

Effective oversight of Methodist Fresh Expressions

An exploration of how fresh expressions are challenging the practice, discipline, and ecclesiology of the Methodist Church, with specific reference to the task of presbyteral oversight.

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Abstract

Rev Langley Mackrell-Hey: Effective oversight of Methodist fresh expressions

The British Methodist Church defines oversight as the means by which churches remain true to their calling. Its presbyters are charged with upholding *Constitution, Practice, and Discipline* or 'CPD'. This research employs a combination of Practical Theology methods to examine the challenge of applying CPD to fresh expressions (forms of Church established for the benefit of those who are not yet members of a local church). It offers three original insights in regard to the tension between mission-praxis and ecclesiological discipline. First, it provides empirical evidence to support the anecdotal observation that not all fresh expressions are authentic in that they lack ecclesial intent. A combination of factors inhibited this. New churches can be formed when twelve Methodist members unite. Current legislation allows members of the Church to belong to only one society, meaning that leaders face the conflict of leaving their parent church if they are to form a new church. Second, membership mediated an unequal power balance between fresh expressions and their parent churches, undermining progress towards achieving a 'mixed economy'. This situation was confounded by the fact that newcomers to fresh expressions viewed Methodist membership as an institutional construct and requirement, rather than an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Third, the Methodist Church policy that encourages presbyters to apply CPD with a 'light-touch' in respect of how its disciplines are applied to new work, risks inconsistency. This thesis invites the Church to find a way of identifying which of its fresh expressions have genuine ecclesial intent, reflect on how membership is impacting their ecclesial formation, and widen its existing legislation so that a Methodist member may belong to two local societies at the same time. This, combined with additional District oversight, would remove some significant barriers to ecclesial formation.

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Dedication

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