

19. Response of the Methodist Church to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales

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Subject and Aims	The response of the Methodist Church to the discussion papers published by the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales in October 2012.
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is insufficient support both in Wales and in the wider Connexion for the Methodist Church to accept the invitation from the Commission in paragraph 1 of its 'Summary of Recommendations'. • It is hoped that the response of Y Cyngor to the Commission's work plan for 2011-16 may be 'heard afresh'. • The Conference assures the Commission of its prayerful support.
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This Covenant dates from 1975 and the Covenanted Churches are the Covenanted Baptist Churches, the Church in Wales, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church of Wales, and the United Reformed Church. • Two discussion documents published in October 2012 by the Commission: <i>Church Governance/Llywodraeth Eglwysig</i> and <i>Pastoral Oversight/Arolygiaeth Fugeiliol</i>. • Section B of the Ecumenical Report to the Conference in 2013 (Agenda, pp 95-97) and Resolution 12/3.
Consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Y Cyngor, with the support of the Wales Synod and Synod Cymru, consulted the Circuits and ardaloedd of their Districts. • The Faith and Order Committee and the Law and Polity Committee produced responses to the Commission's recommendations to help inform Y Cyngor. • The District Policy Committees.
Impact	The Covenanted Churches in Wales.

Introduction

1. It was in 1974 that the Methodist Conference approved the proposals for covenanting for union in Wales. This year, then, marks the 40th anniversary of that decision; next January marks the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Covenant. The Conference rejoices in the fruit this Covenant has produced over all these years and is grateful to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches for all it has done to help the Covenanted Baptist Churches in Wales, the Church in Wales, the Presbyterian Church of Wales, the United Reformed Church, and the Methodist Church 'to work and pray in common obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that by the Holy Spirit we may be brought into one visible Church to serve together in mission to the glory of God the Father.'¹
2. The Conference thanks the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales for the two discussion papers, *Church Governance/Llywodraeth Eglwysig* and *Pastoral Oversight/Arolygiaeth Fugeiliol*, that were launched at 'The Gathering' in October 2012.² The Conference also thanks the Commission for agreeing to extend the consultation period so that

¹ 'The 1975 Covenant' at www.cytun.org.uk/covenant75.html

² The reports are available at www.cydgynulliad.org.uk/

it could agree its response in 2014 rather than 2013; this has enabled the Methodist Church to engage in a more thorough consultation than would otherwise have been the case.

Consultation process

3. The Ecumenical Report to the 2013 Conference referred to the current work plan of the Commission, included the Commission's own 'Summary of Recommendations', and outlined the process of consultation that Y Cyngor initiated the month after the Gathering. With the support of Synod Cymru and the Wales Synod, that consultation took place with the circuits and ardalodd in Wales from January to September 2013. This consultation, together with responses from the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees of the Methodist Church, informed Y Cyngor as it formulated its response which was agreed in November 2013.³
4. The Ecumenical Report to the Conference in 2013 also proposed a process of consultation with the other districts in the Connexion, and the Conference adopted a resolution directing that:

in the light of the recommendations agreed by Y Cyngor in response to the recommendations of the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales, the Methodist Council shall consult with all the districts except Synod Cymru and the Wales Synod on the recommendations of the Commission, and report to the Conference in 2014. (Resolution 12/3 of the 2013 Conference)
5. In January 2014 the Methodist Council decided to consult with the relevant Districts through their policy committees and invited them to submit comments on the Commission's recommendations to the Connexional Ecumenical Officer by the end of February; of the 29 consulted, 16 responded.
6. The Conference is grateful to all who have participated in this process and responds to the Commission on behalf of the Methodist Church in the light of a connexion-wide consultation. The overwhelming majority of responses received during the consultation relate to the first three of the recommendations set out in the Commission's own 'Summary of Recommendations'. It is important, however, that the Conference also responds to the other three; these were set out under the heading 'Short-term Recommendations' in paragraph 12 of *Pastoral Oversight* in a slightly different version from that in the Summary; the last one also appeared under the same heading in paragraph 6.2 of *Church Governance*.

