

What sort of bishops?: Models of episcopacy and British Methodism

SUMMARY

The Methodist Church has been debating whether to have bishops for a long time (paras 1-6). The present discussion takes place within Guidelines agreed in 2000 (para 5). As things stand, the Methodist Church will only consider having bishops 'within the historic episcopate'. In other words, any bishops in British Methodism would link with bishops in Christian traditions 'in the apostolic succession'.

The present report does the task required of it by the 2002 Conference: clarifying what kind of bishops would make sense within British Methodism. The report seeks to do that job recognising that:

- the contexts we operate in are large and complex, are not just to do with Methodist Church life, and certainly not just to do with England (paras 7-28, 36-41);
- wondering about whether to have bishops 'in the historic episcopate' means British Methodism cannot simply decide for itself what such bishops would be like (paras 29-35);
- however, any proposals offered (46-57 and 65-81) have to respect what Methodism has been/is about, and how it works i.e. they have to fit in with the findings of *The Nature of Oversight* (paras 42-45) and with where we are now (paras 58-64).

The report therefore presents a detailed analysis of all of the above, inviting Circuits, Districts and local churches (and any group or individual who wishes to make comment) to offer responses to two questions:

Do you think that the findings of this report adequately articulate a Methodist understanding of episcopacy? (para 76)

Given that in Methodism the Conference acts like a 'corporate bishop', who should the specific representatives of that 'corporate episcopé' be? (para 77)

Two sub-questions (contained in paras 77-78) focus the second question, so that Circuits, Districts and other respondents can make the precise responses which the consultation process requires.

The Conference is being asked to receive this report (Resolution 60/1), to request that the consultation with the Methodist Church as a whole in Britain actually takes place (60/2) and to require that a further report be brought in 2007 to enable the Conference to make an informed decision (60/3).

WHAT SORT OF BISHOPS?: MODELS OF EPISCOPACY AND BRITISH METHODISM

Introduction

1. This report is written at the request of the Conference of 2002. It constitutes the further work required by that Conference consequent to the receipt of the 2000 report *Episkopé and Episcopacy*, and the study of that report throughout the Methodist Church, the results of which were summarized in 'The Methodist Church in Britain and the Prospect of Episcopacy' (*Conference Agenda 2002*, pp.347-53).¹
2. The purpose of this report is simple: to clarify 'the concrete models of episcopacy which may be deemed possible in the light of Methodist experience, understanding and practice of episkopé'. It has been the Working Party's task to suggest what model or models of bishops the Methodist Church in Great Britain might realistically consider adopting, should it choose to do so. The Working Party's brief was to draw up models of episcopacy for the Conference to consider within the Guidelines listed in para 5 below. As those adopted guidelines make clear, this means that the models of episcopacy to be considered are those which, in Methodist perspective, appear compatible with the historic episcopate. The Working Party did not therefore offer to the Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council models beyond that framework, even though there are clearly things to learn from other episcopal (including Methodist) churches about episcopacy in relation to mission and church order. Nor did it revisit the question whether the British Methodist Church should or should not in principle embrace episcopacy.² It has undertaken its work with reference to past explorations of episcopacy in relation to British Methodism, receiving those past arguments and proposals in a fresh context.³ It was also recognised that the report needed to mesh its conclusions with the findings of the report on *The Nature of Oversight*, submitted to the present Conference.⁴

1 The further work was at first required of the Faith and Order Committee. As reported at the Conference of 2004, the complexity of the work required led to the task becoming a joint initiative of the Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council.

2 i.e. The working party was not asked to re-argue the case in principle for/against the Methodist Church having bishops, but merely to work through the implications of a Conference decision finally to take such a step ('if the Conference said yes to bishops, what would it mean? who would they be? etc.'). It was then the task of the Faith and Order Committee (and now, jointly, the Methodist Council and the Faith and Order Committee) to determine what should be done with the working party's conclusions and what resolutions should be attached to any resulting report.

3 Especially reports from 1978, 1981, 1982 and 1998, and with regard to the 1985 British Methodist Response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1982) and to the adopted statement on the Church *Called to Love and Praise* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 1999).

4 The Working Party which undertook the bulk of the work on this report comprised:

- The Chair of the Faith and Order Committee
- Two District Chairs
- One person with experience of direct involvement in discussions about episcopacy outside of England.
- Two Superintendents
- Two further Members of the Faith and Order Committee (both of whom had been involved in the writing of the 2002 report)
- Two lay people (one of whom had been a member of the Methodist Council's Leadership Task Group)
- The Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee (acting as convenor and note-taker).

Group members were not selected on the basis of their known stance with regard to episcopacy. The identity of four members (the Chairs and Superintendents) was not under the direct control of the Faith and Order Committee itself. Some members were opposed to the introduction of episcopacy into British Methodism, yet

3. In working towards its conclusions, the Working Party has sought to:
- interact with available understandings of episkopé and episcopacy from other Methodist and other Christian traditions;
 - assess the extent to which and ways in which the presence of an order of bishops within British Methodism might enhance Methodist practice, especially in the light of the prioritizing exercise currently underway across the Connexion;
 - consider whether the presence of an order of bishops within British Methodism would contribute positively to ecumenical relations;
 - clarify what Methodist theology and practice might contribute to current ecumenical discussion of episkopé and episcopacy.
4. It is important to emphasize that the findings of this report remain consistent with the basic stance towards the episcopate adopted by the British Methodist Church over many decades. British Methodism has thus far consistently expressed no *need* of bishops in order to remain loyal to the apostolic tradition. The Deed of Union states that: ‘The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ.’ The ‘inheritance of the apostolic faith’ is thus celebrated within the Methodist Church already. ‘Might an order of bishops now help the British Methodist Church both in its pastoral and missionary task, and in its ecumenical relations?’ is a different question, to which the best answer might well be ‘yes’. One of the circuit contributions to the discussion following the 2000 report put it like this:

We warm to the more positive sound of the expression ‘embracing episcopacy’, which suggests to us an active step by the British Methodist Church to introduce something consonant with our own traditions rather than the passive receipt of someone else’s form of episcopacy. We are encouraged by...(the reference to)...the call to engage seriously with partner churches in the search for a form of episcopacy “which all can own and cherish”. (Conference Agenda 2000, p.348.)

5. It is also important to be reminded that the 2000 Conference adopted four resolutions in relation to the text *Episkopé and Episcopacy*. The second of these was ‘The Conference affirms its willingness in principle to receive the sign of episcopacy on the basis of the Guidelines set out in this report’. This merely voiced, once again, a willingness which has been expressed across many decades. These Guidelines themselves bear repeating here:
- 1 The Methodist Church recognizes that episkopé is exercised within its life in communal, collegial and personal ways.
 - 2 The Methodist Church is a connexional Church and all episkopé should be exercised within this context. In the development of any structures, due consideration should be given to their impact upon the life of the whole Church. There is a proper balance to be maintained between, for example, Circuit and District or District and Connexion.

- 3 The Methodist Church began as a missionary movement and continues to have mission at its heart. Methodists believe that a key function of episcopé is to enable and encourage the Church's participation in God's mission.
 - 4 In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ's Church, the Methodist Church would willingly receive the sign of episcopal succession on the understanding that ecumenical partners sharing this sign with the Methodist Church (a) acknowledge that the latter has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and (b) accept that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist.
 - 5 The Methodist Church, in contemplating the possibility of receiving the sign of the historic episcopal succession, expects to engage in dialogue with its sister Churches to clarify as thoroughly as possible the nature and benefits of this gift.
 - 6 The Methodist Church would be unable to receive the sign of episcopal succession in a context which would involve a repudiation of what the Methodist Church believed itself to have received from God.
 - 7 The Methodist Church, in receiving the sign of episcopal succession, would insist that all ministries, including those of oversight, are exercised *within* the ministry of the whole people of God and at its service, rather than in isolation from it and in supremacy over it.
6. This present report on models of episcopacy reflects the fact that the move to an episcopal order of ministry may be regarded as a *Methodist* matter as much as an ecumenical one. They also consider the fact that as a Methodist matter, episcopacy is also a *public and social matter* as it relates to the potential enhancement of the contribution that the Methodist Church makes to public life, as part of its mission as a church. The Conference is therefore asked to consider the contents of this report not simply with respect to how the Methodist Church relates, or might relate, to other churches. We are examining models of bishops with *the possibility that Methodist practice and thought will be enhanced*. In so doing, we may better be able to fulfil our own task, and in so doing contribute also to the mission of the wider Church in Britain and beyond.

In What Context(s) Are These Models Being Offered?

7. This report offers in paras 65-75 below eleven possible proposals deemed compatible with Methodist theology and practice.⁵ It will need to be shown that all are not as equally workable in practice even whilst each can be regarded consistent with Methodist theology and understanding of the church. These models are offered with full awareness of the multiple contexts within which the Methodist Church undertakes its contemporary mission. These contexts are: the *Methodist* Church itself, the *ecumenical* scene in Britain and beyond, the *geographical* context for a Church serving three nations, the *cultural* context within which the role of bishop needs to make sense.

⁵ And when allowance is made for combinations of models, consideration of a total of forty-one proposals becomes possible!

