

## 37. Faith and Order Committee Report

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<b>Resolution</b>	37/1. The Conference receives the report.

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and Aims</b>	To provide a report on the work of the Faith and Order Committee
<b>Main Points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Reflection on 2020-21 in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic</li><li>● The work of the Faith and Order Committee including the work of the Worship and Liturgy Sub-Committee, the Committee's consideration of the Deferred Special Resolution relating to Model Trust 14(2A), an update on the theology of online life and work expected to be brought to the 2022 Conference.</li></ul>

### The Faith and Order Committee Report 2020-2021

#### Part A: Reflection on 2020/2021 in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Amidst the ongoing devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic and whilst wrestling with all kinds of loss, pain and grief, the Methodist people have continued to “respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out [their] discipleship in worship and mission.”<sup>1</sup> Through exploring and discovering new ways in which to worship together; through caring for families, friends, neighbours and those within our wider communities; through praying, whether in familiar forms or fragile fragments; through working for justice and healing for the earth and its people; and through helping one another to discern God’s presence and hope, there are many examples of faithful discipleship. The number of significant issues in this year’s Conference Agenda indicate the huge amount of work that has been undertaken across the Connexion in the middle of change and uncertainty in all areas of its life.

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1 The Methodist Conference, *Our Calling*, 2000

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2. During the 2021 Conference some difficult decisions will be made, many of which say something important about who we are and how we live together as the Methodist people. Such decisions are made whilst many continue to ask where God is and what God requires of us in the midst of such devastation. In the *Preface* to his reflections on faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic, Rowan Williams notes that:

“We are by no means out of the wood yet as far as the pandemic is concerned. What we have been thinking and praying about in these last months ... is, sadly, not a matter of historical interest. The acute challenges to faith, hope and love remain. But these meditations – brief and scrappy as they may be – are offered in the hope that our Christian communities will continue to find resources of compassion, trust and energy to share with a society and a world struggling with what seem unmanageable burdens and impossibly complex decisions.”<sup>2</sup>

3. The Conference Agenda is testament to some of the ways in which Methodists have found resources of compassion, trust and energy in order to share God’s love and hope. Questions about God, about God’s church, and about our own response remain. For many, it is not yet possible to find time and space to reflect on them. The Faith and Order Committee has begun to note some of the emerging theological questions and will continue to do so, including by sharing in conversation with ecumenical partners through Churches Together in England. As part of this report, however, the Committee draws attention to some of the themes which recur in several Conference reports and point to some of the potential theological questions which might emerge from reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact.

### 3.1. What it means to be human

The pandemic has caused profound disruption to ways of being across the world, revealing the fragility of human life and providing examples of both the horror and the heroism of human behaviour. It has prompted questions about who we are when stripped of our familiar ways of inhabiting the world, when resources are scarce, and when facing fear and uncertainty and loss of hopes for the future. Some of the reports before the Conference remind us of other experiences of abuse, discrimination and exclusion which necessitate further reflection on the human condition: the *Theology of Safeguarding* reminds us that “human beings

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2 Williams, R, 2020, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic*, London: SPCK, pp. xx-xi.

are capable of horrific and appalling acts, as well as being capable of acts of inspirational grace and love”<sup>3</sup>, the *Strategy for Justice, Dignity and Solidarity* highlights some ways in which unconscious biases shape our assumptions and expectations of others and how contexts of privilege and impoverishment shape understandings of the self and of others, and the *God in Love Unites Us* conversations reveal how integral sexuality is to human identity. For many, new or increased engagement online has thrown into sharper focus questions about how the digital context changes and shapes human beings, and *Holy Communion and Online Worship* offers a comment on what it means to be human in a digital world.

### 3.2. What it means to love one another

#### 3.2.1. In his reflections on the pandemic, Tom Wright notes how the response of many Christians in such situations throughout history has been to help and care for others:

“... when faced with a plague, the early Christians would pitch in and nurse people, sometimes saving lives, sometimes dying themselves. Their strong belief in God’s promises for life beyond the grave gave them a fearlessness which enabled them both to keep cheerful in the face of death and to go to the aid of sufferers whose own families and communities had abandoned them for fear of disease. ... throughout Church history, Jesus’ followers have ... got on with the job. They have visited the prisoners, cared for the wounded, welcomed the strangers, fed the hungry. And they have tended the sick.”<sup>4</sup>

Wright also draws attention to Martin Luther’s determination to “avoid places and persons where I am not needed”<sup>5</sup> as he understood “that it was quite possible for a well-meaning person to make matters worse”.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.2.2. In Local Churches across the Connexion there has been much reflection on how care and support might be offered appropriately and safely (especially during lockdown), with the willingness to act also requiring shared discernment about

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3 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, 2021, 3.10

4 Wright, T, 2020, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London: SPCK, pp.61-62. Wright notes that this is explored further in Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996.

