

# The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain

## SUMMARY

This report seeks to help the Methodist Church to remain true to its calling and to harness the skills and gifts of its people in fulfilling its mission under God. In doing so it uses insights drawn from biblical and theological sources, and others from discussions about human relationships and institutions. Because the Church is the Body of Christ and, in this world, is embodied in people, it is always an agent of God whilst also a human organisation. Therefore, in order to discern better how to fulfil its calling, the Methodist Church needs to learn from the Bible and theology, from its own history and also from contemporary forms of good institutional practice. In doing this, its members and authorised representatives accept the immense responsibility of participating in the task of ordering its life in a way which does justice to the divine Spirit at work within it, whilst acknowledging that they themselves are fallible and limited. They must then seek to apply all the different sorts of lessons in ways which maintain Methodism's spiritual and theological integrity both as part of the Church Catholic and as a specific Church with a particular history.

The function of ensuring that the Church remains true to its calling is known as **oversight**. This is a translation of the Greek word *episkopé* which, with its related verbs, is used in the Bible to describe God visiting people and “keeping an eye” on what is happening. So far as the Church is concerned, it is the process of reflecting on experience in order to discern the presence and activity of God in the world. It is undertaken by a corporate body and by groups or individuals on behalf of that body. It involves aspects of watching over, watching out for, monitoring, discerning, disciplining, directing, guiding, encouraging and caring. These in turn can be grouped under headings which can appropriately be described as **governance** (exercising formal authority in formulating the policies and ordering the practices of the Church), **management** (implementing strategies to enact the policies, deploying people and other resources to that end, and monitoring the results) and **leadership** (inspiring, discerning and articulating vision, and providing models of giving guidance and exercising power with authority, justice and love). In the context of the Church this means that *oversight* involves theologically informed *governance*, theologically informed *management* and theologically informed *leadership*, but oversight is a rich context and these expressions of it by no means exhaust its significance. [Full report Section 1]

The report explores how “connexionalism” is fundamental to the Methodist way of being Church. This in turn makes it fundamental to Methodist understanding that oversight (*episkopé*) is essentially shared between different groups and individuals and different formal bodies and types of “officer” across the whole Church. Consequently any exercise of personal (lay or ordained) or corporate expressions of oversight cannot be self-sufficient or independent of each other but must be intrinsically linked with the other expressions. Since Wesley's death, oversight in Methodism has been corporate in the first instance and then

secondarily focused in particular individuals and groups (lay and ordained). Therefore at the heart of oversight in the Connexion is the Conference which in turn authorises people and groups to embody and share in its oversight in the rest of the Connexion. There are two main strands of this oversight. One is that of formal bodies (e.g. Church Pastoral Committee; Church Council; Circuit Leadership Team; Circuit Meeting; District Policy Committee; District Synod; the Methodist Council) and particular office holders (e.g. class leaders; pastoral visitors; church and circuit stewards; Local Preachers; district officers; members of the Connexional Team; Vice-President of Conference). The other is that of ministers (presbyters) stationed by the Conference to exercise pastoral responsibility and, when appointed to circuits, pastoral charge. [Section 2]

Oversight is not complete if the two strands of it do not collaborate and interact. The report seeks to identify and encourage good practice in doing this in circuits, districts and the wider Connexion. In each context of the Church's life interdependent structures are emerging in which formal bodies and deacons and lay officers (e.g. Circuit Stewards, the Vice-President of the Conference) all have vital roles to play. Equally vital is the role of the Superintendents, Chairs, the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of the Conference and the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, and the President of the Conference. All of the latter are presbyters, carrying appropriate presbyteral authority in the various contexts of shared oversight in which they operate. At some points they will therefore be primarily exercising their ministry in the form of *leadership*; at other times in the form of *management*; and at yet others in the form of *governance*. It is important that they are able to recognise and signal clearly which of these they are doing when, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness. Similarly, the formal bodies will each have a primary emphasis on leadership, management or governance respectively. It is important that care is taken to identify the intentions of each type of gathering and to ensure that their boundaries are not transgressed, whilst at the same promoting their interdependence. [Section 3]

The report then highlights leading theological considerations that have informed the thinking about these matters and will help shape the practice to flow from it. Each theological insight is articulated both in terms of what is being said about God within the Christian theological tradition, and with respect to practical ways in which each insight informs the immediate task in hand. Thinking of God as Creator, Redeemer and Perfecter leads to insights about the sharing of power and the sharing of responsibility for redeeming. All power derives from God. Therefore all personal power ('charisma') and all institutional power (taking the form of authority) must be understood as derived power. The theme of Redemption through Christ leads to insights about Christ as servant and about servant leadership in the church and world. Recognising that the Spirit is creative, dynamic and embodied leads to insights about spiritual and sacramental power, and about the way in which individuals and groups are channels of grace as they participate in God's oversight. Understanding the Church as Christ's Body leads to the recognition of how divine power is at work in its structures. The recognition that all humanity is in the image of God leads to the acknowledgement that oversight should always seek to promote human flourishing. Conversely, understanding that human beings are fallible and subject to sin leads to the recognition of how the exercise of power can be corrupted in a fallen world. The understanding of God as Trinity leads to a relational approach to the use of power.

Belief in the trinitarian God provides no direct blueprint for the structuring of any human organisation, but does challenge the Church and all organisations to declare how their structures enable all people to flourish in the context of empowering relationships, whatever roles and positions those people hold and occupy. Shared oversight is the concrete, structural expression in ordered human life (and thus of organisational life, including the life of the Church) of such belief. [Section 4]

Section 5 of the report examines what lessons can be learnt from outside the Church about oversight and some of its component aspects such as leadership, management and governance. The church as institution is compared with three models of organisation, namely a *business model*, a *public service model*, and a *charity model*. In each case points of similarity and dissimilarity are noted. Three critical reflections then suggest themselves.

First, attention can be given to the way in which Methodism's emphasis on the priority of the group over the individual in decision-making sometimes produces a debilitating dependence upon committee structures. This can be avoided where the shared nature of oversight is properly understood, and the accountability structures which already exist are fully respected. Appropriate respect for accountable personal episkopé can lead to a liberating and creative openness to the appropriate freedoms of, and expectations from, the Church's representative and authorised individuals. Second, the same understanding could ensure that 'hierarchy' is not seen as a way of apportioning status or rank but accepted as a form of differentiated decision-making and clarification of accountability that is inevitable in a large organisation. It would then ensure that hierarchy works for the benefit of all within the Church, and all who can be reached beyond it in the name of the Church. Third, the shared nature of oversight means that there can be a proper coming together of professionalism and the vocational in a body that is a faith community rather than an organisation of paid professionals.

Lessons are then drawn from various understandings of strategic management for the ways in which the Methodist Church does its planning. Within a primary oscillation of power between, say, a Circuit and the Conference (even if the final authority resides with the Conference) it is not always clear where initiatives are first taken. An emphasis on *design* should lead to those who occupy appropriate positions within the Church's structures being expected to take an appropriate lead. An emphasis on organisational *culture* should lead to the ideals and values of 'fellowship', 'learning' and 'developing discipleship' coming to the fore in practice. An emphasis on environmental *context* should lead to a heightened consciousness of the full extent to which Christian discipleship and the mission of the Church entails a mix of detachment and accommodation (being 'in the world but not of it'). Some conclusions are then drawn about the need to develop proper ways in which the two main strands which exercise the Conference's oversight throughout the Connexion (formal bodies and office-holders on the one hand; presbyters on the other) can effectively render accountability to the Conference for so doing, and can be supervised and supported in their exercise of leadership.

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

**5/1.** The Conference receives the Summary Report and the Introduction to the Main Report.

**5/2.** The Conference receives the Report and commends it for study in the development of good practice in the Church.

*[An assurance was given that a further report would be brought to the Conference of 2007 upon the responses received.]*

**5/3.** The Conference encourages all Circuits and Districts to attend to the content of the Report in their regular, ongoing review of their own work and ways of working.

**5/4.** The Conference commends the Report for use in training contexts throughout the Church, especially in contexts where people take on new roles and offices. **[WITHDRAWN]**

# THE NATURE OF OVERSIGHT LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH IN GREAT BRITAIN

## INTRODUCTION

This report is the foundational document for several other pieces of work in the Conference Agenda which arise from clear, identified needs in the Methodist Church's life.

**'What is a Circuit Superintendent?'** resulted from the need, for stationing and training purposes, to offer greater clarification than has occurred in the past concerning the core role, required competencies and accountability structure of the Circuit Superintendent.

**'What Sort of Bishops?'** is the report required of the Faith and Order Committee by the Conference of 2002 with a view to clarifying 'the concrete models of episcopacy which may be deemed possible in the light of Methodist experience, understanding and practice of episkopé'.

In addressing the two above tasks, it became clear that there was much overlap in the two conversations. It also became clear that a precise answer to the question **'What is a District Chair?'** was needed, lest that role be left out of the equation, or it merely be assumed that Bishops and Chairs would prove rough equivalents. Clarification of the current role of the District Chair was seen to be needed regardless of any conclusion that might be drawn about what form of the historic episcopate it might be appropriate for British Methodism to receive into its system, or whether it should do so. This work has begun, and the results of it will be brought to the Conference of 2006.

In the course of working on these three tasks it further emerged that each depended upon further work being undertaken on the Methodist understanding of 'shared oversight (episkopé)'.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the relationship of that further work to long-standing, parallel discussions about leadership, management and governance in the Methodist Church indicated that a document underpinning all these discussions was needed. Such a document would substantiate whatever conclusions could then be drawn about Superintendents, Chairs and Bishops. This work would also be relevant for the continuing discussions of the groups dealing with the **Review of Conference** and the **Review of the Methodist Council**.

**'The Nature of Oversight'** is that resulting document. It provides the underpinning for two documents about roles which already exist [**What is a Circuit Superintendent?**, to be found in the 2005 Conference Agenda, and **What is a District Chair?**, to be presented to the 2006 Conference], and for one about an order of ministry which the Methodist Church in Britain does not currently have, although it has been debating for many years whether to welcome it into its system [**What Sort of Bishops?**, to be found in the 2005 Conference Agenda]. All four of these reports are co-sponsored by the Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council. The overall aim is to outline our present legal and constitutional position and provide a description of 'best practice' in these matters

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. building on but moving beyond the explanations offered in *Episkopé and Episcopacy* (2000).

that is consonant with our history and traditional values, whilst at the same time being appropriate for a Church whose calling is “to serve the present age”.

## 1. OVERSIGHT AND THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

### The calling of the Church

- 1.1 The calling of the Methodist Church, like that of other Christian Churches, is to respond to the Gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.<sup>2</sup> The key element in this is the primacy of God. In the beginning, middle and end of all things God is active in creative and recreative (i.e. redemptive) love. God calls things into being by giving them life, and gives them value and worth by calling them “good” (without denying the fact that human beings are later marred by sin). The Church looks to be modelled on Jesus Christ in the glory of God the Father and the power of the Spirit. It seeks to recognise and respond to the primacy of God and to God’s love that is active in the world. It does this by looking to acknowledge the ultimate importance of God in worship, receiving love from God and mediating it to each other; and by participating in God’s self-sacrificing and transforming love to the world in mission. As such (i.e. at its best) the Church is primarily concerned with God and the world, and not with its own importance. It is called into being as a means to God’s ends and not as an end in itself. It exists only for the sake of the Kingdom where God’s love directs all things.
- 1.2. If, therefore, the Church is responding to its calling, its outlook is **global** and **ecumenical**. Fixing its eye on worship and mission, it holds **discipleship** in balance with **apostleship**, and **holiness** in balance with **witness**. Its common life has a rhythm of coming and going in which it is gathered around the Word and the Sacraments, and scattered in evangelism, social caring, the struggle for justice and concern for the integrity of creation. Through a sharing of resources, both material and spiritual, it becomes a community where worth and love are received from God, offered to God and mediated to others.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.3. In seeking to enact this, the *Our Calling* programme states that the Church exists to:
  - increase awareness of God’s presence and celebrate God’s love
  - help people to learn and grow as Christians, through mutual support and care
  - become a good neighbour to people in need and challenge injustice
  - make more followers of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> This *Statement of Purpose* was adopted by the 1996 Conference. Since then the 1999 Conference has adopted a major statement *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice*; the 2000 Conference has adopted the fruits of a programme of reflection and dialogue entitled *Our Calling*; continuing dialogue led to discussion at the 2003 Conference of a report *Where are we Heading?*; and after a further process of consultation the 2004 Conference adopted *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

<sup>3</sup> These phrases are adapted from the opening theological statement in the *Restructuring Report* of the 1993 Conference (Agenda pp. 802-4).

In order the better to fulfil the *Our Calling* programme, the Methodist Church has committed itself to concentrating its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on a set of *Priorities for the Methodist Church*. The main priorities are to:

- affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and
- renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world.

As ways towards realising these priorities, particular attention will be given to:

- underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer
- supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor in Britain and worldwide
- developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved
- encouraging fresh ways of being Church
- nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible.

1.4 At the centre of the Church's activity, therefore, are the twin aspects of **worship** and **mission**. Above all else the Church is called to worship God and to share in God's mission in the world. It is called to be **one**, seeking unity with God and within its own life, reflecting the rich diversity of being and grace within the oneness of God and realising it in the world. It is called to be **holy**, turned towards God in worship and discipleship, belonging to God in its inner dynamic and showing the marks of Christ in the outward expressions of its life. It is called to be **catholic**, seeking the redemption of the whole world and therefore sharing an authentic, common life in behaviour and belief with all God's people throughout history in this world and the next.<sup>4</sup> It is called to be **apostolic**, turned towards the world in mission and witness, and thereby sustaining continuity with Jesus, his apostles and their successors through faithfulness to Christ, his Gospel and his call to be agents of God's love in the world in the fellowship of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

### **Remaining true to the calling**

1.5 How in all this is the Methodist Church to remain true to its calling, in both what it is and what it does? The Church often fails. It is made up of human beings and is therefore subject to all the pressures and social forces which affect human institutions and which are in turn marred by sin. It needs to face this reality as well as remain open to its vision. It loses its grip on either at its peril. Vision without realism is at best ineffective, and at worst escapist. Realism without vision lacks hope. Yet vision meshed with a realistic awareness of the personal and social forces that affect people and of the power of sin can banish guilt and engender hope.

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<sup>4</sup> This latter point perhaps requires that Methodists restate their traditional emphasis on the communion of saints: it is frequently remarked that the Wesley hymns begin on earth and end in heaven.

<sup>5</sup> *Called to Love and Praise* Section 2.4

- 1.6 So how is the Methodist Church to remain true to the Bible and to the Christian tradition of faith and discipleship, as well as to new insights that the Spirit reveals?
- How is it to remain true to its Methodist identity as it inherits it from the past, as it experiences it in the present and as it is called to re-express it in the future?
  - How is it to maintain its unity and order, and yet empower and encourage a diversity of people to be creative?
  - How is it to discern the Spirit's leading in the contemporary world and develop and maintain structures appropriate to the task of sharing in God's mission?
  - How is it to ensure that it both receives and offers love and worth in worship and mission?
- 1.7 The function of ensuring that the church remains true to its calling is known as **oversight**. This is a concept which Christians have used and developed throughout Christian history. It is a translation of the Greek word *episkopé* which, with its related verbs, is used in the Bible to describe God visiting people and “keeping an eye” on what is happening because God is concerned and alert to fulfil God's purposes. This produces demonstrations of God's power which can lead to people sensing that, although God is always present, God has in some special way visited them. They might experience this visitation as judgement or salvation, but both are part of God's constant creating and recreating to bring all things to perfection.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament repeats these ideas, but in addition sees Jesus as embodying God's oversight and visitation.<sup>7</sup> Paul and the writer of the Gospel of John in particular link this theme with the coming(s) of Jesus. Moreover, as the body of Christ, the church further embodies the coming of God in Jesus to oversee the world and help effect its judgement and salvation.<sup>8</sup> Paul sees himself as having a particular role in this on behalf of the church<sup>9</sup>, but also as having a role in which he comes to visit and oversee particular Christian communities as if he were a representative and harbinger of the coming of Christ to them.<sup>10</sup> Yet even in this Paul sees himself as acting on behalf of the whole church and in collegiality with

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<sup>6</sup> Some sample texts are Genesis 50:24f; Exodus 3:6; Psalm 8:5; Job 10:12; Isaiah 10:3, Jeremiah 10:15 (“day of reckoning”).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Luke 1:68,78; Luke 19:44; Acts 15:14; Hebrews 2:6; 1 Peter 2:12.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Romans 11:13; 1 Cor. 9:12-23; see also Acts 13:47. The sense of a detailed specific role of an ‘overseer’ who is in charge of the godly ordering of people or things is also found in the Hebrew scriptures, e.g. Numbers 4:16.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in 1 Cor. 4 and 5, Paul asks the Corinthians to be like Timothy and follow his example as he himself follows the example of Christ (4:16f.). In particular, he wants them to exercise discernment in dealing with a particular case and act to effect judgement and salvation on behalf of Christ (5:1-5). They should know what Christ requires because although Paul is not with them in person, he is present in spirit when they assemble in the name of Christ, and has also sent Timothy as his representative to remind them. Paul promises to return to the Corinthians very soon, and makes it clear that they will experience this as condemnation or affirmation depending on how they have dealt with matters (4:18-21). The language is full of echoes of the second coming of Christ to judge and save. It is as if Paul sees himself as anticipating the coming of Christ to visit and oversee the church.



it.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he was not the only person to exercise this oversight. Others were appointed to do the same, with an emphasis more on their being the “pastoral” leaders and organisers of Christian communities.<sup>12</sup>

1.8 **Oversight** is therefore a rich concept. It includes elements of watching over, discerning, guiding, caring for and disciplining. These in turn can be grouped under headings which can appropriately be described as **governance, management and leadership**, but these expressions of oversight by no means exhaust it. Some of its elements are best described in terms drawn from biblical and theological sources, others from discussions about human relationships and institutions. Because the Church is the Body of Christ and embodied in people, it can be viewed both from a divine perspective and from a human one. The former perspective has to be expressed in its own appropriate language, whilst the latter can be described in more general “human” terms. If the latter has an inherent tendency to overlook the presence and activity of God, the former has a tendency to describe a perfect ideal without reference to the effects of human fallibility. It is therefore important that both sets of terms are brought together so that they may inform and moderate each other. In order to discern more obedient ways of fulfilling its calling, and find better ways of harnessing the skills and gifts of its people to achieve its mission, Methodism needs to learn from its own tradition and at the same time learn from contemporary forms of good institutional practice. It must then apply both sets of lessons in ways which maintain its spiritual and theological integrity both as part of the Church Catholic and as a specific Church with a particular history.

### **Oversight, Governance, Management and Leadership – some definitions of key terms**

1.9 As the above has begun to demonstrate, in exploring the nature of the British Methodist Church and the ways in which oversight has been and might be exercised in it the following terms have proved helpful. A preliminary indication of how they are being used is therefore offered below. These understandings will then be filled out in the subsequent discussion.

1.10 *Oversight*, in the sense in which the Church generally and the Methodist tradition in particular have developed it, is the process of reflecting on experience in order to discern the presence and activity of God in the world. It is undertaken by a corporate body and by groups or individuals on behalf of that body. It includes elements of:

- caring for an individual, a group of people or an organisation as a whole body
- reviewing the life and work of the individual, group or organisation and seeing how the parts of it fit into the whole

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Paul makes it plain that what he preaches and teaches is the common tradition of the whole church [1 Cor. 11:1, 11:23, 15:1ff; Galatians 2].