The British Methodist Context

8. How do our discussion and the suggested models locate themselves within the current situation of British Methodism? The Conference of 2000 endorsed a vision of 'what the church is for' and instituted a process entitled 'Our Calling to Fulfil'. In subsequent years *Our Calling* has increasingly been owned and implemented across the Connexion, at national, District, Circuit and local church level. The goal of this calling was affirmed as 'to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ' and then, as disciples, to live out one's response in worship and mission. Four key elements were identified as the focus for discipleship: Worship, Learning & Caring, Service and Evangelism. The Conference recognised and encouraged diversity in the way the process might be taken forward in different places. The report received by the Conference emphasized the underlying principle as being, 'throughout the Connexion we share a vision of what the church is for and we all judge ourselves as we see fit against that vision'. The 'Our Calling' initiative has since been developed in the form of a major prioritizing exercise throughout the Methodist Church.⁶ Any proposed model of episcopacy must therefore be able to show how it coheres with the aims of 'Our Calling' as a vision and the priorities and programmes of action which are emerging from it.
9. The 2002 Conference received a report *Leadership in the Methodist Church* from which a number of options were adopted. A one year term of office for the President and Vice-President was retained; a new appointment established, the designation 'General Secretary of the Methodist Church' being added to the title and responsibility of 'Secretary of Conference'; and a realignment of roles has led to the creation of a group of, currently, six Co-ordinating Secretaries. The principle was agreed that a 'Management and Leadership Team' (subsequently renamed as the 'Connexional Leadership Team', hereafter CLT) should be established with a membership including the General Secretary, the Co-ordinating Secretaries, the District Chairs, the Warden of the Diaconal Order, the President and Vice-President and the ex- and designated-Presidents and Vice-Presidents. Fuller clarification of the significance of these developments, and of their relationship to management, leadership and governance practices and structures across the Church, is spelt out in *The Nature of Oversight*. Again, any proposed episcopate within British Methodism would need in due course to show how it relates to these developing structures. In particular, clarification would be needed as to how an emerging episcopate, in acknowledging its responsibility to lead, would not unduly compromise the oversight seen (in *The Nature of Oversight*) to be shared throughout the Methodist Church between presbyters, deacons and lay people.
10. That British Methodism has been in numerical decline for some time is an undisputed fact. The current trend is an actual and projected average decline of 2.5% per year. The Conference of 2002 received a report drawing some challenging conclusions from the *Triennial Membership Returns* of 1999-2001. Summarily, there is evidence of a Church whose form and make-up is changing. For example the developing practice of holding mid-week worship;

⁶ 'Priorities for the Methodist Church' adopted at the 2004 Conference (in *Over to You 2004* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2004, pp2-15).

a decline in the numbers of infants being baptised paralleled by an increase in those over 13 presenting themselves for baptism; a decline in the number of children attending church on Sundays alongside increasing mid-week activities attended by children;⁷ a not insignificant number of new people still choosing to join the church, a fact easily masked by the numbers of those members dying and the challenge of those who have left the church or whose membership has lapsed. If introduced, the episcopate would be embraced within this context of numerical decline. There is no immediate ‘quick-fix’ way of halting this decline. Aside from questions about which other church or churches the Methodist Church may in the longer-term form ever closer relations with, or unite with, the Methodist Church may itself continue to become smaller for some time. The overriding question here is whether the embracing of episcopacy may enhance the leadership of the Methodist Church and of any future church of which the Methodist Church might become a constituent part.⁸

11. Like all Methodist Churches, the British Methodist Church owes its existence to the activity of the Wesley brothers. The industry and personality of John Wesley continues to exert an influence on the shape of British Methodism, even if in a diluted form. British Methodism has, however, for a long time not been enslaved to ‘following Wesley’. The question for the present is whether it has in the recent past learned enough from Wesley’s thought and practice. In discussions about ministry it is crucial to recall that John Wesley died a priest in the Church of England. It is also important to recall that he did, reluctantly, agree to ordain (Whatcoat, Vasey and Coke for work in North America, in September 1784). In this respect he took on an episcopal function (he behaved as a bishop), even whilst not authorized by the Church of his day to do so, on the grounds of missionary necessity. He had no desire, however, to be seen as a bishop. Appeals are, though, repeatedly made in British Methodism to Wesley’s ‘entrepreneurial spirit’, to his ‘missionary zeal’, and to his ‘pragmatism’, as if such appeals sanction a range of contemporary actions on similar grounds. We are now in a very different context from Wesley as far as orders of ministry are concerned, and a wholly different ecumenical context. The contemporary British Methodist relation to Wesley, however, must nevertheless deal in some way with that entrepreneurial spirit, missionary zeal and pragmatism, as it handles contemporary questions about episcopacy.

The World Methodist Context

12. An account of forms of the episcopate in worldwide Methodism is given in the 2000 report *Episkopé and Episcopacy* (Section E.1-2). Except where Methodism is a constituent part of a united Church (e.g. The Church of South

⁷ This latter statement is a further observation not discernible within the TMRs themselves.

⁸ Bearing in mind that the term ‘embracing’ implies the welcoming of something which is largely ‘given’ to Methodism. This is a half-truth. Whilst there is a sense in which British Methodism would be receiving the historic episcopate as a ‘gift’, should it take the step of having bishops, it is also true that the partner church would be entrusting the gift to the Methodist Church to do with it what the Methodist Church sees fit. In this sense, then, this report articulates both for Methodism and for the wider Church what British Methodism envisages it would responsibly do with the gift. *The Nature of Oversight* would shape how episcopacy would be received and used. In turn, the Methodist Church would hope, in the spirit of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1982) ‘that the Spirit may well speak to one church through the insights of another’ (BEM, para 54) *in both directions*.

India), Methodist forms of episcopacy stand outside of the historic episcopate. The Guidelines within which we as a British Conference operate steer us away from this course. There are, however, still respects in which we can learn from Methodists elsewhere.

13. The Working Party noted the considerable degree of common ground in the definition of the responsibilities of the bishop, despite significant differences. Leadership and oversight in both temporal and spiritual affairs is a constant, with mission to the world at the forefront, and the transmission of the apostolic faith a clear emphasis. The mission emphasis is sometimes sharpened in distinctive ways. In the African Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, the primary role of each bishop is to seek to advance the Kingdom of God by saving, helping, teaching, and liberating the oppressed of his/her episcopal district. The programme set up by the bishop should address itself to the needs of the people. The Working Party looked closely at developments in the Methodist Church in Southern Africa, noting the emphasis upon the bishop as ‘spiritual leader’, on the bishop’s role in having oversight of nurturing and spiritual growth, on mission, on collaboration, and on participation in connexional leadership.
14. We did not, however, come to the conclusion that the *election* of bishops was the right way forward. There seems no reason to move from the situation currently operative for many appointments, whereby the Conference would confirm the recommended designation of individuals as bishops for particular office.⁹
15. We note differences in the considerable variety of the duration and the nature of the appointment. Not all bishops are bishops for life. In only considering a form of the historic episcopate for British Methodism we preclude the possibility of having ‘fixed-term episcopacy’. We do not, however, preclude the possibility of distinguishing bishops who function in a particular episcopal office from bishops who, having served in episcopal office, then return to so-called ‘ordinary circuit ministry’ or to another role in church life.
16. In worldwide Methodism not all Bishops ordain although all may preside at regional and district Conferences. In seeking to embrace a form of the historic episcopate, we would not envisage a situation in which bishops were not involved in ordination. All participation in ordinations would, however, as now, be subject to the decisions of the Conference.¹⁰ This relates to the issue of ‘who should be a bishop in British Methodism?’, in indicating, in keeping with the current Standing Order (S.O. 726(6)(a)), that as the one presiding at ordination services, the President would always automatically be ordained bishop.¹¹

9 It needs bearing in mind that the working party was operating within the Guidelines cited in para 5. above i.e. seeking models deemed compatible with the historic episcopate. Methodist Churches who elect their bishops do so for forms of the episcopate outside of the historic succession.

10 See para. 53 below.

11 In turn, the question needs to be posed as to who else, in any given year, would preside, as the President’s deputies, at other ordination services. Should these be Past Presidents (made bishops), or others, who become bishops on other grounds first, and are then able to fulfil the role as the President’s deputy in ordinations?

17. There would, then, appear to be no single distinctly 'Methodist' model of the office of Bishop in world-wide Methodism. The discussions we have conducted with forms of Methodist episcopacy worldwide have, however, been fruitful as we have clarified in our own minds, within the parameters set by the agreed Guidelines, the best way forward for British Methodism.

The Geographical Context

18. British Methodism operates in three nations. What influence does the fact that we are dealing with three regional Methodisms, operating in three different ecumenical and political climates, have on our thinking and proposals?