5 Martin Luther from a letter of 1527 in Tappert, T G, ed, 1955, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, London: SCM Press.

6 Wright, T, 2020, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London: SPCK, pp.64.

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what is an appropriate way to express and receive care and support in different situations. Such questions also emerge in other contexts. *The Theology of Safeguarding* report highlights the importance of self-awareness and attention to boundaries. It raises questions about the models of pastoral care which are employed within the Church and about whose needs are prioritised.<sup>7</sup> The *Changing Patterns of Ministry* report reflects on the importance of pastoral care, noting that different models have developed (over time as well as in response to the pandemic) and identifying a number of things that can be said about a renewed understanding of pastoral care.<sup>8</sup>

3.2.3. What has become clear is that Local Churches have adapted to the pandemic by enabling pastoral care to be expressed in a variety of ways, through social media, prayer support, phone contacts, emails, video-conferencing house groups, and messaging groups, for example. There is some evidence to suggest that others have felt called to share in pastoral ministry who otherwise might not have been able to do so. Some have offered to be a contact person or an intercessor who for personal reasons could not have offered, for example, to be a pastoral visitor. Visiting is just one expression of pastoral care and some Local Churches and Circuits were already developing a team approach in which a range of people, with different skills and experiences are able to share in the ministry of pastoral care. The Faith and Order Committee therefore notes that it may be timely to revisit Standing Orders 526 and 631 and will keep this on its agenda.

3.3. How we live with difference

3.3.1. It has been understood for many years that the Methodist Church comprises people who live with contradictory convictions and who interpret the Bible and make sense of experience and tradition in different ways.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly discussed in relation to the *God in Love Unites Us* conversations, but is also evident in other matters before the Conference such as *Holy Communion and Online Worship*. How members of the Methodist Church live with contradictory convictions impacts on their relationships and the Methodist Church's decision making. Attention is given to the importance of conferring as central to the way in which Methodists discern the will of God (including in the work on oversight and trusteeship) and Local Churches are encouraged to reflect on how the different gifts of its members are identified and nurtured and contribute to the Church's ministry, whether in the Church or in the world (*Ministry in the Methodist Church*).

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7 *The Theology of Safeguarding*, 2021, section 6.4

8 *Changing Patterns of Ministry*, 2021, section 3.8

9 The Methodist Conference, 2006, *The Faith and Order Committee: Living with Contradictory Convictions*

3.3.2. Living with contradictory convictions is also a central part of the witness of the Methodist Church in the world. The extent to which different global, national and local communities are able to live with diversity has been a matter of significant attention (and concern) in recent years. The Methodist Church's commitment to being a church which enables those of contradictory convictions to live together is potentially a significant witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and a challenge to some ways of relating in contemporary cultures. Whether such witness is possible depends on the extent to which the corporate commitment is embodied in the ordinary interactions of the Methodist people and the ways in which Methodists relate, welcome, listen to and care for each other and those they encounter. Living with contradictory convictions requires careful attention to views and experiences that are different from our own, a willingness to be changed, a preparedness to challenge, a readiness to discern together where appropriate boundaries to beliefs and behaviour reside, and a respectful way of relating to those who hold the different positions within the collective boundaries that are established. Recent work on connexionalism as central to a Methodist understanding of Church emphasised that such ways of relating and being in community require commitment, time, attention and very hard work<sup>10</sup>; yet such relating points to the God of love who is the source and foundation of our life together and it can be a significant and transforming witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### 3.4. Attention to power

The question of power runs through all of the topics noted above and receives particular attention in the *Theology of Safeguarding* report. It is a vital element in conversations about justice and inclusion, and a key consideration as the Conference is asked to reaffirm *Our Calling* and consider how the Church might be re-structured for mission in a changed and changing context. Whilst all members of the Church are thus encouraged to pay attention to the nature and dynamics of power, to reflect on the different kinds of power they have and how they use it, and to examine how it is embedded in church processes and ways of relating, it may also be timely for there to be further theological reflection on power, especially in the life of the Church.