<sup>12</sup> For example, Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1ff.

- ensuring that both the parts and the whole flourish and fulfil their purposes
- seeking to catch a vision of what God might require of an individual, a group, the Church or the world, and to proclaim that prophetically
- developing plans for how that vision might be enacted
- taking the decisions necessary to begin to implement those plans
- reviewing progress regularly, reflecting on it prayerfully in the light of the word of God, offering it all to God and receiving it back from God transformed in worship.

As paragraphs 1.7 and 1.8 make clear, this process involves aspects of watching over, watching out for, monitoring, discerning, disciplining, directing, guiding, encouraging and caring. This in turn means that oversight involves theologically informed *governance*, theologically informed *management* and theologically informed *leadership*.

1.11 *Governance* is the system by which an organisation directs and controls its functions and relates to its constituent communities<sup>13</sup>, external bodies and the wider world. In the context of the Church it involves the exercise of formal authority in

- formulating and adopting the principal purposes and policies of the Church under the guidance of the Spirit
- monitoring and assessing the fulfilment of those purposes
- setting parameters for the implementation of those policies
- making rules and regulations for the organisation
- ensuring that the organisation complies with both its internal regulations (e.g. Standing Orders, doctrinal standards) and external legislation (e.g. accounting rules, Charity law, data protection).<sup>14</sup>

1.12 *Management* is the process by which

- specific strategies are formulated for enacting the organisation's policies and fulfilling its purposes
- particular objectives are set concerning the implementation of those strategies
- human, financial, capital (e.g. investments and buildings) and technological resources are deployed to achieve those objectives
- the performance of individuals and groups in meeting the objectives is monitored and assessed.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the Church such management is always exercised under the guidance of the Spirit and in an attitude of stewardship.

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<sup>13</sup> This part of the sentence is drawn from a definition promoted by British Government sources and found in many documents produced by Local Authorities.

<sup>14</sup> This restates and develops the material in section 3 of the report to the 2002 Conference *Leadership in the Methodist Church* [2002 Agenda pp.173-5].

<sup>15</sup> As note 14 above

1.13 *Leadership* is the set of interactions through which

- people are inspired to be imaginative and to participate in the development of new vision, and are empowered to share their ideas and act upon them
- the content of that developing vision is articulated and considered
- action is initiated and people encouraged to follow
- examples are provided of taking risks, once the realities of a particular situation have been rationally assessed and a commitment has been made to accept responsibility for the results of the action to be undertaken
- guidance is given about what actions are likely to entail unwarranted risk and contravene Christian principles or the law (or both)
- models are provided of exercising power (not least with regard to the management of resources) with authority, justice and love<sup>16</sup>

In the context of the Church, these expressions of leadership are always related to the Word, rooted in the sacraments and undergirded with prayer.

1.14 The following terms are also important:

1.14.1 *Supervision* is the assessing and guiding of people in their general roles or practices, or as they undertake a particular task. It helps them to flourish and develop and helps the organisation to achieve its objectives more successfully. It involves both helping people to reflect on their work in order to identify the bodies of knowledge and principles of good practice that relate to it, and also supporting them in their experience.

- In *managerial supervision* this involves senior members of an organisation directing their juniors in fulfilling their tasks, appraising them and then rewarding them, applying sanctions or redeploying them. (Where necessary this can lead to formal processes of complaint and discipline.)
- In *non-managerial supervision* it involves people encouraging, challenging and supporting their peers (and their juniors and seniors) in their work.

In the context of the Church, there are forms of both managerial and non-managerial supervision (but not under those names) which relate to the ways in which people “watch over one another in love” as some fulfil particular offices (lay or ordained) or undertake particular forms of service in or on behalf of the Church.

1.14.2 *Accountability* is the duty of and capacity for explaining actions that have been undertaken. This can involve justifying decisions made, demonstrating results or outcomes that have been produced and generally describing processes and procedures in a way that enables both those who required them and those affected by them to understand them better.

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<sup>16</sup> As note 14 above

In the context of the Church, mutual accountability for discipleship and for particular acts of service in worship and mission are an outworking of the shared nature of oversight as Methodists understand it.

- 1.14.3 *Responsibility* is a social force which binds people together as they are assigned or permitted to undertake some activity or position. They pledge themselves to make a conscious effort to acquire and exercise the relevant knowledge and skills, to achieve or maintain a good result, and to accept the consequences of their actions and the obligations of their privileges.

In the context of the Church, responsibility is a natural outworking of people's recognition that they constantly stand in the sight of God, and that they are able to face and relate to God not by their own efforts but because through Christ and in the power of the Spirit, God makes it possible for them to do so.

- 1.14.4 *Autonomy* is the right and ability of individuals or corporate bodies to think and speak for themselves, to make decisions about the course of their own lives and to act as they decide, free of enforced constraint or external oppressive control.<sup>17</sup>

- 1.14.5 *Mutuality* is a reciprocal relationship between interdependent individuals or groups which involves all parties being disposed to respect both themselves and others. In it people pay loving attention to the needs and gifts of others and seek to use power only in their service and to help them to flourish in the sight of God.

- 1.14.6 *Power* is the capacity to act in ways which have significant effects on others and which ensure that a particular set of interests are maintained or achieved. It can be characterized as 'power-over', 'power-within' and 'power-with'.<sup>18</sup> 'Power-over' is closely allied to 'authority' when one party is able to require that another act in a particular way. 'Power-within' is related to an individual's personal qualities and charisma. A person with a high level of such charisma can exercise 'power-over' others by virtue of inspiring them but may have no formal authority as such. 'Power-with' operates when there are bonds of solidarity between people, whether or not any of the parties involved exercise formal authority.

God's power exists in all three forms. First, God's 'power-within' is the source of all creative energy. Second, God's 'power-over' describes the fact that God is God but other phrases have to be added if anything is to be said about the way in which God chooses to be God and exercise power. Any such phrases have to be handled carefully. For example, the language of 'Kingship' may have biblical resonance, but may not always be helpful unless the biblical material is seen in its context of the kingly messiah being understood as a son of man, and the kingly lion of Judah as a

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<sup>17</sup> But when pushed to an extreme which involves exercising no accountability or responsibility and setting oneself up over and above all others in relationships, excessive autonomy is defined by the Christian tradition as a sin (e.g. Genesis 3; Philippians 2:5ff).

<sup>18</sup> See further Martha E. Stortz, 'Naming and Reclaiming Power' in M.R.A. Kanyoro ed., *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership* Geneva: WCC Publications 1997, pp. 71-81 and para. 4.1.1 below.

sacrificial lamb [Revelation 5]<sup>19</sup>. Third, God's 'power-with' describes how God as a trinitarian being relates to the world.

In organisational settings, 'power-over' is best operated as 'power-with' by individuals who possess 'power-within' and inspire each other! However, a group solely comprising of such charismatic leaders may not be able to operate well due to multiple power clashes between them.

Power can therefore be well used or abused. Where resources are limited or interests clash, attempts to exercise power can result in conflict. If individuals or groups attempt to enforce their own will regardless of resistance and without respect for others, power can have negative connotations. If it is exercised within the constraints that come from an acceptance of mutuality, it can have positive effects.

- 1.14.7 *Authority* is the attribution by a group of people to some individual or individuals of the right to control the actions or decisions of others.
- 1.14.8 *Hierarchy* is an authority structure that is based on rank or the differentiation of role or position. [The term originally meant a structure in which people were differentiated on a religious basis (priests, lay people etc.). Whereas Methodists have traditionally refused to acknowledge a religious hierarchy which exalts some over others, they do occasionally talk of the 'hierarchy' to refer to those who administer the Church connexionally on behalf of the Conference.]
- 1.14.9 *Subsidiarity* is the process by which corporate bodies embody in their structures the principle of empowering people to make decisions in small groups and local communities, where they are closer to the issues, understand them better and have greater access to available resources. In making their decisions the people and groups concerned represent the corporate body. Their decisions and actions must therefore be related to its common mind, which they help form by communicating to it their reflections on their actions.
- 1.15 Each of the terms in 1.10 – 1.13 and 1.14.1 – 1.14.9 represents dynamics which may be the means of grace and through which the Spirit may move. How they overlap or otherwise relate to each other, and the part played in each of them, both by corporate or representative bodies and by individuals,<sup>20</sup> will be explored in what follows.

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<sup>19</sup> See John Sweet *Revelation SCM* 1979 for the way in which, despite the violent imagery in much of Revelation, what is heard is often re-interpreted by means of what is seen. This includes the startling conjunction referred to here.

<sup>20</sup> Particular care will be taken in this regard to revisit and review the material in the *Leadership in the Methodist Church* report to the 2002 Conference, which has a tendency to emphasise the individual and play down the corporate aspects.

## 2. CONNEXIONALISM, CONFERENCE AND TWO STRANDS OF OVERSIGHT IN BRITISH METHODISM

### Connexionalism

- 2.1 Connexionalism is the Methodist way of being Church. Methodists recognise that what is described below is not the only way of being Church, but cherish connexionalism as part of the tradition and gift which they have inherited and which has brought them to the present day. It describes a way of relating in which individual people and individual groups (e.g. interest groups; working groups; fellowship groups; local churches; circuits; districts; denominational institutions, offices and agencies) do not exist by and for themselves but with and for others. This is not just a matter of co-existence but of shared existence. They are not fully independent or autonomous beings which choose to collaborate with each other.<sup>21</sup> Rather, it is of their essence that they are inter-dependent and discover their true identity and develop their full potential only in and through mutual relationships in which they are constantly sharing resources, both spiritually and materially. That is because this “connexional principle..... witnesses to a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God...”<sup>22</sup>. Or, to put it the other way round, “... to speak of God as a loving communion of three co-equal ‘persons’ suggests that the Church should be a community of mutual support and love in which there is no superiority or inferiority”<sup>23</sup>.
- 2.2 The New Testament term for this is “common life” (*koinonia*) which “denotes both communion with the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 1.9; 2 Corinthians 13.13), and fellowship with and ministry to each other (Acts 2.42; Romans 15.26)”<sup>24</sup>. It is also expressed through the images of the Vine and the Branches (John 15.1ff) and the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12-27 and Ephesians 4.12). It is important to note, however, that this “common life” does not just refer to the internal life of the Church, but also characterises, shapes and prompts its mission. Sharing in communion with the triune God, the Church reaches out and forms relationships beyond itself as it participates in God’s creative and re-creative love for the world.
- 2.3 “Connexionalism” therefore characterises an experience of belonging that is shaped both by inter-dependence and also by sharing in holiness and witness, worship and mission. It is not exclusive to Methodism but is a way of being Church which is in direct continuity with the Pre-Reformation conciliar tradition. It was particularly appropriate to a

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<sup>21</sup> This comment and the following sentences are in contrast with the more voluntaristic relationship which appears to be envisaged in the *Discipline of the United Methodist Church* when it uses the language of covenant (but see further 2.3 below).

<sup>22</sup> *Called to Love and Praise* 4.6.1

<sup>23</sup> *Called to Love and Praise* 2.1.9

<sup>24</sup> *Called to Love and Praise* 3.1.6

movement of disciples who were gathered into and sent out from local Societies within that overall movement, but it can still mark an institutional Church. At one level the term “Connexion” was used with reference to those Preachers (later presbyters), Societies and individual members who out of a compelling sense of vocation chose to enter a covenant relationship with the Methodist movement (in the person of Mr Wesley and, later, the Conference which succeeded him) and thereby each other. In particular, those Preachers who successfully completed their time of probation “on trial” were “received into full connexion”. Yet when they entered the covenant relationship that constitutes the “connexion”, they moved into a situation where they willingly surrendered the right to look only to their own interests or pick and choose when to be involved at whim. Instead they accepted a high level of discipline, mutual responsibility and inter-dependence. Moreover, all those who were “in connexion with Mr. Wesley” gradually came to be known as “the Connexion” (particularly after Wesley’s death). The entity described by this term therefore gradually developed into an institution, but the term “Connexion” has always retained a strong sense of pointing to a particular way in which the institution enabled people to relate to each other inter-dependently.

2.4 At another level, therefore, the term “Connexion” has come to be used with reference to the whole Methodist movement in all its manifestations. It is not, however, possible for one part of the Methodist Church to be the “Connexion” more than others are. Individuals, groups, local churches, circuits and districts represent the whole church and sometimes (by subsidiarity) act with the authority of its Conference. They are to this extent “connexional”. As such they cannot look just to their own interests but must also have an eye to the interests of the whole church. Some other bodies, however, are “connexional” in that they are the creatures of the Conference and serve the whole of the Methodist Church [i.e. the whole Connexion] on its behalf. As such their concerns are primarily Connexion-wide, but being “connexional” means that they cannot just look to the interests of the whole church without also having an eye to the interests of particular (“local”) situations.

2.5 These insights have helped shape some recent developments in the life and work of the Church. In terms of their location and working practices, the “Conference Office” and the “Connexional Offices” are now the same thing. Similarly the “Connexional Team” is in a real sense the Conference’s Team in that it is made up of officers and staff whose role is to act on behalf of the Conference in helping the whole Church fulfil its purposes and recognise and enact its calling.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes those officers and staff will take the lead on behalf of and with the support of others. At other times they will support others in circuits, districts and elsewhere who are taking the lead. But in each case both those leading and those supporting will be acting “connexionally”.

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<sup>25</sup> See Standing Orders 300 and 301.

- 2.6 The whole of the Methodist Church is therefore characterised as a “**Connexion**”. In a sense it is an earthly embodiment of the communion of saints. When people and groups in a particular place relate to each other as Methodists they are connected to those who do the same in other places. As they relate to the Conference (which is an effective symbol of the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence that are inherent in those relationships) they are linked with all the others who relate to it. Individual Methodist members and groups, local churches, circuits, districts, Methodist institutions and agencies have a stake in the life and work of the Conference, and participate in it either directly or through their representatives (presbyters and deacons, lay officers and other lay people). At the same time the Conference has a stake in their life and work, and exercises it through
- its statements and resolutions;
  - its “courts” and governance bodies (e.g. Church Councils, Circuit Meetings, District Synods) which are predominately made up of lay people;
  - those lay people who hold office and serve the Connexion in and through those bodies, speaking and acting as authorised on the Conference’s behalf;
  - its ordained presbyters and deacons who are sent (“stationed”) to represent the Conference, to be effective symbols of the “connexionalism” which the Conference embodies and so to bring wider perspectives to the processes of oversight in local situations.

**Connexionalism is therefore fundamental to the Methodist way of being Church. This in turn makes it fundamental to the Methodist understanding of oversight (episkopé) that it is essentially shared. Consequently any communal, collegial or personal (lay or ordained) expressions of it cannot be self-sufficient or independent of each other but must be intrinsically linked with the other expressions.**

### **The Conference – Oversight at the heart of the Connexion**

- 2.7 As has become apparent in the above, at the heart of the Connexion is the **Conference**. This began with the early Preachers, Helpers and Assistants in the Methodist movement who were described as being “in connexion with Mr. Wesley”, and thereby with each other. They embodied their mutual connected-ness and inter-dependence as they or their representatives came together with Wesley in regular Conferences, where they sought to discern the movements of the Spirit and the promptings of grace, and to plan and regulate their response in worship and mission. After Wesley’s death, his leading and presiding role in those processes was vested not in an individual but in a formal group of those with whom he used to confer (the “Legal Hundred”) which, as the Methodist movement gradually solidified into a formal institution, developed into the corporate body of the Conference as a legal entity that exists today.



2.8 As the 1932 Deed of Union puts it

*“The governing body of the Methodist Church shall be the Conference constituted and meeting annually as provided in this Deed.”<sup>26</sup>*

*“The government and discipline of the Methodist Church and the management and administration of its affairs shall be vested in the Conference, and the Conference shall and may exercise and shall perform all the powers, authorities, rights and duties necessary or desirable in its discretion for such government, discipline, management and administration;.....”<sup>27</sup>*

2.9 Other clauses of the Deed show that within the law in general, and the Methodist Church Act 1976 in particular, the Conference has the power to make, amend or revoke the rules and regulations (including the Deed itself) both for its own constitution and procedures and for those of the Church at large (i.e. the rest of the Connexion). Thus the Conference has the authority (amongst other things)

- to regulate and control the nature, role, selection and deployment of its ministers (presbyters), deacons, and lay officers throughout the Connexion
- to set up, regulate and control particular funds and financial activity in general throughout the Connexion
- to found and control institutions in order to fulfil particular purposes
- to elect committees and other bodies and to appoint officers to fulfil particular functions.<sup>28</sup>

2.10 The Conference therefore makes the final decisions about everything to do with the life and work of the Methodist Church throughout the Connexion, either by making the actual decisions itself or by regulating those who do. This is the consolidation and codification of the processes developed by Wesley for discerning the way forward for the Methodist movement, directing its activities and shaping its response to the will and activity of God.

2.11 It is therefore interesting to note that terms which in recent times have sometimes been decried as a form of “management-speak” (and therefore unworthy of the divine and pastoral nature of the Church) are already present in the Deed of Union (“government”, “discipline”, “management”, “administration”). This is a necessary consequence of the process of consolidation and codification. That process in turn clarifies things and places them in the public domain, thereby empowering people to participate fully in the life of the Church and share in the direction of its affairs as responsible individuals and groups.

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<sup>26</sup> Clause 11 of the Deed of Union

<sup>27</sup> Clause 18 of the Deed of Union

<sup>28</sup> The examples in this paragraph are a summary of provisions in the Deed of Union, particularly Clause 21.

2.12 Yet, as noted in 1.8 above, the processes of oversight cannot simply be reduced to those of governance, management and leadership. The Deed, however, takes for granted the wider purposes outlined in paragraphs 1.5-10 and 2.7 above for which Wesley developed his original procedures. Yet if they are left implicit, the danger is that those wider purposes can be eroded or become corroded. Moreover, the Deed of Union also fails to restate the rationale for the methodology employed in Wesley's original processes. Since the methodology helps shape the understanding of purpose and *vice versa* this can increase the danger of unthinking change or unintentional reduction or corrosion.

2.13 The original "method" of Methodism was primarily concerned with mutual support and accountability for

- the basic spiritual and pastoral disciplines of the Christian life
- the skills and disciplines of spiritual and practical leadership.

To this end, as noted in 2.7 above, Wesley called people together to confer with him and sought to establish the process of what we might term "Christian Conferring" as the bedrock of the Methodist movement. Versions of this process were to take place in the Class, Band or other group which supported people in their personal faith and discipleship; in the body making decisions about the life of a particular society, local church or circuit; or in the Conference itself. The process involved what Wesley called times of "conversation . . . seasoned with salt, fit to minister grace to the hearers"<sup>29</sup>. It had to be intentionally and regularly practised as a staple means of grace, or the pressures of contemporary life would seriously erode it.<sup>30</sup>

2.14 The questions which set the agenda for Wesley's first formal Conference were "What to teach? How to teach? What to do?"<sup>31</sup> When Wesley called people together in Conference it was

- to reflect on their experience
- to exercise mutual accountability for their individual and corporate discipleship
- to seek together to discern what God was doing in the world and amongst them and to catch a vision of what God might require of them
- to develop plans for how that vision might be enacted
- to take the decisions necessary to begin to implement those plans
- to review progress regularly, reflecting on it prayerfully and in the light of the word of God.

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<sup>29</sup> The phrase is drawn from Colossians 4.6 and is used frequently by Wesley throughout his life. A typical example is John Wesley Sermon 42 *Satan's Devices* 1749-50.