Wales

19. The Covenanted Churches in Wales (Enfys) have looked at two major ways forward in their search for a visibly united church. 'Ministry in a Uniting Church' (1986) looked on the macro scale at a national uniting church that would have had a structure that included 18 dioceses and bishops covering all of Wales. The Ecumenical Bishop proposal looked on the micro scale with a bishop for an area of the South East of Wales where there is extensive development of Local Ecumenical Partnerships. It was noted, significantly, throughout these later discussions that the size of area envisaged for the ecumenical bishop was in keeping with that of a Methodist circuit.¹²
20. In exploring the office and role of the bishop, much use was made of the understanding that ministry is exercised in three forms: personally, collegially and communally.¹³

The discussion in Wales led to the following:

3.1.3 as Covenanted Churches, we believe that Christian Unity will most effectively be expressed if we embrace a concept of a shared episcopacy that is personal, collegial and communal. *'It is personal because the presence of Christ among his people can most effectively be pointed to by the person ordained to proclaim the gospel and call the community to serve the Lord in unity of life and witness. It is collegial, first because the bishop gathers together those who are ordained to share in the tasks of ministry and to represent the concerns of the community; secondly, because through the collegiality of bishops the Christian community in local areas is related to the wider Church, and the universal Church to that community. It is communal, because the exercise of ordained ministry is rooted in the life of the community and requires the community's effective participation in the discovery of God's will and the guidance of the Spirit.'* ('The Porvoo Common Statement', para 44, cf. the WCC report 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', paras 26, 29.)

12 This significant observation relates also to the ecumenical vision which remains at the end of this report: of a uniting/united church appropriate for each of the three nations, served by a local, ecumenical episcopate. Even if such a church may be a long way off, and unilateral actions seeking to precipitate such a church's coming ill-advised, it should surely not disappear from view.

13 These three forms, explored first in recent ecumenical discussion in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, were related to episkopé in the Conference report of 2000 *Episkopé and Episcopacy* (in *Over to You: Reports from the Methodist Conference 2000* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2000, pp.13-43).

Scotland

21. The Scottish Churches Initiative for Union (SCIFU) offered member churches a vision for a united church in Scotland that would embrace the episcopate. Again, exploration of ministry in ‘personal, collegial and communal’ forms was seen to be fruitful. The members of the SCIFU Group acknowledged that the ministry of oversight has been exercised, in different ways, within each of the partner churches and that, in all of them, the personal, collegial and communal aspects of this ministry are clearly evidenced at the local level.¹⁴ In considering proposals for the exercise of this ministry in the united Church at the regional level, it became clear to the Group that the collegial and communal elements would be adequately expressed but that, without the ministry of oversight to be exercised by the ‘bishop in presbytery’, the personal element would be lacking at this level of the Church’s life. It was emphasised that this personal ministry would be that of a ‘Chief Pastor’ and that it would not in any way be a superior, separate or higher form of ministry but would be one exercised within the communal and collegial structures of the Church.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Group recognised that the ministry of oversight, as with all ministry, should be exercised in ways that are communal, collegial and personal.
22. The Methodist Conference gave strong support to the ecumenical initiatives in Wales and Scotland (in 2002 and 2003 respectively). It has been a cause of sadness that the initiatives have thus far not been enabled to move forward in those nations at the present time. The distinct, though related, visions nevertheless feed into British Methodist discussion as a whole. Given the different ecumenical contexts in each country it may well be that whilst a single form of the historic episcopate is embraced within British Methodism, the structures surrounding an episcopal office may differ in the respective countries. This may especially be the case with respect to collegial episkopé, when ecumenical endeavours and collegiality may move at differing rates. Such different patterns of support may also relate to different responses to pastoral and mission imperatives present in each region.
23. The geographical context thus calls for a unified connexional vision, whilst allowing for appropriate and flexible adjustment to regional needs.

England

24. In England too, exploration of personal, collegial and communal forms of ministry and episkopé have been prominent. *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* (2001) offers the following, within a long section devoted to the topic of oversight:
 1. The *communal* exercise of oversight is an expression of the essential conciliarity of the Church...
 2. The *collegial* exercise of oversight is an expression of fellowship (*koinonia*) in oversight. It gives an authority beyond that of the

¹⁴ See *God's Reign & Our Unity: The Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission 1981-1984* London: SPCK/Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press 1984) pp.58-62 (paras 91-7).

¹⁵ For further details of how this would work in practice see ‘The Scottish Church Initiative for Union Proposals’ §10 and Appendix II and III of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union Second Interim Report (2000).

individual in oversight...It presupposes conciliarity, the communal form of oversight, complementing and upholding it.

3. The *personal* exercise of oversight gives proper place to leadership in the Church and to the special gifts and callings of individuals...The personal dimension presupposes the collegial and the communal, complementing and upholding them.¹⁶
25. The SCIFU experience shows that the possibility of building bridges between episcopally and congregationally ordered churches remains a difficult task. The discussion surrounding *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* continues in parallel with ongoing conversations in Wales and Scotland, and with continuing reference to other churches in England, the United Reformed Church in particular. The question remains how a connexional church, with a commitment to a vision of shared episkopé, might contribute to all such discussions and not do so in ideal form, or in theory alone, but in the concrete practice of its own life, with a vision extending beyond its own structures.

The Broader Ecumenical Context

26. The ecumenical context within which we explore the question of what form of the historic episcopate British Methodism might embrace is, however, broader than these islands. One form of our questioning must be: in what ways do the universal church and the current worldwide ecumenical scene provide 'givens' for our task? Is there, in other words, a worldwide *ecumenical consensus* on what episcopacy involves? If British Methodism is serious about embracing the *historic* episcopate, does this mean it has no say in the shaping of the episcopate it embraces?
27. The extent to which the British Methodist Church may simply be adopting a 'given' of the worldwide Church in seeking to clarify a way of embracing the historic episcopate relates to the question of its stance towards Christian Tradition as a whole. Like any Church, British Methodism has a responsibility to relate to Christianity worldwide. The story of Christianity worldwide and through generations is bigger than the story of any one Church. Identifying a single great Tradition in Christianity is a difficult exercise, even whilst the concept of 'Tradition' remains important. The tasks of defining and participating in the 'Apostolic Faith' are incumbent on all churches. Similarly the acknowledgement of the vision of a united Church in the midst of considerable Christian diversity is crucial in all ecumenical endeavour.
28. Distinctiveness and participation in a greater whole are ultimately two complementary ways of relating to Christian Tradition in the broadest sense. Discussions about the form of a British Methodist episcopate are thus *both* a participation in a given, *and* a distinctive striving for something new and fresh. It is to be hoped that as British Methodism relates its understanding of 'shared episkopé' to the task of clarifying a form of episcopacy for its own life, then this understanding and the practical consequences which follow from it may in turn prove fruitful on the broader Christian ecumenical scene.

¹⁶ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2001) paras. 182-4, p.56.

29. Given the doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union (above, para. 4), attention to the nature of episcopacy within the universal Church must be an important element in the process of coming to a mind on episcopacy within British Methodism. Those parts of the universal Church that claim the historic episcopate (and most Christians are part of such churches) have shared a number of key characteristics of bishops. The working party has engaged in careful scrutiny of what appear to be generally-accepted features of the episcopate within what is sometimes referred to as an ‘ecumenical consensus’ about the historic episcopate. One recent version of key characteristics is presented in the 2004 report *Women Bishops in the Church of England?*¹⁷ Five main aspects of the ministry of a bishop are identified in that report. In each case it is claimed that a clear continuity exists between ‘a bishop in patristic times’ and a contemporary Church of England bishop. The bishop is presented as:

- ‘the principal minister of word and sacrament of the local church, with overall pastoral responsibility for clergy and laity, exercising his [sic] ministry together with priests and deacons and as part of the wider episcopal college’;
- ‘an instrument of unity’;
- ‘called to declare and uphold the apostolic faith which is revealed in Scripture and to which the tradition of the Church bears witness’;
- ‘one who has the sole right to ordain priests and deacons’;
- ‘called to be a leader in mission.’

These five aspects, as a current version of the ‘ecumenical consensus’, must now be examined in Methodist perspective.

30. Principal Minister

The Methodist Church supports the notion of ministers of word and sacrament (presbyters) taking a lead in the church’s worshipping and liturgical life, and in having a ‘directing part’ in the church’s life as a whole.¹⁸ Episcopal leadership is also seen to have a pastoral focus. The episcopal expression of the pastoral role has tended to take the form of: a ministry of visitation among local congregations; a major role in the deployment of ministers; giving counsel to individuals and groups; ensuring the sound management and administration of an identifiable geographical area (diocese). The term ‘principal minister’ is, however, not used in British Methodism, and therefore any attempt to interpret and relate to this aspect of episcopacy requires great care and close scrutiny. The reality described is identifiable, otherwise there would be no Circuit Superintendents or District Chairs. The extent to which and ways in which presbyteral leadership and pastoral oversight is shared with others in Methodism does, however, mean

¹⁷ *Women Bishops in the Church of England?* (London: Church House Publishing 2004), ch.2, summarized on pp.63-4. Use of this text in this way is not meant to suggest that an Anglican (or Church of England) understanding of bishop functions normatively in Methodist discussion. Any attempt to discuss an ‘ecumenical consensus’ about the historic episcopate inevitably draws on many sources, and the 2004 Church of England report is itself no exception. This version of an ‘ecumenical consensus’ about what a bishop is, is used for the sake of ease, being the most recent summary of the episcopate available, and deriving from a close ecumenical partner.

