Conference thanks the Halifax Circuit for this Memorial and refers it to the Methodist Council for consideration and report to the Conference no later than 2006.

b) The 2005 Conference considered the following Memorial:

#### **Memorial 45 - Eligibility to Hold Church Office**

The Bournemouth (26/15) Circuit Meeting (Present: 48. Vote: 24 for, 19 against) asks the Conference to consider amending Standing Orders to allow adherents to hold leadership roles within the Church including Church Stewards, Pastoral Visitors and the Pastoral Secretary. Declining membership numbers mean that such offices are becoming increasingly difficult to fill. By contrast, numbers of adherents tend to be increasing and offer a pool of possible recruits that are currently ineligible to serve.

#### **Reply of the 2005 Conference**

The Conference notes that a similar concern was raised in Memorial 13 at the Conference of 2004 and that a reply to that Memorial is to be brought to the Conference in 2006. The Memorial is therefore referred to the Methodist Council for report to the Conference of 2006.

## ***22. Membership of the Methodist Church and Eligibility to Hold Church Office***

### **2. Report to the 2006 Conference**

The Memorials Committee (2004), in considering the reply to recommend to the Conference to Memorial 13 (2004), had received a longer draft reply (Appendix A). However, the Committee felt that there were other issues to be considered beyond those mentioned in the draft reply, and that some of these issues were matters of policy that required deeper consultation and reflection. The concerns expressed in the Memorials Committee were:

- the draft reply did not adequately address the issues highlighted in the background notes accompanying the Memorial (Appendix B)
- the difficulties faced by churches in finding people to hold office needed to be listened to more seriously
- these problems are not confined to small churches
- there needs to be a fuller exposition of the Methodist Church's theological understanding about membership and the discipline/accountability of those who exercise responsibilities on behalf of the Church
- we need to reflect more widely upon our governance structures, given the increasing requirements placed upon trustees

3. Each local church is required to make certain appointments (S.O. 641 Obligatory Appointments), namely class leaders and pastoral visitors, a church treasurer and a Pastoral Committee, and also (S.O. 632) church stewards. All these people, and also all those appointed to serve on the Church Council, are required to be members of the Methodist Church. Apart from the church treasurer, eligible ministers, deacons and lay workers, and the circuit steward appointed to serve on the Church Council, all these persons are required to be members of that local church.
4. It is open to any local Church Council to resolve at any time by mutual agreement to amalgamate with another, or for its responsibilities to be undertaken by the Circuit Meeting. This is quite distinct from the provisions for cessation in cases where the membership of a local church becomes too small (S.O. 605) or cannot appoint sufficient members to constitute the Church Council (S.O. 612). Such amalgamations are useful in some situations, because in effect two or more congregations/places of worship are then regarded for governance purposes as one local church. However, this does have the possible drawback that the members of each constituent part feel that they lose a say in matters that are truly local.
5. The Halifax Circuit, in the background notes accompanying the Memorial, hints that there is inadequate recognition of many loyal and hardworking people who, although not members, support the life of a local church in various ways, because they are denied voting rights and the opportunity to take up certain offices. Such people are in practice clearly very influential by virtue of the work that they do. It is right to expect those who do hold office to show their gratitude and appreciation for such contributions. In many of the affairs of a local church, which do not carry the weight of managing trusteeship, pastoral, disciplinary or doctrinal responsibilities, people who are not actually members can be involved in discernment and decision-making.

## ***22. Membership of the Methodist Church and Eligibility to Hold Church Office***

Church Councils can often be enriched by the presence of non-voting observers who may share in the meeting's deliberations.

6. However, it is reasonable to ask why, if people are so very keen to be having a voting place within the Church's courts, they are not prepared to take on the status of membership? It is taken for granted in almost any voluntary organisation that a share in governance implies acceptance of the purposes and ethos of the organisation that is recognised by the seeking and receiving of the status of membership. This is especially relevant in the case of a faith organisation whose very reason for existence is the preservation and passing on of a body of beliefs.
7. In the Christian Church, to take on membership is not only an established and recognised means by which one's allegiance to the Church's doctrines is acknowledged by the Church and the individual, it is a sign and symbol of our calling to participate in the one Body of Christ, which is the community of all the faithful in every place and time. Such considerations are especially significant for Methodists, with our strong tradition of 'connexion', whereby membership is that of the whole Church, local and beyond, and our conviction that only through that kind of connectedness can we properly learn and grow as Christians; that part of being a disciple is a commitment to working out our discipleship in community.
8. This report therefore recommends, for the reasons argued above, that the requirement of membership of the Methodist Church for those holding certain offices should be upheld.