<sup>30</sup> The substance of this paragraph is drawn from material provided by David Lowes Watson for a Bishops' Conference for Probationers in Nashville, Tennessee in April 2003.

<sup>31</sup> *Minutes* 1744. For further discussion of the importance of these see Angela Shier-Jones 'Conferring as Theological Method' in ed. Marsh, Beck, Shier-Jones and Wareing *Unmasking Methodist Theology* Continuum 2004 pp. 82-94.

- 2.15 Christian Conferring is therefore a process of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue to which there are two important, complementary strands. As they confer, people intentionally, prayerfully and thoughtfully seek to describe and analyse their experience and to listen to others doing the same, and they give and receive guidance, advice, challenge and support. In this they are exercising both mutual *accountability* and *supervision*. These complementary strands are two sides of the one coin.
- 2.16 The Conference itself is at the heart of the process of Christian Conferring throughout the Connexion. As we have seen above, it exists to focus, renew and nurture the whole Connexion's worship of God and participation in God's mission. It fulfils this purpose principally through people conferring and taking spiritual and theological counsel together. Viewed in that way, the Conference is the prime focus for the exercise of mutual accountability, support and oversight in the life of the Methodist Church.
- 2.17 In embodying this overall purpose the Conference gathers, celebrates and cements the connecting of the Connexion, not only internally between its constituent parts but also with its past and its future<sup>32</sup> and with external bodies. It therefore embodies the inter-dependence and inter-connectedness of the Connexion in order to re-present to the whole Connexion and the wider world what the Connexion is meant to be. It manifests the continuity of the Methodist Church in the present with its own past and with the wider Christian tradition, and as such acts to ensure that it and the whole Connexion demonstrably remain in the apostolic succession of faithful witness and response to the Gospel. In the terms of this report it therefore primarily exercises **oversight** (*episkopé*) in the broadest sense of that term (as defined in 1.7 above). As constituent parts of that oversight it exercises governance, management and leadership, both directly and through processes of subsidiarity. Much of its activity consists of the direct exercise of *governance* as set out in para. 1.11 above (for example, through adopting formal policies and legislation), but also sets the parameters and structures of accountability and support for other bodies to do so in its name through subsidiarity. Less of it is to do with *management* as outlined in para 1.12 above. Whereas the Conference sets the framework for management, the direct exercise of it is by others through subsidiarity, for the Conference (as a large corporate body of people who do not have detailed knowledge of the situations concerned) often gets into problems when it tries to manage things or people in detail. The Conference does, however, directly exercise *leadership* as outlined in para. 1.13 above, both through its formal addresses and inspirational events, and through its mutual conferring.

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<sup>32</sup> Looking to the future requires the exercise of a hopeful discernment grounded in a charitable realism about the present and a faithful appreciation and appropriation of the past.

## Two strands embodying the Conference's Oversight throughout the Connexion

2.18 Any treatment of the Methodist experience of oversight (*episkopé*) must therefore begin with the Conference.<sup>33</sup> The early Methodist Conferences were dominated by John Wesley, who set the agenda, summed up the conversation (the conferring) that ensued, and at the end announced what the programme or policy was to be. One preacher, after the 1774 Conference, was heard to remark: 'Mr Wesley seemed to do all the business himself.'<sup>34</sup> But Wesley believed that his power was God-given. As far as he was concerned, the Conference had no rights other than those which he conferred upon it. As he said:

I myself sent for these, of my own free choice; and I sent for them to advise, not *govern* me. Neither did I at any one of those times divest myself of any part of that power above described, which the Providence of God had cast upon me, without any design or choice of mine.<sup>35</sup>

2.19 Clearly, then, the first form of *episkopé* to appear in Methodism was personal *episkopé*, the ministry of oversight (both pastoral and authoritative) of one man. In a letter to his brother Charles written on 19 August 1785, Wesley stated that "I firmly believe that I am a scriptural *episkopos* [i.e. bishop/superintendent/overseer] as much as any man in England or Europe". In referring to himself as a "scriptural *episkopos*" he saw himself as raised up by God to be an extraordinary overseer (or superintendent) of a team of extraordinary messengers and of a movement or society of extraordinary disciples.<sup>36</sup> The Conference was important as a forum for the discipline of Christian Conferring, as we have seen, and to some extent Wesley shared the functions of his extraordinary superintendency with it. Yet Wesley was still the one who had called together people into Conference, and so was prior to it.

2.20 But by Wesley's express design that was to change after his death. In his latter years he made several attempts to identify a successor, all of which came to nothing. In the end he decided that the Conference should succeed him. Therefore after Wesley's death the Conference was given legal continuity by the Deed of Declaration, which Wesley had executed in 1784 to bestow upon the Legal Hundred those powers which he himself had held. The Legal Hundred (whose original members were selected by Wesley to provide a cross-section of the itinerant preachers) was the

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<sup>33</sup> The material in this and the following paragraph includes passages which first appeared as paragraphs 10 and 11 of the report *Episkopé and Episcopacy* adopted by the 2000 Conference [Agenda pp. 120ff; the text as adopted is reprinted in *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order Vol.2 1984-2000 Part 2* Methodist Publishing House, and in *Over to You 2000* Methodist Publishing House p. 16], and which have been developed and extended for the purposes of this discussion.

<sup>34</sup> *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume 1* 1965 p.242

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 243

<sup>36</sup> For the concept of 'extraordinary messengers' see further *What is a Presbyterian?* para 1 note 4 and the extended note after para 4.9 of *Releasing Ministers for Ministry*.

‘official’ Conference, though other preachers were eligible to attend and it was the whole Conference which exercised general oversight within the Connexion.

2.21 From that time onwards, the character and constitution of the Conference has continued to develop and change. There has been a continual process of reflection and a gradual shift from oversight (and, often, leadership, management and governance) being exercised or controlled by a single individual in a patriarchal society to it being exercised by a communal body in a world which values inclusiveness, participation and “rights”. There has been a shift from the members of the Conference being predominately those exercising the role of clergy (i.e. the category of Preachers, Helpers and Assistants which later developed into that of Methodist ministers) to there being an equal number of lay people (officers and other representatives). These shifts are highly significant both symbolically and practically. Whereas the membership and role of the Conference has developed over time, and will doubtless continue to develop, those developments have been in continuity with the original purposes of the Conference as outlined above.

2.22 **An important feature of the Methodist understanding of oversight since the time of Wesley is therefore that it has always been corporate in the first instance and then secondarily focused in particular individuals and groups (lay and ordained).** The corporate body of the Conference itself is the primary authority for the exercise of oversight for the whole of the Methodist Church. As such, it is made up of lay people, deacons and presbyters, and each of these groups has its proper part to play in exercising oversight within it when it meets. They also play particular roles in the two main strands of oversight which the Conference authorises to embody and share its episcopé in the rest of the Connexion. Those two strands are the oversight exercised by presbyters and that exercised by corporate groups and particular office holders.

2.23 With regard to the oversight exercised by presbyters, we have seen in 2.3 above that although many individuals, groups and bodies can be said to be part of the Methodist Connexion, Mr. Wesley’s Assistants (who later developed into what we know as ministers and, more recently, presbyters) had a particular role to play. They entered into a covenant relationship of being in “full connexion” with Mr. Wesley and, later, the Conference. This means that they had, and Methodist presbyters still have, a particular part to play in exercising the oversight of the Conference in that a core emphasis of their ministry is to exercise *pastoral responsibility* on behalf of the Conference in a way that is always meshed with their ministry of the *word* and *sacrament*.<sup>37</sup> Thus wherever they are stationed (e.g. in an appointment not within the control of the Church, in a circuit appointment, as a member of the Connexional Team, as a Chair of District, as President of the Conference) they bear witness to the centrality of the sacraments and the gospel mediated through scripture in the life of the Church, including

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<sup>37</sup> For the core emphases of presbyteral ministry being Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Responsibility see the report *What is a Presbyter?* adopted by the 2002 Conference [Agenda pp. 446-454; text as adopted in *Over to You 2002* Methodist Publishing House pp.74-82].

its processes for conferring and decision-making. In their representative character they represent the church as a worshipping community. By their presence and conscious embodiment of these truths they ensure that worship and the Bible are not marginalised and do not become two of the church's many activities rather than constitutive of it and central to its mission. At the same time, they are under the oversight of the Conference and its representatives (corporate groups and individuals, both ordained and lay) and are expected to give an account of the ways in which they exercise their role and the insights they have gained.<sup>38</sup>

2.24 Presbyters should therefore play a part in the oversight of the Church and in its deliberations at all levels. The Conference receives them into full Connexion and ordains them to represent it and the wider Church and to embody its oversight in the particular situations to which they are sent. This general pastoral responsibility, which all presbyters share, involves 'watching over' God's people in love. Hence the "Conference shall in its Ministerial Session engage in pastoral consideration of the number and state of the Societies and in pastoral conversation on the Work of God and on pastoral efficiency" and the Agenda of the Ministerial Synod includes a discussion of "What is the state of the work of God in the District?". In this process all Methodist presbyters who are in full Connexion are understood to represent both the catholic and the apostolic nature of the Church. In being stationed they are all sent to particular situations in the church and in the world to bring the goals, insights and resources of the wider church, of Christian history and of the Biblical tradition to bear on them. They all therefore exercise a ministry of visitation to particular groups of disciples and particular situations in the wider world, having spent time watching, praying, waiting on God and sharing the fruits of it all with colleagues. Those, however, who are appointed to Circuits to fulfil particular ministerial duties within them exercise this general pastoral responsibility in the form of a specific *pastoral charge*. This term links with the phrase in the Deed of Union which states that those ordained by Conference (sc. as presbyters) have "a principal and directing part in these great duties"<sup>39</sup> which are the responsibility of the whole church. It therefore involves guiding particular congregations, groups and individuals in their explorations of the ways of God and their responses to the grace of God. As such, it includes elements of discipline and spiritual direction as well as *pastoral work* and *pastoral care*.<sup>40</sup>

2.25 Presbyters therefore embody one of the two main strands by which the Conference expresses its oversight throughout the Connexion. In many ways they are accompanied in this by deacons, who share in many of the functions and tasks outlined above. As with presbyters, the Conference receives deacons into full Connexion with the Conference and ordains them to represent it and the wider church in the situations to which they are sent. But in doing so it also admits them into membership of a religious

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<sup>38</sup> See further paragraphs 3.10 and 5.28.

<sup>39</sup> Clause 4 of the Deed of Union.

<sup>40</sup> This paragraph is drawn from the material in para 6 of the report *What is a Presbyter?* [see note 37].

order, the Methodist Diaconal Order, to exercise their ministry through a particular community and under a particular spiritual discipline. The core emphasis of the ministry of deacons is “to exercise a ministry of witness through service in and on behalf of the Church catholic”. They therefore undertake roles in worship and tasks of *pastoral work* that embody *pastoral care*, mercy and justice and which are appropriate to being a deacon in that local context. They articulate and interpret faith and human experience. They act as a prophetic sign amongst those on the edge of society and on the margins of the church. In all of these things they are public people who are authorised and required by the Church to exercise leadership as it is defined in paragraph 1.13 above, and to do so personally and as a dominant motif in their life and work. Deacons are therefore “representatives (ambassadors) of the Church with authority to lead, focus and enable servant ministry”.<sup>41</sup> They lead in the sense that they provide a model of servant leadership for others. They bear witness to the world and to the rest of the Church of what it is to be and act as the Body of Christ. They encourage others to imitate Christ, offer guidance and support, and initiate and co-ordinate particular expressions of discipleship. What they do not do, however, is exercise pastoral responsibility, still less pastoral charge. That form of leadership is the role of presbyters. By not sharing in this, deacons are liberated to offer an important and distinctive leadership of their own.<sup>42</sup>

- 2.26 The second primary strand by which Conference shares its oversight with the rest of the Connexion is through delegating particular responsibilities to other groups in the Connexion (e.g. Church Pastoral Committee; Church Council; Circuit Leadership Team; Circuit Meeting; District Policy Committee; District Synod; the Methodist Council) and to particular office holders (e.g. class leaders; pastoral visitors; church and circuit stewards; Local Preachers; district officers; members of the Connexional Team). In this lay people play the predominant role, in that they fill most of the offices and make up the majority of members of the corporate bodies to which the Conference delegates particular roles in the exercise of its oversight. They represent particular communities and bodies within the Connexion that is overseen by the Conference. They therefore share in the general responsibility for the oversight of the life of the Church. They take their part in the duty of pastoral care which is the common concern shared by the whole Christian community for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of other people. They enact that shared concern for pastoral care by undertaking particular acts of pastoral work. They share in the general responsibility of the people of God to offer worship and participate in God’s mission, and enact this by undertaking particular roles in both (of particular importance here is the role of Local Preachers in helping the

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<sup>41</sup> *What is a Deacon?* para 4.7 [2004 Agenda pp. 12 - 30: text as adopted in *Over to You 2004* Methodist Publishing House].

<sup>42</sup> See *What is a Deacon?* para. 5.10 “...there is a distinctive quality to a ministry of service when it is not linked to pastoral responsibility but offers a prophetic voice from the margins and when servant leadership is exercised from ‘alongside’ those on society’s edge”. This builds on footnote 16 to para 6 of *What is a Presbyter?* “... the fact that a deacon does not exercise pastoral responsibility or have pastoral charge profoundly affects his or her ministry of service and means that she or he focuses it in new and distinctive ways”.

people of God to gather around the word and to offer worship). They can also take the lead (and therefore exercise leadership) in all these matters within the whole Connexion. Of particular importance here is the role of the Vice-President in and on behalf of the Conference. Because Methodism has put major emphasis on “representation” as a core characteristic of what it is to be ordained, it has found it less easy to recognise the representative role of lay office-holders or to do more than pay lip-service to it. The Vice-President celebrates and encourages lay office-holders by providing a high profile model for them.<sup>43</sup> It is an office which is held in high regard by both lay and ordained. It provides a high profile example of discipleship, and has a vital role to play across the whole Connexion, not just locally. Whether in the company of the President or on his or her own, the holder of the office has an important role to play in the shared oversight (episkopé) of the Church.

2.27 Standing Orders emphasise repeatedly that oversight is not complete if these two strands of it (that of groups and officers on the one hand, and of presbyters exercising pastoral responsibility and pastoral charge on the other) do not collaborate and interact. Be it in circuits, districts or the wider Connexion both of the strands of oversight outlined above are equally important, and each requires the other. The oversight or pastoral responsibility which Methodist presbyters in full Connexion exercise on behalf of the Conference only comes to its fullness when it is exercised in collaboration with lay people and, where they are appointed, with deacons in those situations. Similarly, the responsibility which lay people and deacons exercise in and to local and wider situations only comes to its fullness when it is exercised in collaboration with the form of oversight exercised by presbyters.

### **3. IDENTIFYING AND ENCOURAGING GOOD PRACTICE IN OVERSIGHT, GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

3.1 Within this shared oversight particular attention needs to be given to how the purposes and principles outlined above might best find expression in particular structures and dynamics of church life. The practical outworking of this sharing of oversight in terms of ‘governance’, ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ needs particular attention. The relationship between ‘oversight’ and ‘supervision’ also arises, especially in a context in which people enter diaconal and presbyteral ministry following experience in professions where ‘supervision’ (in managerial and non-managerial forms) is a common term. Exploration of such terms is therefore needed to clarify and sharpen the Church’s understanding of ‘discernment’, ‘discipline’, ‘planning’ and ‘spiritual leadership’, and so that the ‘conferring’ which occurs appropriately envisions the will of God, and adequately structures the human response to the divine initiative. In this way the richness of the concept of oversight will be utilised and enhanced.

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<sup>43</sup> What is needed is a clearer statement of the complementary ways in which both lay and ordained can be said to represent Christ and the Church.



## The Circuit

3.2 If we begin with the entity known as the circuit, its nature and purposes are clearly set out in Standing Order 500. This makes it plain that the circuit is one of the main organisms of British Methodism and of its way of being Church.<sup>44</sup> In recent times there has been a growing tendency in some areas towards local autonomy and congregationalism, which has shifted the balance away from the circuits to the local churches. Yet without the relationships of close inter-dependence which are embodied in a circuit many local churches would not flourish spiritually or materially. This fact plus the reduction of resources in terms of finance and personnel available to the local churches has led to a countervailing tendency to re-establish the circuit as the main entity. The local churches are not independent, primary entities but interdependent cells of the organism which is the circuit. This is illustrated by Clause 38 of the Deed of Union which states that

*“The Local Churches..... shall be formed into Circuits for mutual encouragement and help (especially in meeting their financial obligations) in accordance with directions from time to time made by the Conference, and the Circuits shall be arranged by the Conference in Districts in like manner.....”*

3.3 Thus presbyters who are appointed to exercise pastoral charge in a circuit are appointed by the Conference to do so collectively across the whole circuit. They are not appointed to have charge of or be a servant to particular churches in the circuit. Any decision about which presbyter should take the lead in exercising pastoral charge in particular churches is therefore a secondary focusing and outworking of their collective pastoral charge, and is a decision which should be made by the Circuit Meeting or those to whom that meeting has delegated the responsibility (as is the case with the drawing up of circuit profiles with details of the responsibilities for a particular appointment in the Stationing Matching Process). It is important to remember that this interdependence is the principle of organisation not just of Methodism as a movement of people gathering for mutual support and to be nurtured in holiness, but also as a missionary movement. *Called to Love and Praise* describes Methodism’s distinctiveness as

*“...first, an emphasis on ‘relatedness’ as essential to the concept of ‘church’..... second, an emphasis, stemming from Methodism’s societal past, on fellowship and shared discipline, exercised through small groups, and, third, the conviction that the church should be structured for mission, and also able to respond pragmatically, when new needs or opportunities arise.”<sup>45</sup>*

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<sup>44</sup> SO 500 (1) *The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help. It is in the Circuit that ministers, deacons and probationers are stationed and local preachers are trained and admitted and exercise their calling. 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 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.*

<sup>45</sup> CLP 4.7.1

- 3.4 The local churches are therefore the interdependent cells of circuits, circuits of districts, and districts of the Connexion, with the greatest weight still being on the structures of the circuit and the wider Connexion (e.g. Conference and Methodist Council).<sup>46</sup>

Such mutuality and interdependence entail a proper form of dependency and a proper degree of autonomy:

*“... (Autonomy) is necessary if they are to express their own cultural identity and to respond to local calls of mission and service in an appropriate way. But their dependency on the larger whole is also necessary for their own continuing vitality and well-being”*<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, such interdependence

*“... precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government.”*<sup>48</sup>

Therefore

*“Circuit structures represent interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility and submission to mutual jurisdiction”*<sup>49</sup>

- 3.5 So far as oversight is concerned this interdependence is worked out in different sets of relationships in the Circuit. For example, the Circuit Meeting is stated to be the principal source of what we might term “oversight”, and is charged with promoting shared leadership between lay officers (circuits stewards and others), deacons and the ministers (presbyters) appointed by the Conference to the circuit.<sup>50</sup> This is often done through the creation of a Circuit Leadership Team, which in terms of this report exercises both leadership and management functions.<sup>51</sup> Thus the Circuit Stewards are charged with sharing with the ministers and deacons the general responsibility both for the oversight of the circuit and for leadership and what we might term the executive management of the

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<sup>46</sup> This can, of course, be altered but care must be taken not to allow pragmatic developments (e.g. as the boundaries and size of circuits are reviewed in relationship to their constituent churches, and as the boundaries and size of districts are reviewed in relationship to the structures of regional and national governments and other organisations) to produce by accident a burdensome, cumbersome and ineffective structure in which there are four equally weighted places for the exercise of oversight.