¹⁸ *The Nature of Oversight* 2.28, cf. Deed of Union, clause 4.

that the primary focus of leadership is neither upon presbyters alone, nor on presbyters and deacons together.¹⁹ Presbyters are looked to for leadership within primary contexts of communal episkopé (circuit meeting, District Synod, the Conference), which are nearly always bodies comprising lay and ordained together.²⁰ In this way, the Methodist Church seeks to inherit and interpret the concept of a bishop's oversight first and foremost in terms of *corporate* participation in the oversight of God.²¹ Any expression of such episkopé in an episcopacy which included individuals holding an episcopal role (bishops) would therefore need to respect this theological insight and its reflection in structural form. In Methodist understanding personal episkopé is very clearly derived from communal episkopé, in that individuals have no individual episkopé independent of the colleagues to whom they relate and the communal bodies in which they participate and out of which they operate. A bishop in British Methodism would thus take on a leadership role having been stationed *to* an episcopal role *by* the Conference. Bishops would be first and foremost connexional people whose primary focus of oversight would be the Conference. The pastoral responsibility exercised by a bishop would be exercised alongside others, lay and ordained, at whatever 'level' of the church's life (circuit, district, connexion-wide) she or he was situated.

31. Instrument of Unity

Bishops represent the universal church to the local church, and the local to the universal. They are not alone in the exercise of this role, but they are required to play it, and are located strategically within the structures of the church to play this role perhaps more easily than any other. Within the historic episcopate, this role has been exercised geographically: bishops have usually been bishops within a diocese. British Methodist interpretation of the significance of geography within an understanding of the church differs from a diocese-based model. It is recognised that as instruments of unity bishops have an important role in the organisational life of the church and that this aspect of the episcopal role is time-bound: as signs and instruments of unity, bishops represent the continuity of the present Church with that of its predecessors. In Methodism, however, it is clear that many are responsible for maintaining the church in unity (within itself, and in relation to wider Christianity), but that the overall responsibility in this area resides with the Conference. Episcopacy exercised by bishops would thus relate primarily to the Conference. In geographical terms, Methodism then locates episkopé at local level with the circuit and in groups of circuits (districts).

32. Upholder of the Faith

The second century bishop, Irenaeus, makes the existence of a succession of bishops part of his argument against the heresy of Gnosticism. Early Christian summaries of faith, such as the creed of Nicea-Constantinople and the Chalcedonian definition, were issued by councils of bishops exercising a

¹⁹ *The Nature of Oversight* 2.22 and 2.25-27, esp. 2.27.

²⁰ Even though there are Ministerial and Diaconal sessions of the Conference, Ministerial Synods and a Diaconal Convocation, these bodies do not exist in isolation, even if they sometimes discuss matters and make decisions relating to their specific ministries. The point is that decisions *which directly affect the whole church* are never taken by these separate groups.

²¹ On the notion of episkopé as participation in God's oversight, see e.g. Ignatius to Polycarp 8.3 (e.g. in *Early Christian Writings* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968, p.130).

corporate teaching role. In this light bishops can be seen as preachers and teachers of the faith. Bishops thus have a regulatory or monitoring function: they are significant persons in the way in which the Church sustains and develops its understanding of the gospel. The early church evidence just cited can, however, be read differently even within the context of the Church's emerging Catholicity. Despite the important historical function of bishops at this time, their existence may also have limited the Church's recognition of the many and varied ways in which and persons through whom Christian faith is upheld. Moreover, the regulatory and monitoring role of bishops is not undertaken in isolation. In Methodist perspective, the Conference, to whom all presbyters are (and thus to whom all bishops in British Methodism would be) accountable, is the final authority within Methodism for interpretation of matters of doctrine and worship.²² The Conference would thus look to its bishops for leadership in matters of faith and doctrine, though not look to them alone for such leadership.²³

33. The Right to Ordain

The role of the bishop in ordaining new presbyters is to be seen in the context of Christian unity. The unity of the church is easier to maintain when patterns of authorisation in ministry are related to clearly defined orders. In Methodism, the role of the Conference is again crucial. Ordinations occur within British Methodism in the context of the annual Conference, and with the expressed authority of the Conference. In Methodist understanding, then, the President thus possesses the right to ordain as representative of the Conference, for the 'President or a deputy' presides at an ordination service.²⁴

34. A Leader in Mission

While this has become a very prominent role in recent Anglican documents, it is a role that can be traced in other periods and other churches, too. This role links with that of preacher and teacher, but implies a leading role in developing and implementing strategy for mission and ministry. In British Methodism, it is striking that 'the prime duty of a Chair is to further the work of God in the District' and that evangelism features as one of the five identified areas of work.²⁵ Of the five roles identified for a bishop, however, it must be asked of this role in particular how continuity between an early church model of bishop and that tenable in a contemporary context is possible. As will become clear below ('The Cultural Context'), the contemporary task of shaping mission strategies might require episcopal roles significantly different from those entailed in past models of episcopacy. At the very least, the ways in which an appropriate form of contemporary leadership in mission is to be linked with the task of being a public figurehead of the church will need careful clarification. The public voice of bishops is heard differently at different points in history and in different

22 Deed of Union, clause 5.

23 i.e. It is not even only presbyters who are required to uphold the faith, but deacons and local preachers too.

24 S.O. 728(6)(a) 'Those who have been accepted into full connexion with the Conference shall, unless already ordained or to be ordained elsewhere, be ordained in a service held during the meeting of the same Conference, at which the President or a deputy shall preside.'

25 The others being preaching and worship, pastoral care, teaching and administration; see S.O. 424 (1).

societies, depending on the contexts in which bishops perform, despite the sense that there is a single, historic episcopacy.²⁶

35. The Five Roles of a Bishop: Summary Comment

It is clear from the above comments that the priority given in Methodism to communal over personal oversight affects the way in which it commends reception of episcopacy into its system. Having bishops would enable British Methodism to value afresh the personal, representative role of leaders at key points within an order and office whose role could be clarified in relation to longstanding Christian tradition and the wider church, and respected in wider society. However, Methodism's experience of being church itself contributes to the shaping of the episcopacy received. Individual bishops would in Methodist perspective first and foremost be members of groups exercising oversight within the church.

The Cultural Context

36. In what ways do wider cultural factors impinge on the task of clarifying what it means to be a bishop? Should they at all? It has been striking in the working party which prepared this report that its members had to switch regularly between different kinds of conversation. At one moment they were referring to early church history, at another to Methodist origins and Methodist ethos, at yet another to contemporary theology, ecumenism, and current theories of management and leadership. They have thus taken very seriously the fact that decisions about whether or not to embrace episcopacy are not merely an internal church matter. Bishops are often in practice the prominent, public face of the Church. Though their role in relation to leadership and church order and structure must by definition be carefully clarified, their public role in part shapes what they are required to be and do. It is also clear that there are generally available 'images' of bishop in the public media. Whether they may be deemed accurate or dated and misinformed, they have clearly featured prominently in Methodist discussion of bishops over many years, and have been part of the discussions since the *Episkopé and Episcopacy* report of 2000.²⁷ Trying to fashion a 'fresh' understanding of bishop, when there is a long-standing (theological) tradition of what a bishop must be, and a widespread, and not always positive, (cultural) assumption of what a bishop is, is therefore fraught with difficulty.

37. Two aspects of the current cultural climate which are especially pertinent to our task are the relevance of the culture of management and professionalism and the bishop's role vis-à-vis the media. In the present climate questions such as the following are inevitably posed, whatever model of bishop is considered, and whether or not it is deemed relevant to relate discussions about the episcopate to such a 'management culture':

- Is the bishop a manager or not?
- What does it mean for a bishop to be a 'leader'?
- What is the difference between leadership and management anyway?

²⁶ See also paras. 36-41 below.

²⁷ As some of the Methodist responses to that report indicated, whilst Methodists were often not clear what sort of bishops *were* wanted (if any), it was often clearly stated what kind were *not* wanted.

- What if a bishop is a leader, but others (Superintendents, the Connexional Team, the Connexional Leadership Team, the Methodist Council, all acting on behalf of the Conference) could be regarded as ‘managing’ the Church?
38. Explorations into issues of the leadership, management and governance of the Methodist Church, as understood under the umbrella term ‘oversight’, are contained in the report *The Nature of Oversight*. That report clarifies that ‘oversight’ incorporates the tasks of leadership, management and governance, but proves to be more than the sum of those component parts in so far as oversight is the term to be used for the church’s corporate participation in God’s oversight of the church. As connexional people bishops would participate prominently in the task of oversight, and thus be heavily involved in the leadership, management and governance of the Methodist Church.
39. This will mean that presbyters who also become bishops will be expected to have developed, or to acquire, skills in leadership and management additional to those which would be required of theologian- and pastor-presbyters in circuit life. Such additional skills are in practice already required, in different combinations, of Superintendent Ministers, Chairs of District and members of the Connexional Team. Whether these existing roles should form the basis for a Methodist episcopacy must yet be determined. It is, however, clear that professional practice inherent in related leadership and management roles exercised outside of the church, in comparable large organisations, can prove helpful in the clarification of the contemporary practice of Circuit Superintendents, Chairs of Districts, Bishops and members of the Connexional Team. Even whilst theological insights enable critique to be offered of some professional practice and conduct within organisations, lessons can be learned in return.
40. The question of a bishop’s role in relation to the media is a cultural feature which is unavoidably placed before us by virtue of the way that society currently works. For a bishop to be a ‘media figure’ does not mean that s/he must succumb to being a sound-bite theologian. It is to recognize the significance of what it means to be a ‘representative person’, in a media age, in a mission context, as a bridge between church and world. This involves three tasks, in relation to all of which a bishop seeks to represent insights which the Church can bring, even whilst being called upon to speak as an individual: to explain, to challenge, to express solidarity:
- A bishop *explains* through the media, the way in which the church operates and what its basic assumptions are. This includes both church structures and processes, and its faith. It entails the clarifying of why it takes particular stances, and may entail defending the church when it is being attacked unjustifiably because of views that it holds.
 - A bishop adopts a prophetic role and *challenges*, in the name of the Church, unjust or unwise actions of government and society.
 - A bishop *expresses solidarity* with those who are suffering and in need.
41. Again, in Methodist perspective, such responsibilities would clearly not be held by bishops alone. Relationships with the media are carried out in a formal sense in the Methodist Church in a variety of ways. At national level,

the General Secretary and members of the Church's Connexional Team carry responsibility for speaking on the Church's behalf and contributing to discussions about political matters and aspects of public life. Presbyters (circuit ministers or Superintendents, or Chairs of District), lay people and deacons may all be called upon at some point, in particular local contexts, to speak on the Church's behalf.