### 3.5. Lament, rage and response

3.5.1. Members of the Conference will be aware of the grief, isolation, anger and pain that many people are experiencing, even if those experiences are not always at the forefront of the formal debates. Rowan Williams says:

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10 The Methodist Conference, 2017, *The Gift of Connexionalism*

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“We still don’t know for how long we will have to live with this pandemic, what the eventual cost will be in lives, jobs, confidence, physical safety, mental and spiritual well-being. For all of us, some much more than others, the effects of the pandemic continue to bite deep. Over-excited commentators are happy to hand out blame. Easy enough to do, and there are indeed some hard questions to be answered about slow and half-hearted responses and inflated claims. But it’s a lot more difficult to acknowledge that we have genuinely been overtaken not only by practical challenges that no one had fully foreseen but by *feelings* no one had foreseen.”<sup>11</sup>

- 3.5.2. One of the requests to the Faith and Order Committee this year was for a service of lament, and some Local Churches have also been creating pastoral and liturgical spaces in which to wail together before God. The reports on *The Theology of Safeguarding and Justice, Dignity and Solidarity* remind us that this is not just because of the pandemic but that people experience profound abuse, injustice and exclusion in many forms, sometimes because of the behaviour of members of the Methodist Church and inadequacy of its processes. There is much cause for weeping. Lockdown is not just part of our experience during this past year, but might also serve as one image which speaks of the imprisoning nature and silencing effect of many different forms of abuse, injustice and pain.
- 3.5.3. The Hebrew Scriptures contain many examples of lament and of anger with, or in the presence of, God. The history of God’s people, as well as our contemporary experiences, reveals the importance of space in which to lament, wail and rage before God, individually and collectively, and many Local Churches, Circuits and Districts have sought to offer such spaces in pastoral and liturgical contexts.
- 3.5.4. In all this there are many questions about how the Church responds. In all the reflection on how to be the Church in such a changed and changing context and all the work to establish new ways of worshipping, caring and engaging in God’s mission, questions about where God is in this and what is required of those who seek to follow Jesus persist. In his reflection on the Coronavirus and its aftermath, Tom Wright comments:

“Tears, locked doors and doubt seem to go together. Different ways of saying similar things. Together they sum up a lot of where we are globally at the time I’m writing this. Tears in plenty, of course: so many lives cut short. Locked doors: well, precisely. The fear isn’t just of certain people who may have it

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11 Williams, R, 2020, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic*, London: SPCK, p.94

in for us; it's a larger, more nebulous fear that every stranger in the street might, without knowing it, give me a sickness which could kill me within a week. I might be able to give it to them, as well. So: lockdown. And, like a weed growing between the weeping and the lock-down, there is doubt: what's this all about? Is there any room left for faith, for hope? If we are locked away from all but a few, any room for love? These are hard and pressing questions.”<sup>12</sup>

- 3.5.5. Offering some biblical reflection on the pandemic, Walter Brueggemann seeks wisdom and insight in texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly those which focus on exile.<sup>13</sup> He again discovers the ever loving God, present with people in the devastation, the waiting and the rage: a God “whose tenacious, unrelenting solidarity with humankind supports the human yearning to grow toward love, generosity, and hospitality,” helping people “absorb the loss of the world they had known” and offering “a vision for a way forward”.<sup>14</sup> He writes:

“We are now, amid the virus, in such a matrix of groan about loss, fear, and death. It is clear that yet again we must wait amid that matrix of groan to receive what new good futures God may now give to us.”<sup>15</sup>

In the ‘matrix of the groan’ God is present and we are invited to turn again to God and grow in love, mercy, generosity and hospitality; and thus to imagine and act towards a new and flourishing world.

- 3.5.6. As Tom Wright ponders how we live in the present pandemic, he turns to John's Gospel and reflects that Christian mission began with tears, locked doors and doubt: Mary's weeping (John 20:1-18), the disciples in hiding (John 20:19-23) and Thomas' uncertainty (John 20:24-29).<sup>16</sup> He sees our response as a call to be “sign-producers for God's kingdom”:

“We are to set up signposts – actions, symbols, not just words – which speak, like Jesus' signs, of new creation: of healing for the sick, of food for the hungry, and so on. ... we will needs, as Mary, Thomas and the disciples in

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12 Wright, T, 2020, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London: SPCK, p.60

13 Brueggemann, W, 2020, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books

14 Ward-Lev, N, 2020, 'Foreward' in Brueggemann, W, 2020, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, Oregon, p.viii

15 Brueggemann, W, 2020, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, p.xii (Preface)

16 Wright, T, 2020, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London: SPCK, pp.59-71

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the upper room needed, the living presence of Jesus, and the powerful breath of his Spirit. That is what we are promised.”<sup>17</sup>

- 3.5.7. Rowan Williams, too, highlights how our response to the present shapes the future. He ends his meditations by saying:

“Ultimately the question for us as a society is whether we have *grown* through the solidarity into which we have been forced. Simple solutions are not yet in sight as we move into a hard winter. But ... what if the change has already begun? What if something of a new world has been seen afresh and has kindled a new force of longing for generous, equitable, joyful living together?