<sup>47</sup> CLP 4.6.2

<sup>48</sup> CLP 4.6.6

<sup>49</sup> CLP 4.7.4

<sup>50</sup> *Standing Order 515(1) The Circuit Meeting is the principal meeting responsible for the affairs of the Circuit and the development of circuit policy. It shall exercise that combination of spiritual leadership and administrative efficiency which will enable the Circuit to fulfil its purposes as set out in Standing Order 500, and shall act as the focal point of the working fellowship of the churches in the Circuit, overseeing their pastoral, training and evangelistic work.*

*(2) The meeting shall encourage leadership within the Circuit which involves the circuit stewards and other lay persons along with the ministers and deacons appointed to the Circuit.*

For the text of Standing Order 500 concerning the purposes of the Circuit and referred to above, see footnote 44.

<sup>51</sup> See further section 3.8 below.

Circuit Meeting's decisions.<sup>52</sup> The presbyters appointed to a circuit are described as exercising oversight of the life and work of the circuit and, within that, of its local churches. The Circuit Superintendent shares the same role, but with the additional responsibility of overseeing the other ministers, deacons and probationers in the circuit. In this, the Superintendent and other presbyters are expressing that particular strand of the Conference's oversight which is focused in pastoral responsibility and pastoral charge as outlined above, but they are also explicitly charged to share the particular tasks which this involves with the relevant officers and corporate bodies in the circuit concerned.<sup>53</sup>

- 3.6 Within the context of the circuit, therefore, the Superintendent and any other presbyters appointed by the Conference to exercise pastoral charge in a circuit or stationed by the Conference in a circuit to serve in other appointments gather together to exercise their pastoral responsibility and oversight. Those serving in other appointments join in this meeting not just to be supported in the work that they do, but also to contribute their insights to the life of the circuit. They also interact with the oversight properly expressed by lay officers such as the Circuit Stewards and by any deacons stationed in the circuit. All these groups then interact with the oversight of formal bodies such as the Circuit Meeting.
- 3.7 Three forms of grouping therefore begin to emerge. The first is the Circuit Meeting itself, which is the primary source of oversight, and in particular of *governance* and decision-making in the Circuit.<sup>54</sup> Much of its activity consists of the direct exercise of *governance* as set out in para. 1.11 above (for example, through adopting formal policies and legislation), but also sets the parameters and structures of accountability and support for any other bodies which it authorises to act in its name through subsidiarity (e.g. the Circuit Invitation Committee<sup>55</sup>). Less of it is to do with *management* as outlined in para 1.12 above. Whereas the Circuit Meeting sets the framework for management in the circuit, the direct exercise of it is by others (e.g the circuit staff and the circuit officers) on its behalf (as large bodies often get into problems when they try to manage projects or people in detail). The Circuit Meeting does, however, exercise *leadership* as outlined in para. 1.13 above, through its mutual conferring and in response to stimulation from the Circuit Leadership Team.

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<sup>52</sup> SO 531(1) *The circuit stewards are responsible, with the Superintendent and the ministers, deacons and probationers appointed to the Circuit, for the spiritual and material well-being of the Circuit, and for upholding and acting upon the decisions of the Circuit Meeting.*

<sup>53</sup> SO 700(7) *Pastoral charge in a circuit is exercised by those ministers in the active work who are appointed by the Conference to that Circuit: sharing with others, in the courts of the church and individually, the exercise of the particular responsibilities and ministries involved, they have oversight on behalf of the Conference of the worship, pastoral care and mission policy of the Circuit and its constituent Local Churches in accordance with Methodist discipline.*

*700(9) Superintendent ministers share with the other ministers appointed to the Circuit the pastoral charge of the Circuit and have oversight of all the ministers, deacons and probationers stationed in the Circuit.*

<sup>54</sup> Standing Order 515(1) (see footnote 50 above for the text). See further the material in Section 5.9ff below on the charity model of governance.

<sup>55</sup> See Standing Order 541.

- 3.8 A second type of grouping is the Circuit Leadership Team of presbyters, deacons, lay workers and lay officers (e.g. Circuit Stewards). Its responsibilities are not clearly defined in Standing Orders<sup>56</sup>, but it is clearly stated to be subservient to the Circuit Meeting. In practice, it is most naturally a grouping of those who have a formal role to play in ordering and leading the life of the circuit. Together they will work on behalf of the Circuit Meeting in preparing business for it and acting in the light of its decisions, either in the Leadership Team or with others in a General Purposes Committee (if the Circuit meeting has appointed one). As such this type of grouping is primarily concerned with seeking to articulate vision and thus to exercise *leadership* in a context which links that to the executive *management* of the circuit. It is therefore a place where the vision emerging from the Circuit Staff Meeting can be tested by the Circuit Stewards, and vice versa, and where thought can be given as to what policies can be proposed to embody the vision in the life and mission of the circuit.
- 3.9 The third is primarily a meeting of the presbyters and deacons appointed to or stationed in a circuit, together with any lay workers employed in the circuit. They meet to exercise their various and distinct roles in the oversight of the gathering and dispersing people of God in that place. In the terms of this report, this gathering is not primarily for the purposes of governance or management (decision-making) but for taking counsel in order to help provide *leadership*.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore mainly concerned both with the development of vision and strategy through rigorous group reflection and a collective seeking of wisdom, and also with the mutual nurturing and enabling of its members to be effective leaders. This is not to say that the members of staff are the exclusive source of leadership for the circuit, for the Circuit Leadership Team also has a role to play in the articulation of a vision and in the inspiring of others to share that vision. Nevertheless, the members of the staff meeting have a vital contribution to make, and a precious opportunity for making it. The purpose of their meeting is to ensure that they are fully equipped as people to do so and thus to fulfil their roles and responsibilities within the Circuit Leadership Team and the Circuit Meeting.
- 3.10 The term ‘taking counsel’ does not mean merely talking about something as an end in itself. Discussion occurs but as a means to defined ends. Secondary amongst these is management in the sense of the allocation of particular tasks in the on-going life of the circuit (important though that is). Primary amongst them is the theological and spiritual discernment that

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<sup>56</sup> Standing Order 515(2) (see footnote 50 above for the text).

<sup>57</sup> Standing Order 523(1) states that “*Ministers, deacons and probationers appointed to the same Circuit, stationed in the Circuit in appointments not within the control of the Church or without appointment shall meet together once a week, or as often as is practicable, in order to take counsel together respecting the affairs of the Circuit, and persons residing in the Circuit who are authorised to serve the Church as ministers or deacons under Standing Order 733 and forces chaplains and deacons and lay workers serving in support of forces chaplains located for the time being in the Circuit shall be invited to attend*”. [The inclusion here of lay workers serving in support of forces chaplains when other lay workers undertaking pastoral work in the circuit are excluded would appear to be an anomaly.]

results in vision. This is done through the practice of prayerful ‘Christian Conferring’ as defined in paragraphs 2.7 and 2.13-15 above. In this mutual conversation support and supervision are offered and received, vision is formed and strategic insights are developed. It includes time spent in prayer and the discussion of questions such as the following:

- What insights can we offer in response to each other’s pastoral and other concerns?
- What supervision can we give and receive of each other’s professional practice?
- In the light of our pastoral knowledge of situations in this place, what visions and insights do we have that need to be shared with other people and bodies in the circuit or further afield?
- What do we hear from elsewhere (in the wider Connexion or in society in general) which we have a responsibility to share with the relevant people and bodies in the circuit?

In exercising their collective responsibility for this ‘christian conferring’ the circuit “staff” gather with a Superintendent who leads them, but is also one of them and subject to being ‘watched over in love’ by them. This gathering therefore provides for peer or non-managerial supervision of the practice of the staff. This in turn needs to be backed up with personal support and appraisal of staff by others (such as the Circuit Stewards together with the Superintendent) outside the meeting.

3.11 **It is important to define the intentions of each of these types of gathering and to ensure that their boundaries are not transgressed.** For example, where taking counsel inadvertently or deliberately becomes the exercise of governance or decision-making by presbyters or circuit “staff” alone, tensions and power-struggles may arise in the circuit and the proper exercise of oversight go by default. Part of the particular role of the Superintendent is to ensure that this does not happen, and that governance on the one hand and the making of executive or management decisions on the other occur in the proper places.

3.12 The Superintendent has a particular role to play in each of these three types of gathering so far as exercising oversight is concerned. In the gathering of circuit “staff”, it is primarily one of *leadership* and supervision. In the Circuit Leadership Team it is primarily one of *leadership and management*. In the Circuit Meeting it is primarily one of *governance*. At the same time, just as Superintendents in turn are “watched over in love” by the others whom they lead, so they also exercise a form of accountability for their work and ministry both to the Circuit Leadership Team and to the Circuit Meeting, as well as through the district Chair and Ministerial Synod to the Conference.

## **The District**

3.13 The circuits are in turn grouped together in districts, which are characterized as fulfilling the same purposes as a circuit, but across a wider geographical area. Standing Order 400A(1) again illustrates the point about the interdependent nature of the Connexion as it defines the nature and

purposes of a district.<sup>58</sup> This might suggest that the district is a more important entity than the circuit, with its responsible body standing between the circuit meeting, and the supreme governing body of the Connexion, the Conference. Yet historically circuits pre-date districts. Districts were only formed in 1791 after the death of Wesley as a means “for the preservation of our whole economy as the Revd. Mr. Wesley left it”<sup>59</sup>. Since there was to be no single successor to Mr. Wesley a means had to be found of identifying those who would deal with problems and disputes or offer support and advice to the Circuits between meetings of the Conference. This was achieved by dividing the “the three kingdoms” into 27 districts, and appointing a Chairman<sup>60</sup> for each. However, the district had few functions of its own, and it was the role of the Chairman which was important. During the 1790’s it became established that the Chairman should deal with cases of discipline affecting the preachers in the district which needed to be addressed before the ensuing Conference, and that the Chairmen were to act as arbitrators in any dispute involving preachers, stewards and societies. But beyond that the Chairman could not normally interfere in the affairs of a circuit or the powers and responsibilities of the Superintendents. This is generally still the case. Clause 38 of the Deed of Union recognises that in many respects the Conference deals directly with the circuits. Moreover, the greater weight of legal, constitutional and other formal responsibilities outside those of the Conference itself has historically lain with the circuit meeting, and not with the district. The district has therefore been secondary to the circuit, and in a sense has derived its purpose from that of the circuit, as Standing Order 400A(1) demonstrates.

- 3.14 The balance, however, has become less clear in recent times. Districts increasingly have their own finances (drawn from levies on the circuits and other sources) which they can use in and through the circuits, and this raises the importance of the district and its formal structures. At the same time federations or clusters of circuits are appearing which emphasise the importance of the circuit instead of the district. Some are starting to argue for the development of larger circuits and the complete abolition of districts. Others argue for creating fewer, but larger circuits and fewer, but

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<sup>58</sup> *SO 400A (1) The primary purpose for which the District is constituted is to advance the mission of the Church in a region, by providing opportunities for Circuits to work together and support each other, by offering them resources of finance, personnel and expertise which may not be available locally and by enabling them to engage with the wider society of the region as a whole and address its concerns. The District serves the Local Churches and Circuits and the Conference in the support, deployment and oversight of the various ministries of the Church, and in programmes of training. It has responsibility for the evaluation of applications by Local Churches and Circuits for approval of or consent to their proposals, when required, or for assistance from district or connexional bodies or funds. Wherever possible the work of the District is carried out ecumenically. The District is thus an expression, over a wider geographical area than the Circuit, of the connexional character of the Church.*

*(2) Since every member in the District is as such a member of the Methodist Missionary Society, the purposes of the District include the promotion of understanding of and support for the work of the Society to the end that every member may share actively in world mission.*

<sup>59</sup> *Minutes of the 1791 Conference.*

<sup>60</sup> Recently the term “Chairman” has been replaced with that of “Chair”.

larger districts. It is hard, however, to argue for making districts of equal weight with circuits, or of greater weight. In general, therefore, it is still the case that the district is best seen as secondary to the Conference on the one side and the circuits on the other. Its major responsibilities are to act as the arms of the Connexion in helping people to develop local strategies, and to play a part on behalf of the Conference in such matters as ministerial selection, accountability and stationing. By analogy or extension they also now include parallel responsibilities for or roles in such matters as the connexional procedures for the discipline of lay people and for the preliminary vetting of circuit applications for connexional funds. In these respects the districts are interdependent cells of the organism which is the Connexion.<sup>61</sup>

- 3.15 So far as oversight is concerned this interdependence is worked out in different sets of relationships and structures in the district. The District Synod is stated to be the principal body for exercising oversight over all the affairs of the district.<sup>62</sup> The Synod is asked to consider its composition with regard to age, sex and ethnic origin<sup>63</sup>, and is charged with ensuring that its membership contains at least as many lay officers and lay members as deacons and ministers (presbyters) in the active work.<sup>64</sup> Districts have traditionally not been as weighty an entity as circuits in terms of formal structures and with regard to some (but not all) procedures. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly important that a forum is provided where vision can be developed in the form of policy and strategy, and where problems and difficulties in the life of the district can be addressed. Each district therefore has to appoint a Policy Committee under that or some other name, and some districts have used this as an opportunity to develop a District Leadership Team or District Council. These bodies fulfil purposes which bear some similarities to those of the Circuit Leadership Team, and in them lay officers play a crucial role (with an increasing number of Districts appointing lay Synod Secretaries), although there are not statements about district lay officers to parallel those about circuit stewards.

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<sup>61</sup> The fact that traditionally the organisms of the circuit and the connexion have carried greater weight than those of the local church and the district may explain why British Methodism finds it difficult to find structural ways of relating to other denominations. In the Church of England the primary organisms are the parish and the diocese. Amongst Baptists the primary organism is the local church which is independent, although it may choose to enter voluntary federations with others.

<sup>62</sup> *SO 412 (1) ..... the Synod is the policy-making court of the District, serving as a link between the Conference and the connexional Team on the one hand and the Circuits and Local Churches on the other. It shall have oversight of all district affairs. It shall formulate and promote policies, through its various officers and committees, to assist the mission of the Church, to give inspiration to the leaders in the Circuits and to ensure the interrelation of all aspects of the Church's life throughout the District. It is a forum in which issues of public concern relevant to the witness of the Church may be addressed. The Synod's business is the work of God in the District, expressed in worship, conversation, formal business, the communication of Conference matters to the Circuits and the submission of memorials to the Conference.*

<sup>63</sup> SO 410(5)

<sup>64</sup> SO 410(1)(xii) and 410(4A)

- 3.16 Similarly, in many ways the Chair has an analogous role in the district to that of the Superintendent in the circuit. The Chair has to be a presbyter because he or she is exercising presbyteral pastoral responsibility on behalf of the Conference. He or she does so in collaboration with the other presbyters in the circuits which make up the district, particularly the Superintendents. The means of doing this are the equivalent of Staff Meetings in a circuit where the members offer mutual support and accountability in the exercise of their pastoral responsibility and take counsel together about what ideas might be shared with others to promote the formulation of a collective vision throughout the district. So far as all of the presbyters in a district are concerned, this is done through the Ministerial Synod. In addition in some districts regular meetings of the Chair with the circuit Superintendents have become an important part of district life. Like the role of Superintendents in circuits, Chairs are explicitly charged to exercise pastoral responsibility in the district (including oversight of the ministers and probationers) as one of the two strands of the Conference's oversight, but to collaborate in particular tasks of oversight with those who constitute the other strand, namely the corporate body of the Synod and its individual members.<sup>65</sup>
- 3.17 The fact that districts were traditionally not heavily structured formal entities, allied to the general moves towards de-regulation of church life begun in the early 1990s, means that in recent years district structures have changed markedly with a series of separate and mainly ad hoc developments in different places. Nevertheless, although the districts are still less heavily structured than circuits and there is not a complete analogy between them, the need has begun to emerge for three similar types of grouping in district life as we have outlined above with regard to circuits.
- 3.18 First, Ministerial Synods provide formal and informal opportunities to function as a staff meeting in which people confer together, develop vision and strategy through rigorous group reflection and a collective seeking of wisdom, encourage and watch over each other in their 'professional' practice, and support and equip each other as people in their discipleship and ministry. The Church is impoverished and the future of Ministerial Synods brought into question if they are not doing this. In addition, many districts now have meetings where the Circuit Superintendents and sometimes some other key people gather with the Chair of District to confer and take counsel in their shared oversight of the district. This is not to say that presbyters are always the ones to originate ideas, for it is part of their responsibility to encourage and enable others to contribute their

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<sup>65</sup> SO 424 (1) *The prime duty of a Chair is to further the work of God in the District; to this end he or she will use all the gifts and graces he or she has received, being especially diligent to be a pastor to the ministers, deacons and probationers and to lead all the people of the District in the work of preaching and worship, evangelism, pastoral care, teaching and administration.*

(2) *The Chair, in conjunction with the members of the Synod in its respective sessions, shall be responsible to the Conference for the observance within the District of Methodist order and discipline.*

(3) *It is the duty of the Chair to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and ministerial probationers in the District.*



insights to the process. At the same time they are failing in their vocation if, when they meet, they do not do so with a view to exercising *leadership* and contributing to the development of vision in and for the district.

- 3.19 A second type of gathering is where the members of a group (lay and ordained) exercise executive *management* on behalf of the District Synod in preparing business for it and acting in the light of its decisions, and do so in the context of seeking to articulate vision concerning the district and thus exercise *leadership*. In some districts these functions are performed by the District Policy Committee, in others by the District Leadership Team or some equivalent body. In any event this type of gathering is a place where vision emerging from many quarters, and particularly from the Ministerial Synod and other groups outlined in the previous paragraph, can be tested and attempts made to develop strategies which can be proposed for embodying it.
- 3.20 The third type of gathering is the District Synod, which is the primary source of oversight, and in particular of *governance* and decision-making in the district. Much of its activity consists of the direct exercise of *governance* as set out in para. 1.11 above, but it also sets the parameters and structures of accountability and support for any other bodies which it authorises to act in its name. Less of it is to do with *management* as outlined in para. 1.12 above. Whereas the District Synod sets the framework for any management required in the district, the direct exercise of it is by others (e.g the District Chair and Lay Stationing Representative) on its behalf. The District Synod does, however, exercise *leadership* as outlined in para. 1.13 above, through its mutual conferring and in response to stimulation from the other types of grouping in the district.
- 3.21 **It is again important to define the intentions of each of these types of gathering and to ensure that their boundaries are not transgressed.** The Chair of District has a vital role to play in the oversight of this, both in ordering and leading the Synod and the Policy Committee, but also in exercising an accountability to both. As such, the current Standing Order which prevents Chairs from interacting with the life, work and mission of circuits except in certain restricted circumstances appears increasingly outdated and unhelpful. The Chair's role of sharing pastoral responsibility with the presbyters in a circuit means that there has to be a mutual relationship between Chairs, Superintendents and presbyters in which any party can initiate the conversation without undermining the authority of the Superintendent. Similarly, the Chair's role of stimulating leadership and vision about the worship and mission of the circuits means that she or he has to be able to interact with the relevant circuit bodies and officers, without undermining their authority.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, Superintendents,

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<sup>66</sup> The Standing Order reproduced below was meant to guard the importance of the role of Superintendents as separated Chairs were introduced into the system, but in an understanding of shared oversight is increasingly outmoded.