The Sharing of Oversight in the Contemporary Context: A Summary Reflection

42. All that has been said so far, and will be worked out further in practical terms in the remainder of this report, needs to be linked closely with the content of *The Nature of Oversight*. Carrying forward from *The Nature of Oversight* important Methodist insights about oversight, it can be concluded that sharing, and sharing in, oversight, leadership, power, authority and management in the Church:
- is a form of participation in God's creative, dynamic spiritual energy
 - entails active stewardship of the resources which God has made available
 - is a reflection of the trinitarian nature of God
 - needs informing by awareness of the presence of Christ, crucified and risen, in the life of the Church
 - is shaped by the full effects of being created free by God
 - cannot therefore avoid the consequences of human fallibility.
43. More specifically, in relation to Methodist practice and understanding, shared episkopé reflects:
- a reluctance to confer considerable explicit power and authority even to individuals in representative roles
 - an emphasis upon the accountability of individuals to groups (e.g. committees)
 - an emphasis upon leadership and management shared between ministerial colleagues (presbyteral and diaconal) and between lay and ordained at all levels of the Church's life.
44. 'Shared episkopé' is not to be equated simply with 'communal episkopé' i.e. the contexts in which the broadest base of leadership and management shared between lay and ordained is most apparent. There is little doubt, however, as *The Nature of Oversight* has stressed, that the British Methodist Church emphasizes communal episkopé over the other two forms of episkopé (personal and collegial). 'The communal exercise of *episkopé*...is characteristic of Methodism's way of exercising oversight'.²⁸
45. Recognition of this characteristic leads to the following insights about an episcopate in British Methodism. First, despite the fact that personal episkopé can be seen to be 'widely exercised in Methodism',²⁹ the reluctance to grant

²⁸ *Episkopé and Episcopacy* Methodist Conference 2000 (in *Over to You : Reports from the Methodist Conference 2000* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2000, pp.13-43) para 24.

²⁹ *ibid.* para 36.

power and authority to individuals in representative roles might limit the effectiveness of British Methodist bishops inside and outside Methodism. Second, the notion of bishops exercising ‘collegial episkopé’ raises the question of the nature of this collegiality. British Methodism’s greater emphasis on communal episkopé (especially in the Conference) would link with suspicion of the power and influence of any ‘college of bishops’. Careful thought will therefore need to be given to both of these forms of episkopé, lest much be expected of bishops, yet they be insufficiently enabled to do the jobs required of them.

The Episcopate within British Methodism: A Basic Framework

46. The enquiry and reflection above leads us to conclude the following basic framework for a British Methodist episcopate. In accepting that the models requested of the working party had to be compatible with given aspects of the historic episcopate, the following are suggested as givens of a British Methodist form of episcopate. All of these Methodist ‘givens’ then apply to the models offered below.³⁰
47. The following would be characteristic of a British Methodist bishop. She or he would:
 - lead by example in the search for a contemporary form of holy living
 - be a presbyter
 - be a bishop for life
 - take their place within a version of the three-fold order of ministry
 - exercise a personal episkopé which might vary according to particular situations³¹
 - be a leader in mission and ministry
 - need to possess an authority appropriate to expected responsibilities
 - be expected to engage in the promulgation of Christian faith.

Each of these characteristics will now be amplified.

Men and Women as Bishops

48. Both women and men can be presbyters, superintendents, chairs of district and President of the Conference in British Methodism. Therefore both men and women are able to be bishops.

Holy Living

49. If bishops are not only to be leaders and managers of the church in a structural, organisational sense, then concern for the type of person a bishop needs to be comes top of the list. It is clear that churches expect bishops to be

³⁰ It should be noted that the list of characteristics resists using the terms ‘pastor’ and ‘oversight’. This is not because we believe in any way that bishops are not ‘carers of the flock’ or do not exercise oversight. Our task has, however, been to develop further the understanding of ‘episkopé’ explored in *The Nature of Oversight*. In undertaking its enquiries the working party noted how easily ‘pastor’ and ‘oversight’ become blanket terms which veil, rather than clarify, who a bishop is, and what a bishop might be expected to do. To this end, we have sought to be more direct and precise as to what is expected, and taken the risk of using less obviously theological terms for tasks involved.

³¹ But their number would include the President of the Conference.

‘spiritual leaders’. This means they are themselves ‘spiritual people’: people who are disciplined in their Christian lives, resourced by a deep Christian spirituality and life of prayer and study. In this way, they would lead by example in the search for a contemporary form of holy living. However, whilst the church places great expectations upon its bishops in this respect, its members will also need reminding that its leaders are human too, and that such expectations can sometimes merely cloak a failure to aspire to and work towards practices which may be expected of all Christian disciples.

Presbyters as Bishops

50. In the same way as Superintendency is a particular form of the exercise of episkopé by some presbyters, so also the episcopal order of ministry is a particular form of the presbyteral ministry. The episcopacy is, however, distinctive not by virtue of features of organisation or management, but due to other features being explored here (e.g. vis-à-vis lifelong expectations of spiritual leadership, and particular roles in mission and ordination). The episcopacy thus extends the exercise of episkopé by presbyters differently from superintendency, though all presbyters continue to share in oversight, at all levels of the Church’s life, in collaboration with deacons and lay people. Though ordained to episcopal office from within the presbyterate, a particular ‘career structure’ is, however, not being envisaged here, as the next paragraph makes clear.

Bishops for life

51. Presbyters ordained bishops would remain bishops for life. This would not mean, however, that they would occupy a specific type of post for life. It may be important to introduce new terminology to allow for the way in which bishops, whilst still holding episcopal office, might cease to serve in a post to which bishops alone can be appointed and might subsequently serve in an appointment which would otherwise be filled by presbyters. A bishop, however, would only be ordained in the first instance if she or he were to be immediately appointed to exercise episcopal office within a post directly connected to a form of episcopal oversight to which only a bishop could be appointed. She or he would thus always become a bishop for a particular purpose, i.e. role, as and when called by God to do so through the Methodist Church. Because a presbyter becomes a bishop by virtue of being appointed to a particular post, then, does not mean that the remainder of their ministry would entail the exercising of that post.

A three-fold order of ministry

52. British Methodism has a distinctive, permanent diaconate.³² It would be developing a distinctive, permanent episcopate. All three orders of ministry would, however, be envisaged as consonant with the notion of a three-fold order of ministry as participated in by many churches throughout the Christian world.³³ In wishing to envisage for itself no form of episcopate outside of the historic episcopate, British Methodism is nevertheless seeking

32 See further the report *What is a Deacon?* adopted by the 2004 Conference (reprinted as amended by the Conference in *Over to You 2004* Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2004 pp. 16-32).

33 Whilst it must also be noted that this represents a distinctive interpretation of what is commonly called ‘the three-fold order’ which usually assumes (wrongly!) that this must by definition include a transitional diaconate.

to clarify both for itself and for other churches the nature of the ‘Methodist stamp’ which it would be seeking to give to the sign of the historic episcopate to be received.

The President of Conference as a Bishop

53. The question ‘but who would be bishops?’ is dealt with more fully below. However, in keeping with the expectation that bishops ordain, the President of Conference would also be ordained bishop. In this way, continuity with current practice (whereby the President or the President’s representative presides at ordination services) would be maintained. There would be no change to the current practice, itself an expression of the connexional principle, that no-one would be ordained who had not already been received into full connexion. No bishop could ordain without the authorisation of the Conference. The question of whether, at the point at which the sign of the historic episcopate were received into British Methodism, a number of recent Presidents would also need to be ordained bishop, would, however, arise.

Personal episkopé in varying styles

54. It is accepted that the recognition of the personal nature of the episkopé exercised through the embracing of episcopacy would entail respect for the diversity of individual holders of the office, given the different contexts in which people live and work. The connexional ecclesiology and clear accountability structure of British Methodism do, however, limit the extent of diversity and flexibility.

Bishops as leaders in mission and ministry

55. It will be expected that bishops demonstrate visionary leadership, bringing theological acumen to bear in all communal contexts within which they operate, but also inspiring and stirring up those they lead into theologically-informed action within and beyond the Church.