The response from Y Cyngor to the Commission's recommendations

7. The Foreword to *Church Governance* invites its readers to think of what they are about to read as more of an artist's impression, or series of impressions, of what the Covenanting Household of Faith in Wales might look like, rather than the actual plans. In the opening paragraph of its response, Y Cyngor observes that although the recommendations are 'outline in nature', they are 'far-reaching' (1). In the paragraphs that follow, Y Cyngor explains why it considers this to be the case.
8. It records that a wide range of views was offered: these included some positive responses which looked favourably on the Commission's papers (5), a series of concerns which it summarised under four headings (6), and three specific points (7). It went on to look at some 'immediate difficulties' identified by the Commission (8) and at the responses from the circuits

³ See Appendices 1 and 2 for the Commission's 'Summary of Recommendations' and the response of Y Cyngor.

and ardaloedd to them (9). In the latter paragraph, Y Cyngor notes that, since the publication of the discussion papers and just before the close of the consultation period in Wales, the Church in Wales decided to admit women to the episcopate; it also notes that the Wales Synod had sent a Memorial to the Conference raising concern about the proposed 'act of reconciliation'.⁴

9. Y Cyngor says that the concerns picked up in the responses from the two Synods in Wales were also identified in those from the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees (10). It then suggests that the summary statement of the Methodist Church's position on *episkopé* and episcopacy was not taken fully into account by the Commission (11) and refers to the discussions about episcopacy in the Joint Implementation Commission under the covenant between the Methodist Church and the Church of England (12).
10. Having highlighted three points about the Commission's recommendations (13), Y Cyngor concludes that, in the light of the responses it received, there is insufficient support to proceed towards drawing up a more detailed scheme for a Uniting Church in Wales (14). Nevertheless, Y Cyngor ends its response by recalling what it said to the Commission about the latter's current work plan and offering some positive examples of how the relationships and work of the covenanted churches might be developed (15-17).

The responses from the district Policy Committees

11. One district Policy Committee responded by saying that it wanted to endorse the Commission's recommendations and was grateful for the foresight and creativity shown. The majority, however, supported the response of Y Cyngor to the recommendations.
12. In doing so, they pointed to many of the concerns recorded in the response from Y Cyngor, including those about the discussion papers' accounts of the Methodist Church's understanding of ecclesiology (in particular, connexionalism), of oversight, and of the role of the laity in both the life and mission of the Church. One drew attention to the question of whether episcopacy could be introduced to only part rather than all of the Methodist Church and two thought that if a Uniting/United Church were to be formed, the Methodist districts in Wales would need to become an autonomous Conference. The recommended 'act of reconciliation' produced a negative response from a few district Policy Committees but one also wanted to affirm that the reconciliation of ministries of word and sacrament is an essential goal of ecumenical commitment. Similarly, although supporting Y Cyngor's conclusion about proceeding towards drawing up a more detailed scheme for a Uniting Church in Wales, a few district Policy Committees affirmed the importance of seeking unity, including visible unity, with other churches.
13. Several district Policy Committees commented on the themes of the closing three paragraphs of the response from Y Cyngor, affirmed the good work undertaken by the covenanting churches over many years, and expressed support for the further development of shared mission and ministry involving both lay and ordained.

Conclusions

14. As stated above, the Conference is grateful to all who have participated in the consultation process that it agreed in 2013 and, in the light of it, responds to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales.

⁴ The Memorial is also referred to in paragraph 3.