*SO 425 (3) Each Chair is authorised to visit officially any Circuit in the District to which he or she is invited by the Superintendent or respecting which, after consultation with the Superintendent, he or she is satisfied that his or her assistance or intervention may be necessary for the advancement of the work, the preservation of peace and order, or the execution of the connexional economy and*

presbyters, deacons and the representatives from the circuits have a role in and through the Synod and other district structures of engaging in conversation with the Chair and in helping to form the priorities for the work of the district and of the Chair as an expression of the shared nature of their oversight.

### **The wider Connexion**

- 3.22 The structures and dynamics outlined in the previous sections are also emerging in the context of the wider Connexion. The same three types of gathering are starting to appear as in circuits and districts, although the differences of scale, context and history mean that there are not exact analogies.
- 3.23 So far as the first type of gathering is concerned, the Connexional Leadership Team and the meetings of Chairs of District fulfil functions similar to those of a staff meeting<sup>67</sup>, in that they meet to confer together, to support and equip each other as effective leaders, and to articulate vision and thereby offer leadership to the Church. The Connexional Leadership Team is made up of the past, present and designated President and Vice-President of the Conference; the Chairs of District and Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order; the Chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee; and the members of the Joint Secretaries Group (i.e. the General Secretary/Secretary of Conference and the Co-ordinating Secretaries) who represent the wider team of lay and ordained officers which is known as the Connexional Team, which they also lead.<sup>68</sup> From

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*discipline. The Chair of the District shall not so far set aside the office and responsibility of the Superintendent as to intervene in the administration of a Circuit of which he or she is not the Superintendent or to preside at any meeting for the administration of discipline or for any other circuit purposes in any such Circuit except when, in special circumstances, the Synod otherwise directs, or by the invitation or with the consent of the Superintendent. Even in such circumstances, unless the Synod otherwise directs, the Superintendent shall be responsible for administering, after consultation with the Chair and his or her own colleagues, any measure of discipline which may be deemed necessary.*

<sup>67</sup> As noted in paragraphs 3.9-10, a circuit staff meeting includes lay people and deacons as well as presbyters.

<sup>68</sup> *SO 301 (1) The overall task of the connexional Team is to further the purposes of the Methodist Church, in particular enabling it better to fulfil its calling of responding to God's love in Christ and working out its discipleship in mission and worship.*

*(2) The Team is charged with providing appropriate support for Local Churches, Circuits and Districts in accordance with Standing Orders and any directions of the Conference given from time to time.*

*(3) The Team shall foster the recognition throughout the Church that the Church's mission includes telling the good news of Jesus; calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and to Christian discipleship; caring for individual people in communities; sharing in the task of education and social and spiritual development; struggling for a just world; being alongside the poor; becoming friends with people of different cultures and faiths; caring for the earth; and building partnerships with other churches and other groups who share some of the mission aims.*

*(4) The Team is authorised to act on behalf of the Church in relation to national institutions and public issues in harmony with the existing statements and resolutions of the Conference.*

*(5) The Team is responsible for assisting the Methodist Council in considering future policies.*

*(6) The Team shall have particular responsibility for the areas of work which are prescribed in the Deed of Union or specified in Standing Orders, or approved from time to time by the Conference and the Methodist Council.*

time to time the Chairs of District meet on their own but under the aegis of the Connexional Leadership Team to deal with matters of common concern which are particularly connected with their pastoral responsibility, and to offer mutual support. In the terms of this report this means that within its overall exercise of oversight, the emphasis of the meetings of the full Connexional Leadership Team is on leadership as defined in paragraph 1.13 above.

- 3.24 So far as the second type of gathering is concerned, the Methodist Council is charged with the regular oversight under and on behalf of the Conference of the on-going life, worship and mission of the whole Church.<sup>69</sup> It is made up of lay members, deacons and presbyters. It has a Strategy and Resources Committee, also made up of lay and ordained, which deals with issues of executive management in regard to the work of the Council itself, with particular responsibilities to do with finance.<sup>70</sup> Together, the Methodist Council and its Strategy and Resources Committee therefore provide for the functions of *management* in the context of seeking to articulate and test vision and so exercise *leadership*. Thus they oversee the work of the Connexional Team and also prepare business for, and ensure that action is taken in the light of the decisions of, the supreme authority in matters of governance and decision-making, namely the Methodist Conference. In so far as this role of executive management is concerned, the Strategy and Resources Committee is acting as a filtering mechanism or a sub-group undertaking close scrutiny of some matters (particularly finance) on behalf of the Council. But the Council also has a *governance* role in which it is sometimes said to be “the Conference between meetings of the Conference”. It is more accurate to say that, like the Circuit Meeting and District Synod, on some occasions and for some specific purposes it acts by subsidiarity under and on behalf of the Conference. When the Council functions in this governance role, the Strategy and Resources Committee acts as its executive management group.
- 3.25 The third type of gathering is the Conference, which is the supreme source of oversight in the Connexion. It primarily exercises *governance* as set out in para. 1.11 above in the context of exercising *leadership* as outlined in para. 1.13, but it also sets the framework for *management* as outlined in para 1.12 above. [See further paragraphs 2.7-17 above.] However, as has been noted in paragraph 3.24 there are occasions on which the Methodist Council acts in these matters on behalf of the Conference by subsidiarity.
- 3.26 **It is again important to define the intentions of each of these types of gathering and to ensure that their boundaries are not transgressed.**

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<sup>69</sup> SO 211 (2) *The council is charged with responsibility to keep in constant review the life of the Methodist Church, to study its work and witness throughout the Connexion, to indicate what changes are necessary or what steps should be taken to make the work of the Church more effective, to give spiritual leadership to the Church and to report annually to the Conference, bringing to the notice of the Conference matters to which it believes the Conference ought to give urgent attention.*

<sup>70</sup> SO 213.

- 3.27 All the contexts of circuit, district and wider Connexion mentioned above are subject to the Conference, and the oversight that is exercised in them is the Conference's oversight delegated to them. The Conference therefore overarches them all. Consequently somewhat analogous to the role of the Superintendent in the circuit and the somewhat different role of the Chair in the district have been those of the President of the Conference and the Secretary of the Conference in the whole Connexion, to which has recently been added that of the General Secretary of the Methodist Church.<sup>71</sup> According to Clauses 26 and 30 of the Deed of Union both President and Secretary of the Conference have always had to be presbyters, because they are exercising the strand of presbyteral pastoral responsibility on behalf of the Conference towards the whole Connexion [see further paragraphs 2.23-4]. When the first appointment to the General Secretaryship was made it was judged prudent that the role be combined with that of the Secretary of the Conference to help embody the oneness of the Conference Office with the connexional offices and of the Connexional Team with the Conference Office team.<sup>72</sup> Therefore the General Secretary has *de facto* been a presbyter, and the current Standing Orders concerning the role have a particular resonance when read with that understanding.<sup>73</sup> Thus whereas the Secretary of the Conference is responsible for enabling the Conference to carry out its roles of oversight (and in particular its functions in governance and leadership), the General Secretary is responsible for the oversight of the life of the Church and is the leader of the Connexional Leadership Team.<sup>74</sup>
- 3.28 When the proposals to establish the role of General Secretary were adopted it was argued that it would not always be necessary for the role to be linked with that of the Secretary of the Conference. It could therefore be envisaged that at some time the role of General Secretary might be undertaken by a deacon or lay person. Similarly the 2003 Conference adopted an amendment to Standing Order 116(3A) which made it possible for the Secretary of the Conference to delegate any of the functions or duties assigned to him or her in Standing Orders to any of the Co-ordinating Secretaries (not just those who happened to be presbyters). It could therefore be envisaged that at some time the role of Secretary of the Conference might be undertaken by a deacon or lay person. Theoretically it is even possible that neither the General Secretary of the Methodist Church nor the Secretary of the Methodist Conference be presbyters. But the reasons which led to the linking of the General Secretary's role to that of the Secretary of the Conference are still valid, and it is important that

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<sup>71</sup> The role of General Secretary of the Methodist Church was established by the 2002 Conference and the first appointment made by the 2003 Conference for the connexional year 2003-4.

<sup>72</sup> See paragraph 2.5 and S.O. 302(1) *The person who is for the time being the Secretary of the Conference shall also, by that fact, be the General Secretary of the Methodist Church.*

<sup>73</sup> But see below for consideration of whether the roles of General Secretary or Secretary of the Conference are necessarily required to be presbyteral.

<sup>74</sup> *SO 302(2) The General Secretary shall be responsible for leading the development of the vision, mission and strategy of the Church, and shall be the executive leader of a management and leadership team, comprising also the Co-ordinating Secretaries, the District Chairs and the Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order.*

the strand of presbyteral oversight is embodied at a senior level amongst those who serve the Conference or work in the Connexional Team.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, although either the General Secretary or the Secretary of the Conference could be a deacon or lay person, some of the functions currently carried out by them should always be fulfilled by a presbyter.

- 3.29 Moreover, amongst the functions performed by the General Secretary and the Secretary of Conference are not just responsibilities with regard to the Methodist Council and the wider Connexion, but also a major role towards the Conference itself. Yet here at this supreme point of oversight it has proved to be important that all the emphases of the pastoral responsibility which the Conference focuses in its presbyteral representatives (thereby making one strand of the Conference's oversight) are not gathered together in the one person. As well as a President of Conference there therefore needs to be another senior presbyter to share in the same presbyteral oversight whilst fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and the General Secretary. But there is a difference of emphasis in this, which when it is held to by both parties produces clearer and more effective exercising of oversight in and by the Conference, and in the Conference's name throughout the whole Connexion. That difference of emphasis can be characterised as follows. The person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and the General Secretary exercises **executive oversight** connected with the carrying forward of the life and work of the whole church, whilst the President exercises **presiding oversight** connected with being a figurehead and chair of proceedings, whilst acting executively (after receiving appropriate advice) on the Conference's behalf in some clearly defined areas such as stationing and dealing with the resignation from or reinstatement to full Connexion of presbyters and deacons. As noted above, Standing Order 302 states that it is currently the General Secretary who is responsible for leading the development of the vision, mission and strategy of the Church and of its executive management. In this the General Secretary interacts with the Conference, which has the final authority over the vision, mission and strategy that are adopted. The President has a role of leadership within the parameters of the vision, mission and strategy that are adopted by the Conference. Within the Conference, the President offers inspiration (for example, through the set-piece addresses). But within the business meetings she or he has to ensure that fair debates occur and fair decisions are made, irrespective of his or her personal views or agenda. The President re-presents or reflects the Conference to itself as he or she presides at it. Outside its meetings she or he then represents the Conference by speaking and acting on its behalf and in accordance with its expressed wishes. He or she is able to exercise discretion in some matters, but does not have a role that is independent from, still less set over or against the Conference. However, both the President and the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and the General Secretary exercise the strand of presbyteral pastoral responsibility in oversight and as such play particular roles in the workings

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<sup>75</sup> Not least to counteract any tendency for the Connexional Team and those who serve the Conference being treated as a civil service rather than as people sharing in the oversight of the Church.

of the Conference, where their strand of oversight is supremely meshed with those formal meetings or groups and individual officers exercising the other strand.

- 3.30 Just as the essentially collegial nature of oversight in Methodism means that at the heart of the Conference (which is itself at the heart of the Connexion) the strand of presbyteral oversight has to be shared by two people (the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and General Secretary on the one hand, and the President of the Conference on the other), so it is equally important that the essentially shared or collaborative nature of oversight means that the strand of presbyteral oversight is visibly and effectively meshed with the roles of lay people and deacons exercising their proper responsibilities. The Presidency is therefore shared between a President who is a presbyter and a Vice-President. The Vice-President can take the chair whilst the Conference is debating or executing business, and brings insights from his or her experience, work and interests to the leadership of the Conference and the wider Connexion. Therefore, as noted above,<sup>76</sup> the role of Vice-President is extremely important and symbolic, not least as a representative lay office-holder. But this is complicated by the fact that at present a deacon can be elected as Vice-President. Moreover the very term “Vice-President” is increasingly problematic, in that the person who holds this office can never become the President because the President has to be a presbyter exercising presbyteral oversight. In addition, the Deed of Union currently states that the Vice-President can only preside over the business of the Conference by invitation of the President, at his or her absolute discretion, and in his or her presence.<sup>77</sup> The shared nature of oversight requires that this be changed. In some partner Methodist Churches (for example the Methodist Church of Ghana and the Methodist Church of Nigeria) the practice has developed of having a Presiding Bishop and Lay President of the Conference (and a Lay Session of the Conference meeting under the Lay President whilst the Ministerial Session meets), and a Bishop and Lay Chair in each district/diocese. This might provide a model for a clearer expression of shared oversight in British Methodism, with the Presidency being made up of a Lay President, a Presbyter President and the Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order.
- 3.31 Similarly, the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and General Secretary shares in the strand of presbyteral oversight with other presbyters in the Joint Secretaries Group (and wider Connexional Team) and the Connexional Leadership Team, but in each of those bodies that strand of presbyteral oversight is also meshed with the insights and responsibilities of deacons and lay people as they exercise their distinctive roles. Moreover, the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of Conference and General Secretary also shares particular tasks and responsibilities with the other

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<sup>76</sup> Paragraph 2.26 and footnote.

<sup>77</sup> Deed of Union Clause 28(a). Clause 29(b) then provides for the Vice-President, in the first instance, to preside should the President be absent (presumably in exceptional circumstances such as illness).

strand of formal and corporate oversight that is delegated by the Conference to the Methodist Council (in which lay people, deacons and presbyters each play their proper roles).<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

3.32 In each context of the Church's life there are therefore emerging interdependent structures in which the primary emphasis is leadership, management or governance respectively. This takes further the exploration of these terms in the 2002 Conference report *Leadership in the Methodist Church*.<sup>79</sup> In each of these scenarios formal bodies and lay officers and deacons (e.g. Circuit Stewards, the Vice-President of the Conference) all have vital roles to play. Equally vital is the role of the Superintendents, Chairs, the person fulfilling the presbyteral parts of the roles of the Secretary of the Conference and the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, and the President of the Conference. All of the latter are presbyters, carrying appropriate presbyteral authority in the various contexts of shared oversight in which they operate. At some points they will therefore be primarily exercising their ministry in the form of *leadership*, as defined above; at other times in the form of *management*; and at yet others in the form of *governance*. As has been suggested above it is important that they are able to recognise the boundaries and maintain the intentionality of each, whilst also recognising and promoting their interdependence.

## 4. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

4.0.1 Sections 2 and 3 have sought to tease out the understandings of leadership, management and governance which are either explicit or implicit in British Methodism and which contribute as key components of the concept and practice of oversight. Theological considerations have been present explicitly at some points (e.g. 2.2), though they have in truth undergirded all that has been said so far. The report has, however, yet to make clear how detailed, contemporary theological reflection might help us to evaluate our theory and practice of leadership, management and governance, and whether the 'oversight' spoken of is anything more than the sum of these component parts. This present section highlights leading theological considerations that have informed the thinking behind the report and will help shape the practice to flow from it. Each theological insight is articulated both in terms of what is being said about God within the Christian theological tradition, and with respect to practical ways in which each insight informs the immediate task in hand. These latter practical expressions are contained in boxed sections throughout the text. The boxes are meant to 'ground' the reflections. They are not 'applications' of theology, or simply stories about experience. They

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<sup>78</sup> In doing so, she or he shares in the role of "executive oversight" with the Chair of the Methodist Council's Strategy and Resources Committee, who is not required to be a presbyter and who is currently a lay person.

<sup>79</sup> 2002 Conference Agenda pp.165-187.

present the theological insights in a different way from the text around them. People who find it easier to begin with examples which relate more directly to 'real life' may, however, choose to start with the boxes before exploring the text before and after each box.

4.0.2 The challenges and dangers of such an approach must be recognised. All Christian thinking and acting needs to be theologically informed. Christians strive to be Christ-like, as they seek to conduct themselves in the way that they believe God wants them to be. But behaviour patterns cannot simply be read off from understandings of God as known in Christ. The whole Christian church is engaged in a constant interpretative task as it seeks by the Spirit to discover more about God as known in Christ, and to discern how the developing, collective wisdom it carries with it should issue in forms of social organisation and human conduct. Different emphases and different aspects of God are, furthermore, brought to the fore in different generations.

#### **4.1 God as Creator, Redeemer and Perfecter: Power-Sharing, Redeeming Responsibility**

4.1.1 God is creator of all things (Gen. 1:1-2:3, 2:4-25). God alone redeems (Ps 49:7, 130:7, Rom. 3:24-5). God alone can be said to be all-powerful, and all power derives from God (Deut. 8:17-8).<sup>80</sup> Creation is the overall, fragile context in which all human endeavour is located (Rom. 8:22-3). Redemption is the costly activity God undertakes to enable creation to become (in Christ, by the Spirit) what it can be (Rom 8:18, Rev. 21:1-8). Power is both a capacity for action and an expression of a relationship.<sup>81</sup> The self-revelation of God as creator, redeemer and perfecter clarifies the way in which God's exercise of power is to be understood. References to 'almighty God' respect the power of God, but mislead if God's power is not considered alongside both God's desire for justice (Micah 6:6-8), and God's nature as love (1 John 4:8). The costly, self-giving love of God exemplified supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ shapes the way in which the phrase 'the power of God' is to be received and used by Christians. 'Oversight' is thus to be understood also within this light: within the overall creating, redeeming and power-sharing activity of a loving God. Participation in the task of oversight is participation in God's oversight of the world.<sup>82</sup> This can be seen in an inclusive, protective sense. Though the sense remains that 'God sees all'

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<sup>80</sup> Even abuse of power must be understood as derived from God in the sense that it is misuse of the responsibility and resources entrusted to human beings.

<sup>81</sup> As outlined in para 1.14.6 above 'power' can be characterized as 'power-over', 'power-within' and 'power-with' (see Martha E. Stortz, 'Naming and Reclaiming Power' in M.R.A. Kanyoro ed., *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership* Geneva: WCC Publications 1997, pp. 71-81).

<sup>82</sup> And when related connotations of the Greek root for the English term are carried over, 'oversight' needs to carry with it notions of 'caring for' and 'looking favourably upon' (as in, e.g. Luke 1:68, 7:16).



and that all are accountable to God for their actions, oversight offers a positive, life-affirming image of God.<sup>83</sup>

- 4.1.2 Christians differ as to the extent to which it may be said that God has chosen not to use fully God's power, or has given up the power available to God. Interpretations of biblical passages such as Phil. 2.1-11 are diverse. But the fact that God has created at all – i.e. that God has allowed things in creation to exist – reminds us that there is something other than God (the world) in relation to which God has chosen to stand. Some Christians claim that God retains total control; others accentuate the extent to which God has laid power aside. Whichever line is followed, God's exercise of power cannot be equated with domination, for such a view would not cohere with the belief that God is love. God's love affects the freedom of God: in freedom and out of love God chooses to let others to be free. In so doing, God enables and empowers human beings to be co-creators. This is one way in which being 'made in God's image' can be understood (Gen. 1:26-28).<sup>84</sup>

In the context of the church, therefore, it would be strange to try to force people to do things they don't want to do. The coercive use of power is not usually creative anyway. In this sense, the church has to be recognised to be a 'voluntary society': most people in the life of the church are there because they choose to be. The 'voluntary' nature of this involvement is, however, qualified in so far as Christians believe that the doing of the will of God is a calling. Christian discipleship properly understood includes a commitment to the church as the body of Christ in the world. A 'covenant relationship' is not the same as a contract, but it is more than a whimsical kind of voluntariness ('I might/might not – depends how things go'). Committed involvement and action in and through the church becomes a 'duty' not in the sense of a chore, but as a joyful responsibility. Christian actions remain, however, freely chosen.<sup>85</sup>

- 4.1.3 The freedom God grants to creation invites us to consider what our freedom is *for*. The redemptive activity of God continues God's creative act. God's creative and redemptive acts are both acts of love: they let another be, and work for the well-being of the other. As examples of God's exercising of power, they are also, therefore, examples of the way in which God shares power. God does not manipulate creation to God's own ends and does not compel creatures to be redeemed. Human beings are free to choose not to follow God's intention for the world i.e. that the world embody the reign of God. Nor does God leave the created order untouched. God remains in constant, intimate interaction with it. The extent to which it is clear that God has not abandoned creation says something about God. God remains the nurturer and protector of all who seek God's reign (Matt. 6:25-34).