Bishops, power and authority

56. The models to be explored below will need to clarify the nature and scale of the power and authority which bishops do and do not have, in relation to the responsibilities assigned to them. All authority exercised in British Methodism is given by the Conference. *The Nature of Oversight* sought to clarify where power and authority actually lie in the Methodist Church and how they are dispersed in a variety of ways across the structures of the church. This present document needs therefore to be read in the light of *The Nature of Oversight*. The authority contained within the personal episkopé of a bishop in British Methodism would need to be commensurate with the understanding gained through these enquiries.³⁴

Bishops as promulgators of Christian faith

57. Bishops will play a key role in theological resourcing, through their presentation of Christian faith in a variety of contexts and forms, inside and

³⁴ *The Nature of Oversight* 2.1-17.

outside the Church. In this, they extend the exercise of a responsibility held by all presbyters.

A British Methodist Episcopate: Why? Why now? And what would it mean?

58. It would be a big step for the Methodist Church in Britain to have bishops. The matter has been under discussion for four decades. But even after 57 paragraphs of further enquiry, basic questions remain. What has changed, if anything, from previous discussions? Why *should* the step be taken? And why *now*? And in what ways might the embracing of episcopacy *help or hinder* the Methodist Church's contribution to the mission of God in Britain? The 2000 Conference took the decision to adopt the Guidelines cited in para 5 above. It did so, significantly, without requiring that further exploration of possible models of episcopacy for British Methodism inevitably be undertaken in the context of specific schemes of church union. In other words, the post-2000 context invited exploration of episcopacy in a way which might benefit British Methodism itself. Consideration of whether to embrace the *historic* episcopate could never be a solely Methodist matter. But the challenge was thus identified to look at whether episcopacy might be a wise theological and practical step to take, useful both for Methodism *and* ecumenical development, without being directly tied to a specific unity proposal. The remaining paragraphs in this section therefore address that context.
59. Taking the step of embracing the historic episcopate could lead to *a sharper focussing of the personal episkopé* of a number of those responsible for participating in the exercise of oversight in the Methodist Church, leading to a better exercise of oversight throughout the whole Church. Such a personal episkopé would both be comprehensible to and more compatible with the organisational structures of other (episcopally-ordered) churches and could add a significant dimension to the leadership of those appointed to play a leading part in the pastoral responsibility exercised by those ordained in the Methodist Church. It could also benefit the Methodist Church's public, prophetic voice within British society through some of its leaders holding an office more recognisable beyond the Church itself. But enhancing the episkopé of a few of those who are ordained by making them into the focal point of the historic episcopate in this way would only be authentically Methodist if they in turn enhanced the shared oversight of the whole Church in which others participate. Through clear linking of the form in which the Methodist Church would receive the sign of the historic episcopate with the understanding of oversight mapped out in *The Nature of Oversight* it would be ensured that the detailed, practical outworking of a Methodist form of the historic episcopate would inevitably be shaped by a Methodist understanding of what it means to be the Church.³⁵ The recognition that bishops in the Methodist Church in Britain should be seen first and foremost as 'connexional people' – exercising oversight in, and representing, a Conference and Connexion always comprising lay people, deacons and presbyters together – would limit the extent to which receipt of the sign of episcopacy led to a Methodist form of episcopacy wholly controlled by the church/es from whom the sign was received, or by the social pressure to

35 See n. 8 above.

conform to a culturally-available understanding of what a bishop should be. This could also reassure those in non-episcopal churches who fear that in taking such a step the Methodist Church is distancing itself from them. Through the embracing of the historic episcopate, whilst maintaining a strong sense of shared oversight, the Methodist Church could play a more significant role as a bridge church between episcopal and non-episcopal churches.

60. There are two main arguments against the claim that having bishops would enhance the oversight exercised throughout the Methodist Church. First, there is the view that whatever the intentions, and however carefully *The Nature of Oversight* clarifies the accountability structures which exist within the Church, it would inevitably lead to individuals getting ‘above themselves’ in a way which runs counter to the way in which the Methodist Church seeks to operate. There are, and always have been, individual leaders in Methodism. But to move towards episcopacy in contemporary culture would lead to a more individualistic form of oversight than would be wanted by British Methodists, regardless of what was planned. A second argument against the claim that oversight would be enhanced is that having bishops compromises the commitment to the ministry of the whole people of God, through singling out a small number of particular individuals in a way quite foreign to Methodist practice. The more that ordained ministries have developed and expanded, the less the Methodist commitment to the ‘priesthood of all believers’, as expressed in the ministry of the whole people of God, might seem to be emphasized. Both objections have force, but neither should be permitted to constrain the Church’s decision-making. The first acknowledges the risk involved in the step of embracing the historic episcopate. But it also highlights the challenge issued to all – lay, diaconal and presbyteral members of the Church – to make any future structure work. As already noted in para 59, bishops in the historic episcopate would only take authentic Methodist form if the enhancement of their personal episkopé in turn enhanced the oversight exercised by all those – lay, diaconal, presbyteral – authorised to lead throughout the Church. To take the step of embracing episcopacy could, in other words, only benefit the Church if the interplay between episcopal ministry and the ministry of the whole people of God were properly respected. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ does not mean, and has never meant, that all are authorised leaders or that all members of the Church play the same roles. The significance of *The Nature of Oversight* as a document is that it seeks to clarify as fully as possible the way in which oversight happens in the Church (through a combination of theologically informed leadership, management and governance) so that all participate in the Church’s mission.
61. A more focused personal episkopé could in turn foster greater attention to the Church’s *mission*. If in current Methodist understanding deacons are ordained to a ministry of witness through service, and presbyters to a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility, on the understanding being developed in this report ‘connexional’ bishops in the historic episcopate would be ordained to a particular ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility which symbolises apostolic continuity in faith and mission. As such bishops in the historic episcopate would carry a particular responsibility for encouraging the whole Church to focus on its agreed priorities, and for

articulating those priorities to wider society. This can be expressed at its simplest, through an example. The Church has agreed that it should develop ‘confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved’³⁶. The Methodist Church has therefore, through its Conference, agreed that this priority should be kept constantly before the minds of everyone in the Church, and that the appropriate individuals and decision-making bodies are to be stimulated and encouraged to do what is necessary to turn the priority into practical actions and thereby implemented. In other words, maintaining an agreed focus on mission, as a key aspect of what the Church is about, goes hand in hand with a good and positive decision-making and action-taking structure. In short: the giving of fresh attention to mission and enhanced personal episcopé can work together, and a “connexional” bishop in the historic episcopate could play a key role in achieving this. To examine what that key role might be in more detail, it is worth asking how having a “connexional” bishop in the historic episcopate might help or hinder the Methodist Church in fulfilling its agreed Priorities.

<i>Priorities for the Methodist Church</i>	<i>Bishops in the historic episcopate might help the Methodist Church to fulfil its Priorities by</i>	<i>Bishops in the historic episcopate might hinder the Methodist Church in fulfilling its Priorities by</i>
In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:	visibly increasing and easing its links to Churches which have a personal historic episcopate; and acting as the focal point for the Church in these matters (the Conference being the lens)	distancing it from Churches that do not have a personal historic episcopate; and increasing the clericalisation of the Church whilst at the same time diminishing other presbyters and deacons as well as lay people
to proclaim and affirm its conviction of God’s love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and to renew confidence in God’s presence and action in the world and in the Church;	being the representative of the Church’s confidence in God passed on from age to age, visible to and easily recognised in the church and the world	being the substitute for the Church rather than the representative of it in these matters
giving particular attention to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer 	providing a model for this, encouraging people to emulate it, prompting relevant bodies and individuals in the Church to exercise	disempowering individual lay people, deacons, presbyters and the corporate bodies of the Church by becoming the leading controller of

³⁶ One of five points to which the Conference of 2004 agreed to give attention as a way of expressing the Church’s basic priorities.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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 	<p>appropriate leadership, governance and management about it</p>	<p>these things who delegates to others rather than being the servant and catalyst for them</p>
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62. A convergence may therefore be seen between the long-standing debate about whether to embrace episcopacy within British Methodism and a number of other discussions in the Church, not least the task of identifying current priorities for the Church³⁷, and past reflections on leadership.³⁸ Two objections can, however, be issued against the notion that mission and enhanced personal episcopé belong together. First, this looks like a reactionary step towards centralization. Are not most developments in organisations these days moving away from centralization?³⁹ Second, does not a link between a more focussed personal episcopé and mission inevitably mean that there will be more emphasis on the leaders (be they bishops, or whoever) being expected to do the mission, rather than mission becoming a focus for the whole people of God? In response to the first objection, it must be stressed that most forms of British Methodism have been centralized to some extent. Methodisms have always tended to be tightly structured. Not for nothing was John Wesley known as a great organiser (as well as an autocrat). The dispersal of authority post-Wesley, and the emergence of new forms of Methodism after Wesley, did not alter the recognised need to organise Methodist movements very carefully. This need not be seen as undue ‘centralization’, even when related to a focal point in a Conference, *so long as* the Conference functions genuinely as the place where national, regional and local meet, and the decisions about action to be taken derive from, and relate to, the needs of the local. Those who enact the decisions of the Conference (the whole Church) are led by all manner of ‘connexional people’ (presbyters, deacons, and lay officers – paid and unpaid), as *The Nature of Oversight* clearly explains. So long as this insight is maintained, the second objection should not arise. It would therefore only arise in the case of

37 Begun with *Our Calling* (2000), continuing through *Priorities for the Methodist Church* (2003), and finding expression in the present Conference Agenda in the *Team Focus* report.