Recommendations 1, 2, and 3

15. The response from Y Cyngor and the responses from the district Policy Committees show why there is insufficient support both in Wales and in the wider Connexion for the Methodist Church to accept the invitation from the Commission in paragraph 1 of its 'Summary of Recommendations'.⁵

Recommendation 4

16. The Methodist Conference welcomes this recommendation. A significant number of Methodists have been appointed as ecumenical canons in Church of England cathedrals, either because they hold a particular office in the Methodist Church or in a personal capacity. The nature of the role appears to vary and factors such as other responsibilities and proximity to the cathedral mean that the way in which each person is able to fulfil it also varies. Drawing on this experience, the Conference believes that the appointment of canons from other denominations to share in the worship, life, and mission of Church in Wales cathedrals would be another sign that the covenanted churches 'have been brought into a new relationship with one another'.⁶

Recommendation 5

17. This recommendation, to explore together the role of the diaconate, is, in paragraph 12.2 of *Pastoral Oversight*, related to work within the Porvoo Communion of Churches on the same subject. In 1993, the Methodist Conference adopted a report on the Methodist Diaconal Order which was occasioned by resolutions of the Conference in 1988 and 1989. It was a substantial and thorough report which included sections on the history of the diaconate, the then current ecumenical perspectives, and the theology of diaconal ministry. Its main thesis was that the Methodist Church recognises and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal. In the intervening years, the Methodist Church has continued to explore its understanding of the diaconate, mindful of the ecumenical context, and in 2013 the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Methodist Diaconal Order, to 'undertake work on the theology and ecclesiology underpinning the diaconate in Methodism, its place within the British Connexion and its place within the universal church.' This work will also include consultation with our ecumenical partners.

Recommendation 6

18. This recommendation is in two parts. In *Church Governance*, the first part is related to 'the difficulties within Local Ecumenical Partnerships when the minister is expected to report to more than one denominational structure and attend several denominational courts.' The report states, 'This is an unnecessary burden'.⁷ *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (CPD) provides for those who are authorised to serve the Methodist Church as presbyters or deacons and those granted the status of associate presbyter or associate deacon to be members of particular church courts. Whilst recognising the possibility of this becoming a burden, it should be both a privilege and a responsibility. It is also about more than reporting to a denominational structure because it offers an opportunity for ecumenical formation as those concerned witness and take part in the exercise of oversight in a church with a different ecclesiology and polity than their own.

⁵ See *Pastoral Oversight*, para 10.1.1.

⁶ 'The 1975 Covenant'.

⁷ *Church Governance*, para 6.1.

19. The second part of this recommendation speaks of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) entrusting the administration of the Partnership to a Sponsoring Body. It would be helpful to clarify what is meant by the term 'administration'. The Conference understands that the role of Sponsoring Bodies for LEPs has included formal recognition, ongoing liaison, support and review, learning, consultation about ministry, the approval of specific rites for worship, amendments to the constitution, and the dissolution of the charity. A Sponsoring Body has been established between the URC National Synod for Wales and the Wales Synod of the Methodist Church to relate to their LEPs; this has been done in the hope that, in due course, one may be provided on a wider ecumenical basis.

Looking to the future

20. The Conference is mindful that significant reservations have been expressed in the Methodist Church about the two discussion papers and some of the recommendations they contain. It is also aware that some will be disappointed with its response.
21. In 2001, the Conference adopted 'Towards an ecumenical strategy' in which it was stated, 'The Methodist Church remains committed both to the search for full visible unity and to exploring with ecumenical partners what that will mean as we seek to be open to the gifts God still has to share with us through our developing relationships.'⁸ Looking again at the text of the 1975 Covenant, the Conference is reminded that 'we do not yet know the form union will take', 'we approach our task with openness to the Spirit', and that we need 'to grow together through common prayer and worship in mutual understanding and love so that in every place [we] may be renewed together for mission.'
22. In the closing three paragraphs of its response, Y Cyngor records what it said to the Commission and to the Conference about the Commission's work plan for 2011-16 and expresses the hope that this may be 'heard afresh'. The Conference encourages the Commission to enable this to happen.
23. The Conference assures the Commission of its prayerful support as it considers the responses it receives from the covenanted churches and discerns how we may continue 'to work and pray in common obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that by the Holy Spirit we may be brought into one visible Church to serve together in mission to the glory of God the Father.'