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<sup>83</sup> It could be argued that images of 'overseers' from Victorian workhouses are too dominant behind some understandings of (and fears about) 'oversight'.

<sup>84</sup> See also 4.5.1 below.

<sup>85</sup> This also leads to the observation that where Christians undertake tasks unwillingly, begrudgingly or feel they are coerced, then God is dishonoured.

4.1.4 The perfecting activity of God brings together insights about God's holiness (God's 'sanctifying' of the world), God's part in the future which is already anticipated in the present (the coming of the reign of God), and the purpose of redemption (what is the created order being saved *for?*). Though a problematic term, 'perfection' denotes that which is being moved towards. God is the companion of those who desire to participate in God's holiness and to celebrate the inbreaking presence of God's reign. The future lies in God's hands (Rom. 8:28-30, Rev. 21:1-7): God will bring to fruition that which God has promised. Even so, it is clear that God has placed much of that promised future into human hands, despite the fact that human beings are far from perfect as they seek to work (or not, as the case may be) as co-creators with God of that which is yet to come.

Talk of 'holiness' and 'perfection' may not be common in working relationships. But 'objectives', 'goal-setting', 'purposes' and 'mission-statements' are all part of working life. Christian activity is 'directional'; it has a purpose. If we lose a sense of what any activity is *for* and of how it serves God's mission in the world, then it should be stopped. In practical terms, this means that the current fashion for mission statements, aims and objective-setting can easily be recognised as usable in the service of God's reign. If such practices as objective-setting are constantly undertaken with explicit reference to who God is and what God intends for the world, then they become mission-orientated practices.

4.1.5 All power derives from God. Therefore all personal power ('charisma') and all institutional power (taking the form of authority) must be understood as derived power. As such, it is to be understood as a gift, to be received, treasured and used accordingly. Where it is not understood as gift, where it is used to demean others, and where no attempt is made to clarify how it can be shared, then power is abused and God, as the source of all power, is dishonoured.

4.1.6 Understanding human power in the light of God's exercise of power for the purposes of creation and redemption entails respecting the givenness of the world (and of the concrete situations in which we find ourselves) and the possibility of ongoing transformation. The proper human exercise of power, in Christian understanding, is to be understood as participation in the redemptive work of God.

This means asking at every stage and in every context e.g. 'how does this committee further God's mission in the world?' 'how is this committee acting as an agent of transformation?' 'what power do I hold, and how can I contribute to this group's role in transformative action?'

4.1.7 No-one's power is total, perhaps not even God's (due to God's way of choosing to operate). All power is relational, God's included. The doctrine of the trinity is a way of articulating the insight that God is relational in God's very self. To respect the derived nature of power and the responsibility entailed in participating in God's redeeming, transforming work in the world means exercising human power relationally. To link discussion of the appropriate human exercise of power to exploration of

what it means for God to be relational therefore goes to the heart of what it means to believe in God, and to act accordingly. This also links to explorations of the way in which God has always been seen to work through a social organism (a people, a church)<sup>86</sup> and to create structures within which people can live (commandments, liturgies).

In practice this means welcoming clear accountability, whilst creating structures which do not foster oppression. Strong accountability recognises that all need support, encouragement, and sometimes the critique, of others. Non-oppressive structures ‘let others be’ – to get on with their jobs, to take risks. Where there is trust in working relationships, people know what their jobs are, get on with them and check back with others anyway, without fear of feeling oppressed. Accountability is then recognised as a positive aspect of power understood relationally. CPD is sometimes interpreted as oppressive rather than being recognised as an agreed, shared framework which enables the Methodist Church to order its life and fulfil its responsibility to participate in God’s mission. Where accountability is accepted with trust, and even with joy, it can be life-enhancing. Clarity of purpose can be life-enhancing too, as the ‘Our Calling’ and ‘Priorities for the Methodist Church’ processes demonstrate.

4.1.8 God’s way of ‘letting the world be’ whilst remaining in intimate interaction with it justifies neither a laissez-faire management style nor a fussy interventionism. The clear intent to share power signals how individuals can better understand their own action. Isolated actions by solitary individuals are ultimately not necessarily powerful actions. They may not understand appropriately the relational aspect of power. If power-in-relation is the strongest and most effective form of the exercise of power, then all management styles and all organisational structures will need to respect this. God has delegated to human beings the responsibility for creation’s care (Gen. 1:28). This is not the abnegation of responsibility but the consequence of freedom and a corollary of creativity and abundant flourishing, hallmarks of the Spirit of God. From this perspective, appropriately-exercised participation in the power-sharing of God (in the forms of leadership, management and governance) can be seen as spiritual gifts.<sup>87</sup>

Good managers do not double-check every action of those whom they manage, once a relationship of trust has been established. Nor do they appear on the scene only when there is a problem. Supervision is a means of regular review both of work tasks, and of a working relationship i.e. a review of the way that power is shared within a developing, working relationship and a constant source of encouragement.

4.1.9 There is arguably a hidden ‘perfectionism’ within much working life: wherever people feel like cogs within a machine, or automatons who are expected to make no mistakes, then the demands made of them treat them

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<sup>86</sup> On which see further 4.4 below.

<sup>87</sup> See further below 4.3.

as if they were sub-human. The human desire to ‘get the job done’ can often overlook the nature of the world in which the task is being done. By contrast, God’s desire to ‘get the job done’ (to usher in the kingdom and to bring about the perfection of the world) does not overlook the world’s complexity or the implications of freedom. If, then, people are to reflect the fact that God is perfecting the created order in human life and work, they will have to be future-oriented, with full awareness of the limitations and possibilities of the present.

## **4.2 Redemption Through Christ: Christ as Servant**

4.2.1 God’s redemptive activity in the person and work of Jesus Christ is the fundamental lens through which the activity of God is to be read. In Christ ‘God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19). As a result of the cross, Christians often easily remark that ‘God’s only power is weakness’ and refer to the nature of Jesus’ servant ministry. Sometimes, however, the cross is focused upon in isolation from resurrection (and vice versa), or without respect for the Gospel of John’s insights into the cross as symbol of glory (John 3:14, cf. 1:14, 17:1-5). Theological considerations about power must therefore not neglect the triumph of resurrection even whilst acknowledging that participation in the power of God in the world will involve pain-bearing.

4.2.2 The shaming of the power of the world through the weakness of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18-25) thus needs careful handling when used in discussions of power, leadership and authority in and beyond the Church. Appeals to ‘servant leadership’ are sometimes lazily used in church discussions about ministry. Utter dependence upon God is the basis of all Christian ministry and service, but is sometimes experienced as weakness, helplessness, and powerlessness. These are part of ministry, but are bearable only because of God, the life-giver, whose presence is evident in resurrection.

4.2.3 The centrality of Christ for Christian faith is often held to lead to assumptions that the picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels must be able to answer all questions asked of it. Jesus then becomes the ‘model leader’ or ‘archetypal manager’, and evidence for this is found in the Gospels.<sup>88</sup> Christians disagree about whether such an approach is possible. Some note Jesus’ calling of a team of helpers (Mk. 1:16-20), his need for reflection (Mk. 6:31-2), his willingness to take on his critics (Mk. 2:6-12, 17, 24-8; 3:4; 7:6-13) as examples of an exemplary leadership style. Others note these as elements of Jesus’ style, but are reluctant to conclude that the Gospels offer a model style which can be copied in today’s world: complex (post-)modern organisations make fresh demands which patterns of leadership worked out in predominantly rural first-century Palestinian culture are ill-equipped to meet.

4.2.4 The ‘servant leadership’ which Jesus embodied will thus prove informative, but may require greater reflection to prove fully usable in the contemporary world. In particular, the paradoxical nature of Jesus’ teaching and practice must be stressed: the exhortations not to ‘lord it over

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<sup>88</sup> E.g. J. Adair *The Leadership of Jesus* Canterbury Press 2002.

others' and preparedness to be 'the least' (Mk. 10:41-45; Luke 7:28), alongside evident leadership in the cause of serving others.<sup>89</sup> As presented to the reader of the Gospels, in the teeth of much opposition and faced with the bewilderment and misunderstanding of his own immediate followers, Jesus nevertheless 'carried people with him' to and beyond the cross. His actions ensured continued activity for the purpose which he embodied and about which he taught. The responsibility for serving God's kingdom (the way of the cross) is thus shared with others by Jesus from the start. The only Jesus which Christianity knows is the Jesus Christ of 'the Jesus movement'.

- 4.2.5 Servant leadership remains *leadership* even whilst undertaken in a spirit of service, and any definition of leadership requires complex wrestling with issues about power and authority. Leadership undertaken in the spirit of service prioritizes the task of enabling people to grow towards life in Christ, to be formed and transformed by God in whatever setting they find themselves. Such leadership will need to be exercised in the midst of struggles about power, in the context of clashes about authority, and with full awareness of the pressures caused by limited resources, as all participants and contexts are human. Exercise of leadership in and for the Church, however, can at least recognize that it will occur in settings where the will of God is being sought through and beyond the human wills at work. The *purpose* of such activity and such leadership should be stressed: the celebration of the presence of Christ, the enabling of the life of Christ to be participated in, the empowerment of individuals to see themselves 'in Christ'.

It is not accidental that the power of small groups has been recognised so often, and in so many different ways, in the history of Christianity. Nor is it coincidental that Methodism as a movement has made so much of small groups (and of committees). The primacy of communal oversight has deflected attention away from individual leaders in Methodism, with a corresponding attention to the potent energy of groups. Contemporary challenges for the church abound at this point: how can purposeful groups or committees be wisely led and managed and prevented from becoming either redundant or too powerful and complacent through sheer permanence? How can important committees be revitalized to be contemporary forms of participation in the reign of God, being Christ-like in the way they run, and in evident continuity with the early Jesus movement? How can the strengths of small group spirituality (e.g. from class meetings or cell groups) be re/discovered and both feed contemporary disciples and inform the organisational structure of the church? How can individuals be empowered in their Christian discipleship by their group involvement?

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<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the language of 'servanthood' as used throughout the early church needs careful appropriation. As the work of Dale Martin and others has shown, not all slaves were powerless. 'Managerial slaves' could have had considerable power. Paul was a 'slave of the lord' but was fully aware of his managerial responsibilities in relation to Christian communities he had founded.

- 4.2.6 ‘Christ-likeness’ is a form of shorthand for the way in which reflections on Jesus Christ inform the thinking and behaviour of Christians. This phrase too needs using carefully. It remains powerful nevertheless. Wherever abuse and criticism is unjustly received, then participation in the suffering of Christ occurs. Wherever oppression occurs, then God in Christ shares with the oppressed in their experience.

Managers and leaders know what it means to experience being the object of criticism for something that they may not have brought about. Understood from within the context of Christian discipleship, such experience can be regarded as ‘Christ-like’ in so far as they take on undeserved criticism. A good manager may also properly accept responsibility for mistakes made by their staff. If able to exercise ‘servant leadership’ they may be able to bear such opposition, but will be acutely aware of the potential for abuse within working relationships. Likewise, those who are managed and led often know what it means to be taken advantage of, and when their time, labour and skills are abused. If this can be deemed ‘Christ-like’ it can only be so because God in Christ knows what such experience means. It does not make it acceptable practice. In the midst of the complexity of such working relationships it is clear: the respectful, sensitive deployment of people, in their use of labour, time and skills, is itself a form of participation in the redeeming work of God in the world.

Christ-likeness must therefore also be identified in terms of human flourishing: where the ‘respectful, sensitive deployment of people, in their use of labour, time and skills’ becomes an act of co-creation with God and results in a recognition that ‘the kingdom of God has come to you’ (Luke 11:20). It is the task of Christ-like ‘servant ministry’, and Christ-like ‘leadership, management and governance’ to aspire to reach this point: where the results of the human practice of oversight correspond with God’s oversight of the world.

### **4.3 The Spirit as Creative, Dynamic and Embodied: Spiritual and Sacramental Power**

- 4.3.1 Belief in resurrection requires that attention be given to ‘spiritual power’. The spirit of God, as revealed in Christ crucified and raised, continues to be a gift to the Church and to the world and the source of new life. The spirit of God is creative (Gen. 1:2), guides (Ps. 143:10, Matt. 4:1, Acts 8:29, 10:19), anoints (Mk. 1:10, 2 Cor. 1:21-2), cleanses (Ps. 51:10-12), gives gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11) and sometimes disturbs (1 Sam. 19:18-24) those who encounter God. Christian conviction about the resurrection of the body encapsulates the view, however, that spirit and body must not be viewed in isolation (1 Cor. 6:19).
- 4.3.2 Liveliness and dynamism are hallmarks of the spirit’s presence. If oversight is to be exercised, and if leadership, management and governance are to be practised ‘in the spirit’, then a dynamic, refreshing, transformative approach to decision-making, strategic thinking and organisational development will be evident. Structures cannot ultimately

contain or constrain the workings of the Spirit of God.<sup>90</sup> But they are needed to channel the impact of God's Spirit, lest God's dynamism overwhelm us. 'Structures' and 'channels' are not, however, the same as dull bureaucracy.

Consider this as a vision of what it might be like following a Church Council or Circuit Meeting. You return home thinking...

'what a useful time that was. All the decisions we made had crystal-clear proposals attached to them. All the discussions were informed, and well-led. It was evident that all those present were fully aware of their co-responsibility under God, guided by God's spirit, for the meeting's conduct. If time may prove that we made some bad decisions, it won't have been any particular individual's fault, not even the chair's. And anyway, we were all very conscious that we were making our decisions together, and would all stand by them and support their outcomes, whether or not they happened to coincide with our own personal views.'

4.3.3 Christians believe in the resurrection of the body (whole persons), not merely the spirit. This belief in turn creates concern for whole persons and, when understood metaphorically, for whole 'bodies' such as churches, and other organisations. As whatever 'bodies' we are (individual and corporate), the challenge is to celebrate the presence of the power of God as a redeeming, reconciling, nurturing, and liberating spiritual power (2 Cor: 3.17). God's power and empowerment thus belong closely together. 'Spiritual power' can, however, too easily become disembodied, unworldly power. Such an approach would devalue the importance of the material world.

4.3.4 The way in which the Spirit of God is at work in the world can be clarified further by reference to the sacraments. In the sacraments, water and bread and wine function as material symbols and means through which God's presence is recognised and conveyed. In the same way that sacraments are material ways in and through which God is discerned in the world, so also human participation in divine power is always embodied. Speaking of the spiritual power of God as 'sacramental' is therefore a way of keeping embodiedness and materiality in focus, lest mention of 'spirit' cause us to consider God's power in too diffuse (woolly, inward) a way. Through respect for power as embodied, we keep concretely in touch with what it means to participate in the power of God in this world, and not some imaginary spiritual dimension. God's power is acknowledged to be channelled in and through the material world.

4.3.5 The care of both soul/spirit and body of those who lead and are led is of paramount concern. The practice of oversight, in taking expression in the form of leadership, management and governance, focuses not merely on ideas or beliefs or on the inner lives of those who hold them. Nor does it focus only on visions, aspirations, mission-statements, targetted outcomes, goals or objectives. All of these, necessary as they are, need to be

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<sup>90</sup> In the midst of a created order granted great freedom by God, lack of clarity in, and understanding of, structures may, though, seriously hinder the fulfilment of God's intentions.

embodied. Oversight therefore becomes too diffuse ('too spiritual') when it does not take the form of leadership and management which turns goals into strategies and planned activities. 'Stewardship' is the term often used for the appropriate oversight exercised in this area of the Church's life.

Sacramental respect for the material world takes many forms including safeguarding of bodies and stewardship of both money and property. 'Shared oversight' is the collective task of acting in a way which demonstrates active care for the created world. The 'bodies' (literal and metaphorical), property and money which are overseen (and thus managed) become the focus of divine care. The human actions in which leaders and managers (as those who exercise oversight) individually and collectively participate become themselves sacramental actions in so far as they are actions in and through which the presence of God is called upon and experienced. Conferences, councils, committees, commissions, working parties can all be contexts, channels and agents in and through which God is revealed to be at work. This occurs both by the way they act and by the conclusions they reach and the decisions they take. In the way they operate and the work they agree to do we need constantly to ask: are they Christ-like? What image of God do they embody and promote, directly and indirectly in their work? Whom do they serve?

- 4.3.6 The structure of the Church's ministry depends on the recognition that God works in and through people, and gives diverse gifts (1 Cor. 12:27-31). The gifts which people receive ('charisms') are sometimes publicly recognised (in the form of 'offices'). The acknowledgment of the interplay between charism and office, and between Spirit and structure, is crucial for an understanding of God's way of working in and through the Church.
- 4.3.7 All Christians receive some form of gift. All may play a part in the various meetings or bodies in the life of the church where collective vision is formed and owned and corporate leadership is exercised. But not all Christians receive the gift of personal leadership. Even when they do, this may not always be publicly recognised. The main focus of this report, however, is on the way in which the many publicly recognised forms of leadership in the church (individual and corporate) inter-relate. Some of the individual 'offices' held are permanent (e.g. ordination to the presbyterate or the diaconate); others are temporary (e.g. church stewarding, or being a member of the Connexional Team).
- 4.3.8 A particular challenge of this whole report is the way in which it may be possible to see *individuals* as channels of God's power. Individuals participate in the oversight of God *in the roles they fulfil*, and are thus channels of divine grace. This is the case, however much the emphasis remains on the nature of oversight as firstly a corporate concept.<sup>91</sup> The recognition that oversight is primarily held corporately (by the Conference) underpins all exploration of collegial and personal episkopé.

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<sup>91</sup> *Episkopé and Episcopacy* 2000 paras. 36-51 explores personal episkopé, though leaves theological exploration underdeveloped. The section also notes (para 41) that 'personal oversight at connexional level is less clearly understood and effectively exercised than elsewhere in Methodist polity'. This present report represents a major attempt to rectify that lack, and to note the implications of the resulting findings for all 'levels' of the Church's life.



The shared (presbyteral, diaconal and lay) nature of oversight thus precedes the recognition that individuals can and do exercise oversight. The recognition that individuals do nevertheless exercise personal oversight on behalf of the corporate body and as part of the shared exercise of oversight may, however, need appropriate reassertion in the Church's life. Crucial also in Methodist understanding is the recognition that whilst many key roles in the life of the Church – and thus the exercise of personal episkopé – will fall to presbyters (and sometimes deacons), this is not inevitably the case.