38 E.g. The 2002 Conference report *Leadership in the Methodist Church*, built upon on this present Conference Agenda by the report of the Methodist Council Review Group.

39 ‘Subsidiarity’ being a fashionable term.

bishops, where the collective responsibility to carry through the Conference's decisions are seen to be 'someone else's decisions' and not those taken representatively on behalf of the whole Methodist Church.

63. The arguments adduced in paragraphs 59-62 are intended to clarify how and why the current place in which the Methodist Church in Britain finds itself might be deemed conducive to a decision about the embracing of the historic episcopate. They are not meant to 'clinch' the argument one way or another. They merely offer a further form of ground-clearing, so that the possible models to follow can be adjudicated appropriately by the Conference and by the Circuits and Districts who will study this report. Alongside the tenor of *The Nature of Oversight*, the above paragraphs are meant to allay the fear that the embracing of episcopacy must inevitably mean the loss of key insights which have been part of the Methodist movements.
64. The possibility of a more focussed personal episkopé and refocusing on mission as an aspect of the Church's current prioritizing exercise, undertaken within the insights gained in *The Nature of Oversight*, do, however, carry some clear consequences. Expectations of, and hopes for, bishops would be high. Embracing the historic episcopate would not simply mean a name-change for some current church-leaders. The nature of the personal episcopate of Methodists in British Methodism would make new requirements on them as disciples and ministers of God in the Church. Additionally, new levels of the trust that exists to enable the Church to do its work would be extended across the Church. Bishops would be trusted to fulfil their ministry within the terms of *The Nature of Oversight*, maintaining a clear sense of the fundamentally shared nature of oversight in Methodism. Such a step towards greater exercise of personal episkopé would, however, in turn accentuate the level of trust always exercised in those who lead in the Church, be they lay, diaconal or presbyteral.

Possible Models of Bishop in British Methodism

65. After all the background work, the possible options can now be presented of who might be a bishop in the historic episcopate within British Methodism, given the framework outlined in paragraphs 46-57, and given the realities of the Methodist Church as currently structured.
66. The first group of possible models of British Methodist bishop place the focus firmly on the Methodist Conference as the primary location of a Methodist understanding of episkopé. There is a clear sense in which the Conference is British Methodism's bishop.⁴⁰ The only question, therefore, is

40 This raises the intriguing question: who checks on the bishop (when the 'bishop' is a Conference)? Two answers are possible. Internally within the Methodist Church, the Conference's workings are scrutinized in at least two ways, theologically by the Faith and Order Committee and legally by the Law and Polity Committee. Both of these Committees work independently from each other (though liaising as appropriate) and from the Methodist Council, and are, significantly, bodies which can bring lay, diaconal and presbyteral members together in sharing in the task of oversight (acknowledging there happens currently to be no deacon on the Law and Polity Committee). There are, in addition, processes of internal consultation (sending material to Circuit and Districts for responses) and 'reception' (provisional legislation) which act as further checks on the Conference's decision-making. Externally the Methodist Conference (as Bishop) is scrutinized, *as has always been the case*, through its membership of the worldwide Church, and this scrutiny happens in many ways, in many forms of interaction. Having bishops symbolizes this in a new (though old) way. What is symbolized in reverse (i.e. *to* the worldwide Church, *from* the Methodist Church in Britain) through the participation of this Methodist bishop (i.e. the Conference), and those who symbolize the Conference's episkopé and episcopacy, in the historic

how many persons directly representative of that episcopacy the Conference needs. Six models emerge.⁴¹

- Model A: President as bishop
- Model B: President and General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference as bishops
- Model C: President, General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference and selected (presbyteral) members of the Connexional Team as bishops
- Model D: President and selected Past Presidents as bishops
- Model E: President, General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference and selected Past Presidents as bishops
- Model F: President, General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference, selected Past Presidents and selected (presbyteral) members of the Connexional Team as bishops

In each model the President's representation of the Conference comes to the fore.⁴² All of these six options would produce a relatively small number of bishops, but they would represent the Methodist Church as a whole, and specifically its Conference. Of the specific tasks required of bishops, the relationship of the episcopacy to the practice of ordination is prominent in Models D-F, this being the rationale for including Past Presidents within those ordained bishop.⁴³ Where the General Secretary and selected presbyteral members of the Connexional Team are proposed as bishops, then the role of 'upholding the faith' and 'leading in mission' are especially prominent. Models C and F especially emphasize the way in which strategy and coherence across the Connexion, in the service of the Gospel, would be paramount in the Connexional Team's serving of the Conference.

67. A second group of models extends the permutations listed in the previous paragraph through critical comparison of the role of bishop with that of the existing role of Chairs of District. Three further models emerge.

- Model G: Current Chairs of District become bishops
- Model H: Current Chairs of District and, say, up to three Superintendents or other presbyters in each District become bishops, each of them relating to a geographical 'section'

episcopate, is that authentic churches in the apostolic tradition take many forms, that episcopacy is one way of focusing that apostolicity, but that episcopacy itself does not have one single form.

41 It must be noted here that the roles of General Secretary and the Secretary of the Conference are currently united in one person. As noted in NoO 3.27-3.28, it is theoretically possible that at some future date the roles might be separated and fulfilled by two people, one of whom (either of the two roles) could be lay. Clearly, if such a development occurred, only a presbyter could be ordained a bishop. This discussion about episcopacy may thus clarify that, were the two roles separated, one (more probably the Secretary of the Conference) would also be a presbyteral role.

42 The President is identified, in effect, as the 'Principal Minister' of the Methodist Church (to use the terminology explored in para. 30 above).

43 'Selected' Past Presidents denotes simply that a limited number would be needed at first to support the current practice of involving Past Presidents in ordination services i.e. the first Conference at which the ordination of bishops occurred would see the ordination of enough Past Presidents to support the services of ordination for those to be ordained presbyter or deacon.

within a District, thus creating ‘episcopal leadership teams’⁴⁴

- Model I: Current Chairs of District and, say, up to three Superintendents or other presbyters in each District become bishops, each of them having a specialist focus of ministry, thus creating ‘episcopal leadership teams’

If any option from G to I were selected, then one model from A to F would in all likelihood be added. It would, in other words, be highly unlikely for there to be bishops in British Methodism relating to a region without there also being an episcopal form of leadership relating to the Conference itself.

68. A third groups of models extends the permutations listed in paragraph 58 through critical comparison of the role of bishop with that of the existing role of Superintendents. Two further models emerge.

- Model J: All Circuit Superintendents become bishops
- Model K: All Circuit Superintendents become bishops following on from a redrawing of circuit boundaries, turning clusters of current circuits into ‘episcopal areas’ and disbanding districts

Both of these proposals concur with the majority decision reached by the working party which reported to the 1981 Conference i.e. that at that time it appeared to be at circuit level that an expression of episcopacy best ‘fitted’ Methodist theology and practice. This perception of ‘best fit’ does, however, now need to be revisited both in the light of the developing practice in the Methodist Church and the conclusions offered to this present Conference in the document *The Nature of Oversight*.

69. *Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Model*

The table which follows lists some of the key strengths and weaknesses of each model. It does not aim to be comprehensive.

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses
A President only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Links episcopacy firmly with the Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implies too much of a focus on a single individual
B President + Gen. Sec.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respects both representative and <i>de facto</i> leadership in the church ▪ Links episcopacy firmly with the Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creates too few bishops for a Methodist episcopacy to have much effect

⁴⁴ In this and the next model, geographically small Districts such as the Isle of Man and the Shetland District would not have more than one bishop. The individual bishop would receive episcopal collegiality through close links to a neighbouring episcopal team.