*****RESOLUTION**

- 19/1. The Conference adopted the Report and directed that it be sent to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales as the response of the Methodist Church to the discussion papers, *Church Governance/Llywodraeth Eglwysig* and *Pastoral Oversight/Arolygiaeth Fugeiliol*.**

⁸ Conference Agenda (2001), pp.330-333.

Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations

It is the Commission's hope that, at the end of the consultation period these recommendations – perhaps refined by our combined wisdom – may become proposals for the future.

1. The Commission **invites** the five Covenanted Churches to think of themselves as the Church Uniting in Wales.
2. The Commission **recommends**:
 - that the Uniting Church will have nine jurisdictions – the six existing Anglican dioceses plus a Methodist jurisdiction, a Presbyterian jurisdiction and a URC/Covenanting Baptist jurisdiction, each of which will be invited to elect its own bishop;
 - that a description of the bishop's role be drawn up and agreed by all five Covenanted Churches;
 - that the bishop be consecrated into the historic episcopate, i.e. ordained by the laying on of hands by at least three bishops who are themselves part of the historic episcopate;
 - that the bishop will ordain all those who are to become ministers within the bishop's jurisdiction;
 - that the bishop will be a bishop in the Church Uniting in Wales and will share collegiality and full interchangeability with all the other bishops of that Church;
 - that the bishops of all nine jurisdictions in the Church Uniting in Wales consult with each other at least twice a year;
 - that all existing ministers agree to the laying on of hands by at least one Anglican bishop and at least one other bishop representing the other traditions within the Church Uniting in Wales. This would be regarded not as an ordination but as a step forward to full covenanted ministry.
3. Following acceptance of the invitation outlined in 1. above, the Commission **recommends**:
 - that all member jurisdictions will, for the present, continue to operate their existing ecclesiastical polity;
 - that the Gathering of the Church Uniting in Wales be held annually; and
 - that leaders, lawyers and administrators representing all five member Churches be asked to draw up, within a period of five years a Scheme and Constitution for the Uniting Church based on the recommendations in Section 5 of the Report of the Working Group on Church Governance.
4. The Commission **recommends** as good practice the appointment in the Church of England of cathedral canons from other denominations.
5. The Commission **recommends** that its member churches explore together the role of the diaconate to see whether they can reach a common mind on this issue.
6. Within Local Ecumenical Partnerships, the Commission **recommends**:
 - that ministers be encouraged but not required to attend a denominational court other than that of the denomination to which they belong; and
 - that churches entrust the administration of the Partnership to a Sponsoring Body selected from members of the Commission of Covenanted Churches or Cytûn.

Appendix 2: The Response of Y Cyngor to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales

1. Y Cyngor is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations from the Commission of Covenanted Churches. These are contained in the two papers on Church Governance and Pastoral Oversight that were launched at the Gathering that took place in Aberystwyth in October 2012. It recognizes that these recommendations, although outline in nature, are nevertheless far-reaching as they envisage a process in which the non-episcopal partners to the Covenant would take episcopacy into their system through the creation of three new jurisdictions alongside the six existing Anglican dioceses, a commitment to episcopal ordination within the jurisdictions, an act of reconciliation for those ministering within them and an annual Gathering to provide for governance of the proposed Uniting Church in Wales. It also recognizes that these recommendations, and indeed the Gathering which launched them, are part of an Agenda and Work plan for the Commission for the years 2011-16 to which Y Cyngor made its response in 2010 (as was reported to the Conference in 2011 and to which we shall return later.)
2. In seeking to take seriously and make an informed response to the recommendations, Y Cyngor undertook an extensive process of consultation across the 16 circuits and 12 ardaloedd ('areas' in Synod Cymru) that make up the Methodist Church in Wales. This took place between January and September 2013 and all circuits and ardaloedd were provided with an introduction, a summary of the recommendations and template form to reply. Moreover, as we are a connexional Church and part of the British Methodist Conference, this process of response was agreed at the 2013 Conference and also included a similar consultation with two connexional bodies, the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees.
3. In addition this process led to a memorial from the Wales Synod meeting in September that raised concerns about a specific part of the Commission's recommendations, namely the proposed 'act of reconciliation' (see paragraph 9 below). However this memorial will go separately to the Conference and a response to it will be prepared by the Memorials Committee for agreement at Conference in 2014.
4. This consultation resulted in a total of some 55 responses and Y Cyngor would like to pay tribute to the seriousness with which circuits and ardaloedd engaged with the process. Responses were received from all 16 of the circuits and a majority of ardaloedd, and in addition there were some 24 responses received from other groups or individuals. Y Cyngor also received responses from the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees, both of which were very helpful to the process.
5. The nature of the questions asked and variety of responses received make it hard to offer a simply statistical analysis of this process. As might be expected from such an extensive consultation there was a range of views offered, including some positive responses which looked favourably on the Commission's papers, either in principle or in response to particular recommendations.
6. However the group commissioned by Y Cyngor to prepare its response was struck by the emergence of similar themes which emerged across the responses. These raised a series of concerns about the recommendations that could be summarized under the following headings:
 - They were too focused on church structures and not enough on shared mission opportunities.

- They were too much ‘top down’ and not ‘bottom up’ in terms of vision and implementation.
 - They were less about ‘mutual recognition’ and more about being ‘conformed’ to an episcopal model of oversight and ministry.
 - There was too much focus on ordained ministry and not enough about shared lay ministry.
7. In addition, there was a number of specific points raised in the responses:
- There was little mention or discussion of the ministry of deacons in the recommendations.
 - There was little mention of working with partners outside the covenant (particularly an issue in Welsh-speaking work where there is a range of formal and informal relations with other partners).
 - Some questions were raised about the role of the Welsh language in the Uniting Church.
8. Section 10 of the paper on Pastoral Oversight acknowledged that there were some ‘immediate difficulties’ which could be identified in the Commission’s recommendations, and that for Methodists these involved being part of a connexional church in which ordinations took place at Conference presided over by the President. It acknowledged that the Church in Wales’ (then) position on women bishops raised problems should the other partners wish to consecrate a women bishop for one of the other jurisdictions. It also recognized that the recommendations provided a process by which future ministers in the United Church would all be episcopally ordained, but that this might leave ‘in limbo’ those currently serving in Wales who had not been episcopally ordained; to address this situation, the paper proposed an ‘act of reconciliation’ involving the ‘laying on of hands’ by ‘at least one Anglican bishop’ and ‘one other bishop’ following the model of the Church in South India.
9. These difficulties identified in the Commission’s papers were very much picked up in the responses received by Y Cyngor. A significant number of responses re-affirmed the importance of being part of a connexional church and of ministers being ordained at, and in connexion with, the Conference. The concern expressed was that the recommendations threatened to sever the Methodist Church in Wales from being part of the wider Connexion, something that could undermine our ecclesiology and damage our ability to work as a connexional church across three nations and other jurisdictions. Many of the responses were submitted before the decision of the Church in Wales (in September 2013) to admit women to the episcopate, and so continue to reflect Methodist concern to uphold the equal role of women in positions of leadership. However, even though this recent decision by the Church in Wales is welcomed, it is also recognised that much still needs to be done to show how it will work in practice. In particular there is significant disquiet about the recommendation for an ‘act of reconciliation’, which to many respondents seem to imply a rejection of Methodist orders and the prospect of ‘re-ordination’. It was this disquiet that led to the Wales Synod agreeing a Memorial raising concern about the proposed ‘act of reconciliation’ to go separately to the Methodist Conference (see paragraph 3 above.)
10. The same concerns which were picked up in the responses from across the two Synods in Wales, were also identified in those from the connexional bodies. All of them highlight the importance of ensuring that an accurate and adequate understanding of Methodism informs such discussions. For example, the paper on Church Governance emphasises the commonalities between the Covenanted Churches while ignoring or underplaying the theological differences between them, while the paper on Pastoral Oversight underestimates both the theological differences about oversight and the ramifications such a scheme might have for a Welsh Methodist Jurisdiction. They also suggest that some more theological work is

required before any recommendations concerning governance structures and the role of bishops in a Uniting Church in Wales can be further explored.