Those in positions of leadership in the Church (lay or ordained) need to be enabled to recognise the roles of governance, management and leadership that they hold. This means encouraging individuals who have specific leadership roles (local, circuit, district, national) to articulate visions and proposals and to offer insights to the bodies to which they are accountable. These bodies in turn are responsible for the constructive critique and support of such leadership.

Those who represent bodies within the church across the Connexion (e.g. from church to circuit meeting, from circuit to District Synod) and who represent the church to other churches and bodies will need to recognise fully the nature of their responsibility. The days of 'I'm on the circuit meeting but I don't really want to be' will have to pass. Instead, there needs to be a recognition that the circuit meeting is a gathering of inspired representatives whose task is to evaluate the dynamic proposals emerging from across a circuit, including major insights and proposals from the Circuit Leadership Team.

#### **4.4 The Church as Christ's Body: The Structuring of Divine Power**

- 4.4.1 The existence of the church is a reminder that God works in and through the created order through a people (Deut. 7:6). The church is a decisive instrument of God in the world, grounded in the triune God's reign and mission<sup>92</sup>, continuous with God's calling of the covenant people Israel (Rom. 9-11).
- 4.4.2 The church is Christ's Body (1 Cor 12:27), or can be conceived of as a body with Christ as the head (Col. 1:18). In so far as it is Christ in embodied form in the world today, with God's help the church seeks to reflect who God is, as known in Christ. Christ is present by the Spirit in and with the church. Christ crucified and risen supports and challenges the church. In conformity to Christ, the church is servant, prepared to be broken for the world, and also endeavours to be a safe space, a place in and through which creative, spiritual resources can be found for holy living, life in all its fullness. In such a context, all ranks ('names, and sects, and parties') fall, because all are equal before God. Such equality before God is because of God's grace and is a consequence of God's work in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

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<sup>92</sup> *Called to Love and Praise* 1999, 2.1

Names, sects and parties often do prove significant, however, and are not always deemed equal. The challenges and responsibilities of created freedom are immense. The temptation to thrive on the exercise of personal episcopé can lead to a failure to respect the primacy of communal oversight. A circuit steward forgets her accountability to the circuit meeting, for example. Or a Superintendent undertakes an expensive and unwise initiative in the Circuit on the strength of a brief conversation at a staff meeting. Our problem, however, has often been releasing people to do their jobs as individuals when it is *appropriate* for them to take individual initiative (within parameters provided by a group). Recognition of a primary accountability to a group need not mean fear, when trust is being exercised. In a context of communal trust, names and sects and parties can fall.

4.4.3 The church remains, then, a human, social organisation, seeking to live out in its own life the challenge of what it means for people to be one in Christ. It is a collection of fallible human communities, made up of fallible individuals. As the writings of the Apostle Paul bear witness, from the start, the earliest Christian communities (the ‘emerging churches’) were far from perfect. The church – even as Christ’s body – is shaped by the complexity resulting from createdness. The way that churches structure their corporate lives always needs to acknowledge a tension between divine empowerment by the spirit and fallibility.<sup>93</sup> The church’s members are both God’s spirit-inspired, co-workers and individuals prone to disrespect God’s will for church and world.

The Methodist Church supports the view that all members share in the ministry and mission of God. The ‘priesthood of all believers’ is a shorthand version of this. This does not, however, mean that everyone does everything.<sup>94</sup> The church’s life needs to be ordered, and therefore different orders and roles exist within the one ministry of Christ dispersed throughout the whole people of God. But no ‘ranks’ with status are created as a result. If orders and roles become ‘ranks’ then human fallibility has merely caused further fractures to the broken body of Christ. Instead, the ordering of the church’s life is more to do with missionary effectiveness as a consequence of responding to the call of God to diverse ministries as God’s people in the world.<sup>95</sup>

4.4.4 Power is never exercised in a vacuum, but always in concrete contexts. Likewise, God’s power is experienced and participated in in real situations. The primacy of the group (chosen people/church) in Jewish and Christian understandings means that it is first and foremost within the group that the experience of God’s power is enjoyed and perceived. Locating the primary oversight within the Conference (and then in a corporate context at all

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<sup>93</sup> A striking difference between Roman Catholic and Methodist traditions, as noted in the International WMC/RC Dialogues, is the extent to which respect for this fallibility is built into church structures, see e.g. Conference Agenda 2003: pp. 161-180.

<sup>94</sup> This insight is contained in different forms in many Conference reports e.g. *The Methodist Diaconal Order* (1995), *Authorisations to Preside at the Lord’s Supper* (1996) and then especially in section 4.5 of *Called to Love and Praise* (1999).

<sup>95</sup> Deed of Union, clause 4.

operational levels of the Methodist Church's life: District Synod, Circuit Meeting, Church Council) reflects this primacy.

- 4.4.5 The Christ-likeness of any individual thus derives from the Christ-likeness of the body.<sup>96</sup> Individuals who exercise personal episkopé do so because their authority is derived from the authority carried by the body. To be 'individualists' and fail to respect the primacy of communal episkopé would be to distort the spiritual power channelled through the individual, by severing the connectedness with Christ which comes through the church.<sup>97</sup>

Those who function representatively within the church across the Connexion (e.g. from church to circuit meeting, from circuit to District Synod) and who represent the church to other churches and bodies can therefore recognise that they are supported and carried by the body (of whoever they represent, within the body of Christ). They are to *represent* (and not remain silent) so that Christ's body is enlivened by their actions. They *stand for* others, and need fully to acknowledge their individual role on behalf of many. They are not necessarily to try and guess what the body they represent might have thought or desired, but they remain conscious always of their representative role, and their participation in the collective task (to discern the mind of Christ in and for the church, in the service of the coming of God's reign).

- 4.4.6 The church is the 'base' in relation to which all Christian claims to be speaking or acting with and for God must be substantiated. Such is the theological basis for a joyful form of accountability. All individuals and groups who claim to speak and work for God as known in Christ gladly accept such accountability.

- 4.4.7 The challenge for the Church is how to ensure the appropriate exercise of personal episkopé, retaining the primacy of communal episkopé, without stifling individuals in authorised roles through their fear of acting inappropriately.

## **4.5 All Humanity in the Image of God: Oversight in the Service of Human Flourishing**

- 4.5.1 Human beings are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-7). They are created as body and spirit, for relationship with God and with each other, with the responsibility to play a decisive role in the stewardship of creation.

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<sup>96</sup> A distinction must admittedly be drawn between the authority of the whole church as the body of Christ (all the baptized) and the authority of any particular social body within a given church (e.g. Church Council, Circuit Meeting, District Synod, Conference). But the basic point stands.

<sup>97</sup> This remains true despite the sense in which individuals in orders and authorised forms of ministry may also be said to be a gift from God *to* the church and be a channel through which God addresses the church (see e.g. *What is a Presbyter?* (2002) paragraph 4). It also qualifies heavily the approach adopted by John Wesley himself, the consequences of whose own form of individualism Methodism has long since had to wrestle with. Furthermore, even prophets who criticize priests and the patterns of organised religion need to show how they are related to the religious tradition.

- 4.5.2 God's intention is that all have life in abundance (John 10:10). If life in abundance is the goal of creation, and the kingdom of God a symbol of the future which God wills for the whole created order, then all exercise of oversight is to be understood within this purpose.

Good stewardship entails the wise use of resources, material and human. It may not always mean choosing the cheapest option. It involves seeking effective and efficient ways of working. It means minimizing waste, but this is not the same as being frugal or mean. A criterion of that which enables full human flourishing – 'life in Christ' – can be brought to bear in all decisions about the church's life: not merely the flourishing of its members but working for the flourishing of all whom the church serves. In this way, mission and ministry are kept together without the church becoming merely self-serving.

- 4.5.3 Power is well-used when understood as dynamic, creative participation in the movement of creation towards redemption and consummation i.e. working for the well-being of all things. God creates in and with power, as dynamic energy. God 'gets things done' in the task of perfecting creation.

Concretely, this causes such questions to be asked as: 'how is my exercise of personal episkopé, when leading worship as a Local Preacher, contributing to human flourishing?', 'how is the exercise of collegial episkopé by a circuit staff team fostering the well-being of those inside and outside the Church to whom the staff-members relate?', 'in what ways is the exercise of communal episkopé by the Conference participating in the kingdom's coming by the decisions it takes?'

#### **4.6 Human Fallibility: Power in a Fallen World**

- 4.6.1 The created order is complex because of the freedom granted to it by its creator: we live in a 'fallen world' (Gen. 3). The exercise of power will therefore always easily become domination because the being of God will often not be reflected in the way that human beings inter-relate.
- 4.6.2 The management (stewardship) of the created order, including the exercise of power, control, authority and influence, is fraught with difficulty through being exercised in a free but fallen world. But it is essential precisely because of the freedom and responsibility which the creator has granted his creatures (understood as co-creators). If the co-creators are 'getting it right' they will resist mere 'sameness' or 'static' existence and the use of tradition as if it necessarily excluded change. Change is neither always progress nor decay. But it will need balancing by other criteria: whether empowerment occurs, whether domination is resisted, whether good relationships are fostered.

At their best, good accountability structures, and the refusal of organisations to rely too much on individuals, protects people, by acknowledging fallibility. Individuals receive the support of groups, and have their visions and ideas checked out by others. Groups in turn can generate more (initiatives, encouragement, inspiration, resources) than individuals. Circuit Leadership Teams, District Policy

Committees and the Strategy and Resources Committee of the Methodist Council are more than collections of individuals, and more than mere formal management bodies. They are locations of collective wisdom and potential sources of fresh energy. Together with their governance bodies (Circuit Meetings, District Synods and the Conference) they have the potential also to be contexts in which misguided ideas are stifled and wrong actions are prevented.

4.6.3 Sin is real. Christians differ as to the extent to which sin can be understood as an external power which consumes people almost against their will (Rom. 5:12, 6:12). To objectify sin can lead to a playing down of human responsibility for evil. Wherever emphasis is placed, there is no escaping the fact of sin: of opposition to God and God's will for creation. All collude with evil in some way.

Since human beings live in a fallen world and are affected by sin, there will at times be conflict (hidden or open) in the church as well as the world. Power may be manipulated or undermined. Fear and a simplistic view of the gospel of love can produce a tendency to bury conflict rather than resolve it. But the attempt to resolve conflict is important because what is buried will eventually surface. Disagreements between people in Church Council meetings can run deep in the life of a local church. Not all such disagreements fester, but some do. Some cannot be resolved. But local churches sometimes need to accept that this is more than a matter of 'dealing with difference'. Churches 'live in sin' like any human organisation and have to ask God to help them deal with it as part of their ongoing life.

4.6.4 There is 'structural' or 'institutional' sin. Sin is not to be identified solely with what occurs in the inner life or the personal conduct of the individual. Some theologians have spoken of a 'kingdom of sin' or a 'kingdom of evil' in order to express how endemic sin can be: there is no escaping the fact that all live within structures which cause people to act unjustly, rather than simply unwisely. The church is not a context where Christians are free from this, for it too is a fallible human organisation.

Because no-one speaks up at the appropriate time when decisions are being made, groups sometimes make bad decisions. Such inaction may not easily be identifiable as caused by any individual. Collectively, however, a group proves culpable. 'Institutional' or 'structural' sin results when individuals hide behind, or within, an organisation, and the organisation (even a church) adopts a position or a way of working, or takes an action for which its members are not prepared to take responsibility. Such sin becomes 'embodied' within the institution's life and is hard to identify, let alone shift.

4.6.5 Participation in God's power is participation in the dynamic, creative energy of God. But this does not mean that all examples of 'getting things done' participate in the power of God. Inaction may be sinful when we are actively invited to participate in the kingdom's coming. Even when there is an appropriate passivity to the receipt of the kingdom (God alone can bring it), we are actively to welcome it. Certain forms of activism might,

however, be sinful: when overactivity obscures the need to reflect on whether what is being done can be deemed God's will. The proper exercise of shared oversight monitors the relationship between action and reflection.

#### **4.7 God as Trinity: Relationality in All Things**

4.7.1 The most decisive theological insight with respect to the notion of shared episkopé is the trinitarian nature of God. The monotheism of the Christian tradition does not envisage God as a singular monarch, but as one divine Being who is Trinity. This means keeping in mind the sense that God is fundamentally relational both within God's self and in God's relating to the created order. A basic challenge provided by the doctrine of the trinity is that of pressing all human structures to clarify how human participation in the power of God reflects this relationality.

4.7.2 Shared episkopé is the concrete, structural expression in ordered human life (and thus of organisational life, including the life of the Church) of belief in the trinitarian God. Such belief underpins a relational approach to the use of power.

4.7.3 Appeal to the trinity in this way cannot, however, be used lazily to oppose all forms of ordered human life, including hierarchy.<sup>98</sup> Trinitarian thought is itself not free of hierarchy (e.g. the Son begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son). Furthermore, some forms of early church thinking about hierarchy aim to express the radical inclusiveness of all things within God.<sup>99</sup> The *intention* of such thinking, then, was not to dwell on the ranks of levels of those within a hierarchy but on the God who would include all. Even so, if critique of some forms of hierarchical thinking is possible, no form of trinitarian thinking translates easily into a clear picture of how human communities can be structured socially or politically.<sup>100</sup>

4.7.4 The trinity itself, then, provides no direct blueprint for the structuring of any human organisation. But it does challenge all organisations to declare how their structures enable all to flourish in the context of empowering relationships, whatever roles and positions people hold and occupy.

### **5 LESSONS FROM OUTSIDE THE CHURCH**

5.1 Churches are large organisations. Their reason for existing differs markedly from commercial ventures, leisure societies and political bodies. But by the very fact that they are human organisations, churches are comparable to such institutions. Indeed the development of churches has always been meshed together with secular structures, the early church with

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<sup>98</sup> More will be said on this in section 5 below.

<sup>99</sup> e.g. In the thought of Denys the Areopagite.

<sup>100</sup> Despite attempts to do this in e.g. *The Forgotten Trinity* CTBI 1989, J. Moltmann's attempt to develop this line of thinking about the 'social trinity' (in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* London: SCM Press 1981) receives trenchant critique from J. Mackey in 'Social Models of the Trinity' in R. Gill ed. *Readings in Modern Theology* London: SPCK 1995 pp123-30.

the structure of Roman society, for example, and the Methodist church with the rise of the trade union movement. Despite a desire within the church to accentuate and explore the theological dimensions of ‘oversight’, the component aspects of leadership, management and governance suggest, at the very least, that fruitful comparisons between churches and other bodies can and should be drawn.

5.2 It is possible to point to a biblical principle – in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament – to show that the people of God should be prepared to learn from outside its own life. Nevertheless, Christians both lay and ordained differ widely as to whether management or organizational studies can really help the church.<sup>101</sup> Some presbyters, for example, are sceptical about the relevance of such material to their vocations. Others seek a clarification of focus in their working lives which attention to management studies can bring. Some lay people seek solace in the church from the pressures of tightly-structured organizations. For them, the church is a deadline-free zone, and must remain so lest it lose its capacity to be a place of escape. For the church apparently to conform to the ways of the world at this point would be a dangerous move. Others carry insights from their participation in large organizations into the church and are frustrated when they cannot enact them in church life. All this being so, it is helpful to ask in what ways the church is like and unlike other organisations. Comparing and contrasting helps us to understand better what we do and what we do not do. It could also provide the basis for ideas about how we might change in order better to achieve our goals. Two areas where we currently seek greater clarification and possible change is in our understanding of the nature and role of Superintendents and District Chairs. Comparative analysis will help us with this and with our thinking about the potential role of bishops in British Methodism.

5.3 The church as institution can be helpfully compared with three models of organisation. First, it is often assumed that theories of management presuppose a **business model** for organizations. Built into this is the further assumption that businesses primarily produce or sell goods as efficiently and as cost-effectively as possible. Organizations understood in this way are therefore assumed to be largely concerned about economy and efficiency alone. It is wrong, however, to assume that selling something as cheaply as possible is an automatic goal, even if cost-effectiveness inevitably ensures that economic considerations play a prominent part in understanding and structuring such an organization. Ethical considerations can also be added to economy, efficiency and effectiveness, even if this does not happen in all businesses. Within a model of management appropriate for such organizations, however, a ‘chain of command’ is usually clearly visible, according to which a primary goal (e.g. production and sale of a clearly-defined product) is to be attained through a hierarchical ‘command/obedience’ model of management. A senior manager tells a middle manager who tells her/his team to implement ‘plan B’, ‘project C’, ‘initiative D’ or whatever.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> cf. paragraph 2.11 above.

<sup>102</sup> This is obviously a stark simplification. Interestingly, at draft stage objections were levelled against this characterisation, though inevitably from those who strive to be good managers. We

- 5.4 The Methodist Church is like this in some respects. The church seeks to operate at times in a way which ensures that all its members act alike. This is sometimes for legal reasons. But it is also for visionary and strategic purposes, purposes which are themselves theologically informed. *Our Calling* is an example of 'strategic vision'. All church-members will not end up undertaking exactly the same tasks as a result. But it is reasonable to suggest that a Conference-agreed vision should be more than merely *commended* throughout the church.
- 5.5 The church is also unlike a business organization. The 'product' (the Gospel? the grace, mercy and love of God?) is not its own to produce, even if it is attempting to convey something. Nor is its goal (to be the Church? to be faithful? to participate in the coming of the Kingdom of God?) to be as neatly defined as the task of making and marketing carpet-tiles. There are therefore clear limitations on applying any model of management that is too closely aligned to a business organization to the leadership and management of the church.
- 5.6 A second way of looking at the Church as institution is the **public service model**. There are many similarities between this and the business model in so far as cost-effectiveness and efficiency are paramount concerns in the use of public resources. The 'service' element of this second model, however, is reflected in the fact that funding for the completion of tasks is sometimes allocated rather than generated, and that the need to produce a profit on work undertaken is less prominent.<sup>103</sup> As far as decision-making structures are concerned, paid employees work within clearly defined, hierarchical structures, and are subject to decisions made in representative communal settings at many levels in the structures of government.
- 5.7 The Church is like a public service in many respects. Despite being supported by stipends rather than salaries, presbyters, for example (as the largest group of 'paid staff' of the church), function like public servants and are thus treated as such throughout society. Their relative autonomy is, however, greater than, say, Local Authority employees, despite a dual accountability to both Church (through the discipline of being in Full Connexion) and state (e.g. legal requirements relating to marriages).
- 5.8 The staffing structure of presbyters, deacons and the church's many lay staff at all levels of the church's life is often, however, unlike that of a public service because of the more localized accountability structures at work. It could be argued that greater pressing of the similarity between the church and a public service organization could work to the benefit of all. Support would then be easier to find for the importance of ensuring parity and consistency across the Connexion. It could also be argued that where the autonomy of the presbyter is too great, and a sense of connectedness

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suggest, however, that this simplified characterisation of a certain type of working environment might not be in dispute for, say, supermarket staff or car sales assistants within large chains.

<sup>103</sup> Though it must also be acknowledged that patterns of public funding have changed substantially in recent years with public bodies entering into partnerships with sources of private finance, and much greater competition between public bodies being encouraged in seeking sources of public funding.



with the Connexion via the Conference insufficiently recognised, then presbyters, church and society lose out. Attention to the similarity between the church and a public service could lead to appropriate adjustment of any imbalance.