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses
C President + Gen. Sec. + Conn Team members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Locates episcopacy firmly in relation to the Connexional team's role in contributing to the carrying through of Conference decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unless a quota/specified presbyteral post system operated, could create an <i>ad hoc</i> episcopacy dependent on which Connexional Team post happen to be filled by presbyters
D President + Past Presidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Links episcopacy firmly with the Conference ▪ Links with Conference's authority vis-à-vis ordination and thus the unity and order of the church 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Episcopacy is disconnected from the ongoing organisational life of the church
E President + Gen. Sec. + Past Presidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Links episcopacy firmly with the Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creates an uneven group of bishops ▪ Places too great an emphasis upon General Secretary re. ongoing work
F President + Gen. Sec. + Past Presidents + Conn Team Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Links to both Conference's symbolic and <i>de facto</i> authority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creates a team of bishops some of whom may not be in a position to link local church involvement with their connexional role
G Chairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Requires least alteration to current structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implies Districts = Dioceses, and thus compromises connexion-wide emphasis

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses
H Chairs + up to 3 presbyters <i>geography</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Locates personal episkopé within a team emphasis ▪ Extends the structuring of what is already emerging with District Chairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implies too close a copying of a diocesan model (diocesan bishop + suffragans) ▪ Could create an ‘elite group’ within a District
I Chairs + up to 3 presbyters <i>specialism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Locates personal episkopé within a team emphasis ▪ Moves away from geographical model of episcopacy, even whilst being localized (also a weakness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Could create an ‘elite group’ within a District ▪ Moves away from geographical model of episcopacy, even whilst being localized (also a strength)
J Super-intendents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appeared in 1981 to offer best fit with Methodist theology and practice ▪ Relatively easy structural change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Makes additional demands on Superintendents/Bishops ▪ Ecumenically insensitive (creates too many bishops – c. 620 – in one go) ▪ Qualified by <i>The Nature of Oversight’s</i> emphasis upon the collaborative exercise of oversight within the episkopé of the Conference
K Super-intendents <i>(revised circuits)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appeared in 1981 to offer best fit with Methodist theology and practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands major structural change ▪ Ecumenically insensitive ▪ Qualified by <i>The Nature of Oversight’s</i> emphasis upon the collaborative exercise of oversight within the episkopé of the Conference

70. From the perspective of circuit life, it may appear obvious that in Methodist understanding the most logical location of bishops is at circuit level. If the local unity of the church is to be focused in an individual, and if that same person is to be expected to take a key role in the leadership of the church for mission, then it is in relation to the Circuit Superintendent that one might expect a British Methodist episcopate to emerge. On this understanding, either Model J or K offers itself as the best way forward. The suggestion

does, however, overlook the extent to which every presbyter is a 'connexional person', stationed *to* a circuit. The Superintendent may be considered more of a connexional person than every presbyter, through her/his responsibility to ensure that connexion-wide concerns are appropriately addressed in a circuit. However, as *The Nature of Oversight* and this present report make clear, 'connexionalism' and the notion of who are, individually, collegially and communally responsible (as 'connexional persons') for exercising oversight on the Conference's behalf, make the practice of oversight throughout the Church a wide and complex matter. Whoever was to become a bishop in the Methodist Church in Britain would be a 'connexional person' first and foremost.⁴⁵ It is no longer clear that making all Superintendents bishops would be the best way of focusing the connexion-wide episkopé in particular people, either for Methodism itself, or in ecumenical relations.

71. The charge of ecumenical insensitivity counts against both J and K. A Conference-led, circuit-focused understanding of 'church' offers an alternative to a diocese-based structure in that its local focus is on usually smaller, more localized geographical areas than dioceses. British Methodism would want to maintain a vision of the church in the three nations of Great Britain as one in which ecumenical episcopal areas may yet be possible, with one Christian leader identifiable in each local area. In this way both the unity and the mission of the church would be served. Such a vision would not, however, be served ecumenically at this point by the Methodist Church taking a unilateral step to embrace episcopacy in a form which anticipated such a uniting/united church, without that church yet being a reality. But the vision remains, and would need to remain in ongoing ecumenical discussion, regardless of the conclusions which the Methodist Church might make at this juncture in its history.
72. More realistically, a localized form of episcopacy could be introduced into British Methodism according to one of the three District-related models, G to I. Chairs of District already report how similar their roles prove to be to that of their Anglican and Roman Catholic (episcopal) colleagues. They also report how exhausting it can prove to relate to multiple dioceses. In practice, however, Chairs have deputies, and often have other (often Superintendent) colleagues who share in the roles of leadership required of them in the District. The patterns of personal episkopé (and thus of leadership, management and governance) which have begun to emerge thus suggest that relating a British Methodist understanding of 'bishop' to such patterns would not be a huge step. The danger of this 'easy step', of course, is the implications that Districts are very similar to Dioceses, and that therefore bishops in British Methodism could function as Diocesan Bishops. Both implications are mistaken. This does not of itself mean that Chairs should not become Bishops. It merely highlights the difficulty, within a connexional view of 'church', of locating an episcopal structure at a regional level.
73. In identifying potential episcopal oversight in Districts, and wanting to accentuate the personal episkopé of each individual bishop, the relationship

⁴⁵ This would constrain him/her in any individualistic tendencies, but also remind him/her of the scale of collective (connexional) support for her/him in episcopal office.

of bishops to circuits, districts and the Conference would remain different from that of diocesan bishops to their dioceses. It is for this reason that the recommendation of Model G, H or I would, at the very least, need to be combined with one of the models A-F. In this way, the relationship between the Conference and the presbyters (become bishops) who representatively carried the specific oversight of the Conference at more local level would be clearly and symbolically marked in terms of the personal episkopé of bishops.⁴⁶ In Methodist understanding, bishops would be first and foremost connexional persons. As episcopal persons, however, they would be looked to for leadership within whichever groups to which they related (connexion-wide, district, circuit or local church).

74. In the first possible group of models (A-F), two distinct strands of representation and leadership are present. The President and Past Presidents focus symbolically the leadership of the Conference. The General Secretary and selected (presbyteral) members of the Connexional Team focus the *de facto* management of work required by and for the Conference in service of the Connexion and the wider church. Consistent with insights drawn from *The Nature of Oversight* it could be argued that both forms of oversight should be expressed in any form of episcopacy adopted within British Methodism.
75. In interpreting the above with a view to moving towards a proposal for what form or forms of episcopacy can be deemed possible and appropriate in British Methodism, it is thus clear that were the historic episcopate to be embraced within British Methodism, there could be three expressions of it: the President's role, the General Secretaryship, and those exercising oversight within Districts.⁴⁷ These three possibilities are picked up in the proposals offered below.

It should be noted (cf. para 70-71) that it is no longer deemed appropriate, when seen from the perspective of the historic episcopate, for British Methodism to see Circuit Superintendents as best focusing representatively in personal terms the Conference's episkopé, even though their role is crucial within the Methodist Church in the full exercise of oversight (as both *The Nature of Oversight* and *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* make clear).

A Set of Proposals for Discussion

76. On the basis of the thorough investigation of the nature of oversight which is exercised in British Methodism both in *The Nature of Oversight* and in this present document, the Methodist Council and The Faith and Order Committee invite the Methodist Church as a whole to address *two basic questions*.

First,

46 Though all presbyters are 'connexional people' and all circuit superintendents in particular carry a leadership and management responsibility of ensuring that the Conference's decisions are carried into circuit life, bishops would both focus the oversight exercised by the Conference, and the presence of the church in society, in publicly identifiable individuals. A bishop's representative role is, however, not different in kind from that which any presbyter might play (*What is a Presbyter?* para 4).

47 [Moved into the main body of the Report as a separate paragraph within para 75.] .

do you think that the findings of this report adequately articulate a Methodist understanding of episcopacy?

This question invites a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, though respondents may wish to add other comments.

77. Second,

given that in Methodism the Conference acts like a 'corporate bishop', who should the specific representatives of that 'corporate episcopé' be?

This question can be answered by means of answering two sub-questions:

Given that there are three locations within the structure of the Methodist Church in Britain which are most conducive to the expression of oversight in terms of personal episcopé, which of the following roles do you consider should represent the episcopé of the Conference? (You may choose one, two or all three.)

- *The President (sometimes including selected Past Presidents)*
- *The General Secretary (representing the link between the Conference and the Connexional Team)*
- *District Chairs or District Chairs + selected other presbyters sharing in oversight in Districts*

78. A second sub-question may also be addressed.

In the light of your reading of this document, which of the following possible models or combinations of models do you think represents the best expression of personal episcopé in British Methodism, given its understanding of the nature of oversight?

The Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Council deem that five options should be considered.

A President

D President + selected Past Presidents

A+G President + District Chairs

E+G President, General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference + selected Past Presidents + District Chairs

B+H President, General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference + District Chairs and, say, up to three presbyters or Superintendents in each District.

OR None of the above

It is assumed that the response to the question posed in para 77 will be taken into account if this question is addressed.

79. It is recommended that the content of paragraphs 76-78 be discussed in Circuits and Districts (and any other groups wishing to offer responses) and that the responses to the questions posed be reported to the Methodist Council and the Faith and Order Committee via the General Secretary.

80. It is imperative that the discussions of the above paragraphs should be undertaken in the light of *The Nature of Oversight* and the full text of this present report. It may not be possible for all participants in the discussion to read the full texts of both reports. However, in any group discussion it is vital that informed summaries of the material be offered to those wishing to express a view about the content of paragraphs 76-8.⁴⁸
81. It is important also that discussions occur in the context of a realism about the Methodist Church as it is, and the ecumenical context in which we find ourselves. In this light, the group discussions which occur will be able to respect the fact that the reflections on oversight which have brought the Methodist Church to this place, and which can give the Methodist understanding of episcopacy its distinct shape and focus, may in turn prove of use to ecumenical partners (either in episcopally- or non-episcopally ordered churches).

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 60/1.** The Conference receives the Report.
- 60/2.** The Conference commends the Report to Districts, Circuits, local churches, and any other groups wishing to consider its content, for study and discussion and requests that responses to paragraphs 76-78 be sent to the General Secretary by the 31st October 2006.
- 60/3.** The Conference directs that a further report, based on the responses, be brought to the Conference of 2007, to enable a decision to be made about whether to proceed to embrace the historic episcopate.

⁴⁸ If the report is received and commended for study, then study material will be made available to enable these discussions to occur.