11. It could also be said that within the Commission's papers themselves there is some material which runs counter to what is then contained in the recommendations. Section 6 in the paper on Pastoral Oversight summarises the Methodist position by means of quoting extensively from the guidelines on 'Episkope and episcopacy' which formed part of the 2000 report to Conference. Amongst other things, these affirm the importance of personal *episkope* being exercised 'within connexional structures', express unease about the 'development of any models of personal *episkope* which isolated Districts from the whole Church' and maintain that 'there should be freedom of interpretation as to the significance of the historic episcopate'. It seems to Y Cyngor that these same guidelines were not taken fully into account in the jurisdictional or diocesan model of episcopal oversight which is then offered in the Commission's papers.
12. In addition, Y Cyngor is also aware of discussions taking place in another covenant relationship, namely through the Joint Implementation Commission under An Anglican-Methodist Covenant involving the Church of England. In these conversations a very different model of personal *episkope* is being discussed, one which is based on the role of the President of the Conference, and which appears much closer to a Methodist and connexional, rather than a diocesan or jurisdictional structure.
13. Taking all these strands together, it seems to Y Cyngor that there is a significant degree of consistency in the responses received from across the two Synods in Wales and the wider Connexion. Both from within Wales and from the connexional bodies there is recognition that what is contained in the Commission's recommendations i) does not adequately address our understanding of what it means to be part of a connexional church, ii) poses real challenges as to how a Methodist jurisdiction would remain in connexion with the British Methodist Conference and iii) raises fundamental questions about our ecclesiology, not least our understanding of oversight.
14. The underlying question asked by the Commission through its papers was whether there was sufficient support for the recommendations among Covenant partners to proceed towards drawing up a more detailed scheme for a Uniting Church in Wales. Based on the responses received, it is clear to Y Cyngor that there is not sufficient support for them among Methodists both in Wales and across the wider Connexion. Indeed the recommendations themselves reveal both a lack of understanding of our polity as a connexional church working across three nations and other jurisdictions and also of the Guidelines that were adopted by the Conference in 2000 as a summary of its position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.
15. However, this does not mean that the Methodist Church is turning away from ecumenism or from the Covenant. Reflecting back on the responses received, Y Cyngor is struck by how far they resonate with the response it made to the original Work Plan from which the Commission's recommendations emerged (section 1). Our response then, which was reported to the Conference in 2011, was to say:

"Our concern is that the Agenda proposed by the Commission, in particular the first 3 points, appears too focused on matters concerning structural schemes, and not enough on deepening existing relationships and exploring what is possible under existing agreements. In particular we consider that its focus is too much on ordained ministry and not enough on the opportunities afforded by lay and mission-shaped ministry to which Covenant partners are also committed."

16. Examples of what this might mean in practice include a serious attempt to explore the possibilities available, but hardly used, of the ecumenical canons of the Church in Wales, to further develop our work with Fresh Expressions, building on our joint involvement in Mission Shaped Ministry courses, and to commit to a regular pattern of meeting with church leaders from the Covenant partners.
17. Our reflection is that this response was not heard as clearly as it might have been by other Covenant partners at the time. It may be, as partners now reflect on and respond to the Commission's recommendations, that our original response may be heard afresh; and with it the positive affirmation with which we closed, pointing to the Agenda that we see as crucial to the Commission's future work:

"We also consider that more work needs to be done to explore what 'visible unity' might mean for this new century. Accordingly, we would want to see the future Agenda of the Commission adjusted to address these issues and so to focus on work which reflects the practical mission priorities in the areas where we seek to serve."

November 2013