### **\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

- 22/1. The Conference adopts the Report as its further reply to Memorial 13 (2004) and Memorial 45 (2005).
- 22/2. The Conference encourages local churches and Circuits to consider creative ways of using the existing provision for amalgamation or cessation to support the life and mission of the Church.

#### **APPENDIX A – Draft Reply considered by the Memorials Committee, May 2004**

The Conference appreciates the difficulty experienced in many local churches, especially where the membership is small, in finding the right people to hold responsible offices. However, it takes the view that to alter the concept of membership, or to adjust the requirement for those who take office to be members, would not be helpful in addressing the difficulty that the Halifax Circuit has raised.

The Conference debated at length a proposal brought in 1999 to alter the concept of membership, and decided not to make the change.

Although it is true that people's secular patterns of 'joining' have altered in the recent decades, this is not sufficient reason to conclude that the act of publicly

## ***22. Membership of the Methodist Church and Eligibility to Hold Church Office***

professing an adult faith, taking on for oneself the Baptismal promises, receiving the laying on of hands in the promise of God's Holy Spirit, and being received into membership of the local church are somehow no longer really important for those who are 'committed to the Church in every other way'.

It is appropriate that people should be free to express the level of faith commitment and involvement in church life that they are truly ready for. It is possible to assist in many ways, as the background to the Memorial suggests, without being a member. Every encouragement is given for all who are involved in Church life to attend the Church Council (S.O.610). However, it is intrinsically unreasonable to wish (if indeed those who do not take up the offer of membership do so wish) to be a voting member of the Church Council or to exercise leadership or pastoral oversight among church members while not being willing to become a member oneself.

If the reluctance to become a member is because a person is already a member of another Christian communion, the Conference has already provided (2000) that such a person may become a Methodist member without relinquishing their membership of the other communion (Deed of Union 8; S.O. 051 and 052). Guidance from the Faith and Order Committee regarding a form of words for reception into membership of such a person was adopted at the Conference of 2003.

In the recent past there has been an unfortunate perception that to become a member will actually disadvantage the local church, because of the historic link with the assessment. The Conference resolved in 1999 that the link between membership numbers and the assessment imposed should be broken; this should no longer be the normal, or the sole way of making the assessment.

It may be that reluctance to become a member arises from a perception that such a step is merely a formality, or that indeed it is a step which will lead to pressure to take on unwanted roles. The Conference urges churches and Circuits to examine what messages are being conveyed about the meaning of Church membership, and to engage in positive teaching and encouragement about its role in Christian discipleship.

Research undertaken in 2001 among ministers who are bringing unusually high numbers of people into membership demonstrates that people are willing to become members where the minister gives pastoral care and Christian discipleship a high priority, where they make an individual visit to ask someone to consider the step of membership, where the teaching given about membership sets a high value on it, and where it is explicitly not a simple ploy to fill vacant posts.

The Connexional Team has produced a highly popular booklet, *Called by Name*, to address the needs of those who are considering membership, and this is recommended, along with the service of Confirmation and Reception into Membership in the Methodist Worship Book. This gives the opportunity for testimony from those being confirmed and received, and so gives encouragement in the Christian faith to all who are present.

The Conference takes the view that the dilemma raised by the Halifax Circuit may be an issue about the overall viability of churches with a very small membership, and urges Circuits in a similar position to review their mission and plans for the future, with a view to building on strengths in a realistic way. (Connexional

## ***22. Membership of the Methodist Church and Eligibility to Hold Church Office***

resources such as *Pilgrims Way, Know and Grow*, or the help of the Training and Development Officer may be drawn on.) One possibility is that some small and continuing worshipping communities could be treated as a class of a larger church which is where the Church Council is located. Another is that certain offices, such as that of treasurer, may be held by someone who is a member in another church (S.O. 635).

The Conference declines the Memorial.

### **APPENDIX B - Background Notes supplied by the Halifax Circuit**

There are many small churches in Methodism which are required to have a Church Council and Pastoral Committee. The Standing Orders indicate that anyone taking office in the Methodist Church must be a member but that is becoming more and more difficult as people are disinclined to become members. One example is that of Mount Zion Methodist Church in the Halifax Circuit which has a membership of twelve but has an attendance at worship of between eight and fifteen people. It is not possible to fill all the offices within the church but a number of people work very hard on property maintenance, looking after the graveyard and ensuring that a risk assessment is completed. These people may attend the Church Council but have no voting rights nor can they hold office. Other small churches may be in the same position. We feel it would be helpful for this matter to be considered by the appropriate connexional body.