Pray that it is so; act as if it were.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Part B: The work of the Faith and Order Committee 2020-2021**

4. In the light of the COVID-19 restrictions the Faith and Order Committee has adapted its way of working but, due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic and an increased workload, the Committee has also had to prioritise some pieces of work for the 2021 Conference and defer some other pieces of work. The Methodist Council supported the Committee’s recommendation<sup>19</sup> that work on the Methodist understanding of membership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the review of the criteria for Authorisations to preside at the Lord’s Supper be deferred for a year and reported to the 2022 Conference. It also affirmed the decision to bring further reports on the nature of leadership in the Methodist Church and the theology of online life (see also section 7 below) to a future Conference. The Committee has also engaged with various issues, projects, Council papers and pieces of work by the Connexional Team, providing specific responses to paperwork, continuing involvement in the support of working groups, or commentary on the development of reports. Where appropriate, specific responses have been sent directly to the authors of reports, or to those providing the lead in relevant areas of work.

### **5. The work of the Worship and Liturgy Sub-Committee**

As part of its work during the past year, the Worship and Liturgy Sub-Committee has developed an order for a service of to celebrate a return to public worship,

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17 Wright, T, 2020, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, London: SPCK, p.65

18 Williams, R, 2020, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic*, London: SPCK, p.96

19 Resolution 86/1, 2020.



an order for a service of lament ([www.methodist.org.uk/media/21109/a-service-of-lament-0321.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21109/a-service-of-lament-0321.pdf)), the order of communion during the Conference, and the marriage liturgies in relation to the work on *God in Love Unites Us* which are presented elsewhere in the Conference Agenda. The work on the *Theology of Safeguarding* and experiences of worship during the pandemic (including online worship) have raised questions about how the sharing of the peace within services of Holy Communion is understood and embodied, and this is being given further consideration.

### **6. The Deferred Special Resolution relating to Model Trust 14(2A)**

- 6.1. The 2019 Conference submitted a deferred special resolution (regarding a change to Model Trust 14(2A)) to the Synods, Circuit Meetings, Church Councils and to the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees under the terms of Standing Order 126(3). Under Standing Order 126(7), the Faith and Order Committee has considered the resolution and reports its approval to the Conference.
- 6.2. The Committee notes, however, that awareness of the nature of the teaching and practices of any church or congregation using Methodist premises may develop over time. Whilst guidance can be sought from the Faith and Order Committee, the local knowledge and a continuing relationship with the church or congregation is important. A licence which had to be renewed after twelve months provided a natural opportunity for conversation and review. It might therefore be helpful to ensure that there is (at least) an annual conversation between the managing trustees or their representative(s) and the relevant church or congregation as a means of keeping in touch, and also to provide a means of reviewing the licence or lease should any teaching or practices cause concern. Some further guidance around this clause would also be useful.
- 6.3. It is further noted that Model Trust 14(2A) and Model Trust 14(3) also relate to Standing Order 920, but that it can be difficult to navigate how these relate to each other and determine the meaning of some of the terms used. Some further work on these provisions is recommended to better assist managing trustees and Superintendents in their decision making.

### **7. Theology of online life**

- 7.1. The Faith and Order Committee continues to reflect on questions about “the nature of online life and Christian experience”<sup>20</sup> as interaction with technology

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<sup>20</sup> *Faith and Order Committee report, 2018*

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and online communication continues to change and develop. 'Online Life' is a large topic, and as Methodist experience of it has multiplied especially since March 2020 through the necessities of lockdown, so too have the questions, opportunities and concerns. It is too early to discern how this might have changed the Methodist Church more permanently, but many have experienced new ways of being in community, of worshipping and of being disciples of Jesus. These recent experiences of online life and communication are varied, sometimes affirming and creative and sometimes challenging.

- 7.2. The Methodist Council supported the Faith and Order Committee's decision to bring fuller reflection on the theology of online life to a future Conference. While there are many issues that could be explored fruitfully, the Committee's task is to look at those that enable us as Methodist people to navigate ideas about, and practices of, 'Online Life'. In consultation with others, the Committee is planning to hold a series of online seminars that bring together a variety of perspectives, including global, ecumenical and more marginal voices, to discern key themes and to reflect on how best to contribute to the Methodist Church's continuing theological reflection on experiences of online life.

### **8. Work being brought to Conference in 2022:**

Revision of guidance and theological reflection on deliverance ministry

The Methodist Understanding of Membership in the 21st Century

Review of criteria for authorisations to preside at the Lord's Supper

Theology of online life

Further work on *The Theology and Ecclesiology Underpinning the Diaconate and the Methodist Diaconal Order*

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

#### **37/1. The Conference receives the Report.**