- 5.9 A third way of looking at the church as institution is **the charity model**. Here, the role of volunteers in organizational decision-making processes and the benevolent purposes for which charitable bodies exist explain why such a model seems suited to the church. Comparing the church to a charity suggests that its employees (or those who receive stipends to undertake employee-like tasks) function like a charity's 'paid staff', enacting what decision-making bodies comprising largely of volunteers decide. The parallel is far from perfect, but is worth pursuing. The comparison can also lead to the recognition that, as sometimes happens within charitable organisations, paid staff and those who take on significant voluntary roles are undervalued, inadequately supported and insufficiently rewarded for the work they undertake. Concern for oversight in such organisations is thus about ensuring that structures are in place to prevent such abuse of people's skills and time.
- 5.10 The similarity between charitable bodies and churches is important for it seems to get to the heart of how the church's understanding of 'shared episkopé' takes shape. The 'voluntary bodies' which make the crucial decisions (e.g. especially Church Councils, Circuit Meetings, the Conference) are the heartbeat of the decision-making process. The question of whether such bodies truly *lead* the Church, however, arises. It is here where the distinctions drawn in 3.7-32 above prove so important.
- 5.11 The church can be said to differ from a charity, however, in so far as the majority of the church's decision-makers (those who participate in its committee-structures) are disciples rather than volunteers.<sup>104</sup> In theory, this should mean a greater sense of commitment, belonging and joyful duty for those who 'volunteer' in the life of the church.
- 5.12 Though the charity model may seem the best 'fit' for the Church, the extent to which aspects of the other two models can be learned from is often overlooked. As organizations, charitable bodies must structure their decision-making processes and clarify accountability. Resources have to be carefully managed and costs kept to a minimum. In all these respects there is much to be learned from the business and public service models. Furthermore, in practice, within the charitable model, though it is groups who govern (thus exercising communal *episkopé*), it is often individuals who manage, and teams who lead (exercising personal and collegial *episkopé* respectively). Recognition of this can be very fruitful as the Church examines its own leadership patterns.
- 5.13 Three critical reflections suggest themselves in the light of the above. First, attention should be paid to the extent to which power and authority is entrusted to individuals, in the business model especially. Use of resources

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<sup>104</sup> See the boxed section 4.1.2 above.

can often more easily be kept to a minimum when individuals (as opposed to groups) carry responsibility. The cost of gathering groups together to make decisions, often a time-consuming, cumbersome process, can be removed. Furthermore, speed of action is enhanced when a clear responsibility, within a tight structure where work patterns are sharply delineated, is granted to an individual.<sup>105</sup> In so much of its workings, the Methodist Church reveals deep suspicion of such individual power and authority. Such an approach is right and proper in so far as it recognises human proneness to abuse individual power. It is nevertheless recognized that personal episkopé is ‘widely exercised in Methodism’.<sup>106</sup> Methodism’s qualification of personal episkopé through its greater attention to collegial and communal forms has led it, positively, to stress the priority of the group in decision-making, the constant collaboration of lay and ordained, and the exercise of restraint on inappropriate individualism. Negatively, it has led to a debilitating dependence upon committee structures and the shackling of potential creativity. *Greater openness to the appropriate freedoms of and expectations from the Church’s representative and authorised individuals, within the accountability structures which already exist, could prove both liberating and creative.*

- 5.14 Second, all three models inevitably work with some sense of inter-locking decision-making processes. Usually, such processes are hierarchical, even if some prove more dependent on rank or status than others.<sup>107</sup> There can be no escape from the responsibility to work at, and as necessary revise, these processes. Furthermore, however much members of the church might want to claim that it should be free of hierarchical structures, or treat ‘hierarchy’ as always a negative term, the church must nevertheless find a structure capable of mobilising its resources effectively and efficiently to undertake its pastoral and missionary tasks. It can be argued that the organisation of a church is better understood as a wheel with a hub. In Methodism, the Conference is the hub upon which all spokes depend. Even here, however, it could be argued that despite being a ‘flat’ as opposed to a ‘vertical’ picture of the church, the ‘rim’ can see itself as ‘marginal’, because the ‘hub’ is the all-important ‘centre’. Whether hierarchical or not, however, the church must like any organisation agree on courses of action and allocate tasks which carry differing levels of responsibility to individuals and groups. The church will rightly go on resisting any sense that levels of allocated responsibility relate to different worth or rank of persons (be those persons lay or ordained). In this sense, the assumptions often associated with hierarchy are undermined. The differentiation of tasks within the large bureaucratic structure which the church is, however, inevitably creates distinctions between roles. Rather than pretend that it is not there, it might be preferable to accept that a hierarchical structure *does* exist, and to ensure that it works for the benefit of all within it, and all who

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<sup>105</sup> Whether this structure is hierarchical or not.

<sup>106</sup> *Episkopé and Episcopacy* 2000, paras. 36-51.

<sup>107</sup> More conducive to preferred ways of operating in the church are hierarchies which result simply from differentiated patterns of work and decision-making (e.g. from local to regional to national). Whether ‘rank’ and ‘status’ then all too easily result (e.g. so that ‘national’ is seen as more important than ‘local’) is an important question.

can be reached beyond it in the name of the church.<sup>108</sup> *In this way, hierarchy is accepted as a form of differentiated decision-making and clarification of accountability inevitable in a large organisation rather than as a way of apportioning status.* The task then is to find and work with such a structure in a manner appropriate to the theology which the Church claims it carries with it in its embodied life (see section 4 above).

- 5.15 Third, the important role played in the church by members of the faith community should be stressed. This coheres with the recognition that the Church is far from being primarily an organization of paid professionals. Though there is an appropriate professionalism to be recognised in the way that presbyters and deacons do their work, their role is primarily vocational.<sup>109</sup> Lay Workers and other lay employees may work for the church as, in effect, ‘paid professionals’ with specific skills, but these are in a minority within the church’s life. The vast majority of the church’s activities are led by unpaid volunteers who participate in the life of the church as part of their Christian discipleship. ‘Voluntary’ need not mean ‘amateur’ in the negative sense in which the latter term is sometimes used. Professional skills are used in the church on an unpaid basis, by members of the faith community who donate their time and labour to the work of the church. There are nevertheless key respects in which the church’s dependence on its unpaid members qualifies the ease with which comparison can be made between the church and business and the church and public service. This has to be borne in mind in all of the comparisons drawn, and on the lessons to be learned from other organizations. The church’s primary role as a faith community, on the basis of which it can also seek to function as a mission agency, means that other understandings of how the church operates must be brought into play alongside the three models identified.
- 5.16 Other ways of understanding how the church functions, and therefore what can be learned from other organizations, can be gleaned from reflection on how the church undertakes its discernment of priorities and allocation of resources to meet them. How, in other words, does the Methodist Church actually do its planning? Beyond and behind the structures of leadership, management and governance which exist, what can we tease out from what *actually* happens?
- 5.17 Talk of top-down and bottom-up approaches oversimplifies a more complex picture. The interplay between local churches, Circuits, Districts and the Conference produces a structure which seems at one moment heavily centralized and at another radically devolved. Within *the primary oscillation of power* – between Circuit and the Conference – it is not always clear where initiatives are first taken, even if the final authority resides with the Conference. Major connexional developments can begin, for example, as memorials to the Conference, either from Circuits or

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<sup>108</sup> This is particularly the case given the widespread recognition that hierarchy is an organisational principle of most cultures, even those such as Methodism which hold a strongly egalitarian ethic.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Professional’ here is meant to refer to high standards in the quality of work in relation to comparable professions (e.g. in teaching, community development or counselling).

Districts. ‘Strategic management’ is, then, a logical aspect of ‘oversight’, lest the latter be wholly reactive, but it exists in the church’s life at all levels. But from whom does/should the church expect such management, and the leadership with which it will inevitably be associated?

- 5.18 Furthermore, many styles of strategic management exist. One group of theorists suggests that there are ten different ‘schools’ of strategic management.<sup>110</sup> These ten schools can be grouped according to whether their focus is on those at the top who ‘do the planning’ on behalf of an organisation, on the members of an organisation who ‘carry’ an organisation’s culture, or on the wider society within which any organisation is located. Different understandings of organisations and of corresponding forms of strategic planning result. What does this mean in practice for churches?
- 5.19 The more that emphasis is placed on ‘**design**’ or ‘**planning**’ as a form of strategic management, the more that those who have an overview of an organisation and the power to implement change within an organisation come to the fore. Formally appointed leaders are *expected* to be designers and planners. In the church, then, those who occupy appropriate positions within the church’s structure (e.g. within Circuit Leadership Teams, District Policy Committees, the Strategy and Resources Committee of the Methodist Council) should be expected to take an appropriate lead.
- 5.20 The more that emphasis is placed on organizational ‘**culture**’, the more that what happens within the groups that make up that organisation becomes significant. The constitution of groups, and the nature and quality of relationships experienced by members, becomes all important. In the church, then, the ideals and values of ‘fellowship’ and ‘learning’ come to the fore.<sup>111</sup> The task of planning strategically to enable such groups to form and develop becomes paramount and those who are seen best to enable this to occur are the crucial strategists (potentially, class-/group-leaders, pastoral visitors, presbyters, Local Preachers, worship-leaders). Understanding the church itself as a ‘learning organisation’ is important here.<sup>112</sup> If the development of Christian disciples is a primary function of the church then the way in which the whole church is structured to enable this to happen becomes of paramount importance. The need for the church to attend to its own ‘culture’ and how that culture is conveyed through time through its structures and the way it tells its own story (as the

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<sup>110</sup> The ten schools are; design, planning, positioning, entrepreneurial, cognitive, learning, power, cultural, environmental and configuration (see H. Mintzberg, B. Ahlstrand and J. Lampel *Strategy Safari: The Complete Guide Through the Wilds of Strategic Management* Prentice Hall 1998).

<sup>111</sup> The link here with current thinking about ‘communities of practice’ within organisations will also become apparent in 5.24 below.

<sup>112</sup> There has been an emphasis recently by many different types of institutions to understand themselves as ‘learning organisations’ i.e. not simply those whose business is learning (schools, colleges, universities). All successful organisations are aware of the need to be enhancing the skills of their workforce.

narrative of how it seeks to live as a people of God) is crucially important here.<sup>113</sup>

- 5.21 The more that emphasis is placed upon the **environmental context** within which an organisation is situated, the more that the strategic thinking of an organisation is shaped by those who respond readily to factors outside an organisation. Adaptability and relevance become crucial. Though all Christians live ‘in the world’, not all are necessarily conscious of the full extent to which Christian discipleship entails a mix of detachment and accommodation (being ‘in the world but not of it’). Strategists who work within this school of thinking will be attuned to the ways in which the church is part of the culture of the society and world in which it is placed. Ironically, evangelists keen to demonstrate the relevance of the Gospel to the wider world may find themselves agreeing with those who wish to play down the distinctiveness of Christian culture in suggesting that the need to be contemporary outweighs the need to cultivate a distinctive Christian tradition. ‘Context’ is at this point more important than ‘content’.
- 5.22 These three examples do not exhaust the range of ways of understanding how strategic thinking and management may take shape within the life of the church. But the significance of the range of options should not go unnoticed. As the Methodist Church works hard to identify what its contemporary priorities should be, this exploration into the shared nature of oversight clarifies who we might expect to initiate and shape those priorities and who should oversee them. In moving from thinking about the possible models of the Church as an organisation, to the even bigger range of options for thinking about strategic management, it is clear that a basic distinction between the church as a mission agency (like a top-down planned business) or a faith community (like a bottom-up, culture-led collection of local faith groups) is too simple. As a large organisation, the Methodist Church inevitably has elements drawn from all understandings of structure and strategic approaches.
- 5.23 Attention should also be given to the limits of the comparisons being made between the church and other types of organisation. Management and organisational models themselves go in and out of fashion. ‘Strategic planning’ language is already being replaced by talk of ‘management of change’ on the grounds that the former is too static and neat, as if managers can easily stand back and plan in the abstract. The latter approach accepts, by contrast, that all organisations are in constant flux. Leadership and management in organisations thus occur constantly in the midst of a form of chaos.
- 5.24 The inevitability of hierarchy in organisations is also challenged by images of ‘flat structures’ and ‘round tables’ which stress the equality and collegiality between people who work together. Use of such terminology might assist in the handling of issues addressed in 5.14 above, so long as

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<sup>113</sup> Recent emphasis in organisation and management literature on the importance of ‘narrative’ and ‘storytelling’ in organisations is striking. At this point, churches surely have a basis on which to claim this is something they already know, though they have perhaps not always recognised its full significance for their structured life.

the importance of clarity and differentiation in responsibilities is maintained. Too often in the church the desire to stress equality and lack of rank overlooks the fact that proposals need evaluating, that sometimes some people are more equipped than others to make judgments,<sup>114</sup> and that authority has sometimes been given to individuals to make decisions. In keeping with the desire to stress equality and collegiality, it is also widely recognised that despite the existence of clear accountability structures and decision-making processes, large organisations can also generate creativity in ways which fall between, or cut across, the clear lines of accountability. Organisations have to recognise this, or else they stifle creativity. ‘Communities of practice’ thus exist within organisations: purposeful groups which bring together people with similar interests and skills to reflect together.<sup>115</sup> Churches and house-/cell-/fellowship groups might thus prove to be more like such ‘communities of practice’ (and be the true engine-room of the church’s life) whilst the Conference and the church’s committee structure represents its hierarchical life. It is usually easier to be more positive about the former. As a large organisation, however, the church needs to respect both aspects of its life.

- 5.25 Significant points of learning from all the above paragraphs in this section nevertheless need drawing out in relation to Section 3 of this report. It is not enough to say that the Church shows elements of all types of structure and strategic thinking (‘it’s both/and not either/or’). Choices have to be made. Emphases have to be recognised and acknowledged. The most appropriate conclusions to be drawn now follow in paragraphs 5.26-6.6.
- 5.26 It must be stressed that within the structure of British Methodism the Conference is the focal point of **oversight**. Though oversight is often shared (2.18-27) the **governance** of British Methodism remains with the Conference and with the bodies whose role in governance derives from it. The primary sharing of oversight by the Conference within this legal and quasi-legal task is with Circuits. In this respect, then, the structure of the church needs to be viewed like a ‘business’. It has tasks to complete, which the Conference identifies, and Circuits are the primary mechanism through which such tasks are carried out. The Circuit Superintendents, as agents of the Conference and representative figures of the Conference (along with other presbyters, and deacons) within the Circuit Meeting, thus have a direct responsibility to ensure that such tasks are indeed carried out. The question immediately arises as to how they are monitored and supported in this, in a creative and constructive way.<sup>116</sup>
- 5.27 Other dimensions of **oversight**, however, lead to the focal points being located elsewhere. **Leadership** is exercised in many ways and at many levels of operation in the church’s life. In the Circuit, the Circuit Leadership Team is meant to ‘take the lead’ in critically analysing a

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<sup>114</sup> It is ironical that when across many professions there is a right and proper concern for workers to prove ‘competencies’ there is also often a suspicion of ‘expertise’.

<sup>115</sup> E.g. E.Wenger *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* CUP 1998.

<sup>116</sup> This question will be addressed directly in the *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* and *What is a District Chair?* documents.

Circuit's activities and identifying local priorities. These do not (or should not) occur in isolation from the leadership exercised within the District, or across the Connexion, even whilst local concerns surface. In the District, the leadership exercised by the District Policy Committee could be shaped by and help to shape the priorities of Circuits, and also to influence the decision-making of the Synod. Likewise, the leadership of various bodies (e.g. the Strategy and Resources Committee, the Methodist Council, the Connexional Leadership Team, the Connexional Team, the Faith and Order Committee) might be expected to influence the decision-making processes of the Conference. If such bodies do not see their role as one of leadership, and if their leadership role is not exercised through their various representatives, then a vacuum of leadership is created. Attention to the use and abuse of power must remain active at this point. But such attention is misplaced if it is thought that these groups and their representatives should not seek to be influential. *That is their job*. So long as there are sufficient structures of accountability in place, then the respective influences of the different bodies and the relationship of individuals to groups is closely monitored. In terms of strategy, however, it is important to note the interplay between the different levels of operation in the church's life. Local churches, Circuits, District and the Conference work in an *interrogative partnership*: asking questions of each other, and offering answers, in the task of clarifying priorities. The Conference, as the church's governing body, then agrees the overall priorities for the church as a whole, and churches, Circuits and Districts work within them.<sup>117</sup> It would be wrong to see such leadership as simply top-down. The distinction and the tension, between a 'planning' and a 'cultural' approach to strategic thinking can be seen to be at work here.

- 5.28 If **management** is about 'getting the job done' (whatever the identified task be), then ensuring that monitoring of priorities and the tasks which arise from them is clearly also a crucial aspect of **oversight**. At this point, the tensions between a (business) model of organisation as comprising paid employees and a (charity) model of organisation comprising relatively few paid staff (some salaried employees, some on stipends) and considerably more who work as 'volunteers' becomes clear. The management of paid and voluntary workers/disciples is a crucial practical aspect of oversight. Clarity in relation to the complex forms of corporate and individual oversight which exist in the church, and the forms of supervision (formal and informal, managerial and non-managerial, group and individual) which are needed to ensure that good management happens is essential. We have too easily allowed the practice of supervision to be lax or non-existent (under the guise of being non-managerial and informal) even whilst the accountability structures have been in place. *It is not a descent into a bad form of managerialism to suggest that substantial development in our thinking and acting about supervision in its many forms is a necessary corollary of this exploration into shared oversight. Methodism began as a movement that was predicated upon disciplined discipleship. If the ethos in which all members give an account for their discipleship can be recovered and renewed, any attempt to supervise or appraise those who are holding*

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<sup>117</sup> As, for example, with the programme *Priorities for the Methodist Church*.

*office or employed will fit into it easily and not be resisted by those subject to it as a form of scape-goating.*

## **6. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

- 6.1 The crucial challenges which arise from this enquiry into the lessons that the church can learn from exploration of the practice and theory of leadership, management and governance outside of the Church and of its own historical and theological tradition of interpreting its experience and practice are these:
- 6.2 How can individuals and groups who have a clearly defined role within the church's organisational structure be better enabled to be the kind of people able to lead and manage appropriately, and to address and complete the tasks required of them?
- 6.3 How can the church, as an organisation, accept an inevitable element of hierarchy (for the purpose of task-clarity, and task-differentiation) without succumbing to the easy tendency to apportion differing (ranked) personal status to those located at different points within the church's structure?
- 6.4 What further work needs undertaking to clarify the existing roles of those in crucial 'managerial' and 'strategic' locations within the church's organisational structure (e.g. Superintendents, Chairs, Connexional Team members)?<sup>118</sup>
- 6.5 What are the consequences of all this for the leadership/management role of any possible new order/office within the structure of the Methodist Church? For example, if introduced into British Methodism, how would an understanding of the relevant aspects of the role of 'bishop' influence and be influenced by these critical reflections on the church's organisation, leadership, management and governance? Whether or not the Methodist Church in Britain embraces episcopacy, what clarifications are needed, for example, in the roles of Circuit Superintendent and District Chair in the light of the explorations contained in this report?
- 6.6 The church should not be afraid of the obvious parallels which can be drawn between itself and so-called 'secular' organisations. So long as the biblical and theological factors highlighted above (in Section 4) are kept firmly in view as insights are drawn from such 'secular' theory and practice, there is no danger of mere uncritical lifting of un- or sub-Christian practice. The church can accept that even whilst it is an agent of God it remains ever also a human organisation. In doing this, its members and authorised representatives accept the immense responsibility of participating in the task of ordering its life in a way which does justice to the divine Spirit at work within it, whilst acknowledging that they themselves are fallible and limited.

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<sup>118</sup> This question will, of course, in large part be addressed by *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* and *What is a District Chair?*