

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2001 REPORTS

Speaking for the Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

The Conference of 2000 received twelve memorials from circuits relating to a statement on Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. It received three others on the general issue of public statements. The Conference referred the memorials (M63 - M79, Conference Agenda pages 648 to 655) to the Methodist Council for consideration and report to the Conference of 2001. In the course of compiling this report, the Law and Polity Committee has been consulted.

SUMMARY

This paper concludes that whereas many people speak for the Methodist Church in varying contexts, the President and the Vice-President are pre-eminently the spokespersons for the Methodist Church on all major occasions. However, members of the Connexional Team are empowered by Standing Orders to represent the Methodist Church, which includes speaking on its behalf. Trust complemented by judgement, sensitivity and knowledge must characterize the relationship between the Church and its officers. Recognizing the inherent difficulty of speaking for a church which is diverse and complex, the parameters of what can be said are set by Standing Orders 301(5) and 211(1). Guidelines for Team members will be circulated to all Team members who are authorized to speak for the Methodist Church.

1. CONTEXT

1.1 The Methodist Church is a Church of great diversity and complexity, where the major decisions about our common life and witness are made by the Conference. On the whole we conduct our business by conversation and seek a common mind. Sometimes, however, the issue cannot be settled except by a vote. In the debate which precedes the vote, strong expressions of personal views may not necessarily command the mind of the majority. Therefore the Conference may make a decision by majority vote which on some issues at least will leave a minority, large or small, dissatisfied.

1.2 The Conference statement *Called to Love and Praise (4.6.6)* describes the situation thus:

'The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. In so far as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. Within the structures of decision-making the Church gives a special place to those who are its ordained representative persons, it also listens, where relevant, with especial attentiveness both to ordained persons and to laypersons who serve it with special expertise, but it is ultimately the whole people of God, who, through the relevant decision-making bodies, express their affirmation, or otherwise, of the strategies placed before them.'

1.3 Against this background, numerous people are called on from time to time to speak for the Methodist Church - the President, Vice-President, Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Conference, members of the Connexional Team, the Press Office, Chairs of Districts, individual lay people and ministers (for instance, on local radio). Sometimes a person is asked to give a Methodist view or the Methodist view, or to speak from a Christian standpoint, or simply to give her/his opinion as a known Methodist. Depending on the office, there is an increasing likelihood of a person being 'heard' as speaking for the Methodist Church, unless she/he makes it clear that it is a personal view.

1.4 There are some people who are quite regularly asked for authoritative and clear pronouncements on public issues and they are asked because they are seen to represent the Methodist Church. Sometimes responses have to be made immediately because to do so the following day or the following week will mean missing the deadline.

1.5 Additionally, some members of the Connexional Team, by virtue of their office, are asked by Government or a public body to give a Methodist reaction to or an assessment of a particular policy, paper or proposal.

1.6 The discussion at a recent Law and Polity Committee recognized that no matter how difficult it might be, unless there is a clear reason not to speak, a person, when asked or consulted, should respond to the best of her/his ability. To fail to do so will leave a vacuum in which the Methodist case goes by default.

2. SEEKING THE MIND OF THE CHURCH

2.1 There is a natural order of precedence of the key Methodist texts when seeking to understand the mind of the Methodist Church. In this, the Foreword to the sixth edition of the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church is instructive and is contained in Volume 1 of CPD:

In this edition the natural order - Act, Deeds, Standing Orders - is followed, and there are frequent cross-references between Standing Orders and the connected passages in the Deed of Union, which is essential to a proper comprehension of the Standing Orders.

2.2 The Methodist Church Act 1976 Section 3 says:

'(1) The constitution of the Methodist Church and the doctrinal standards shall be as declared and defined in the Deed of Union:

Provided that in the event of any conflict between any provision of this Act and any provision of the Deed of Union the provision of this Act shall prevail.

(2) The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.'

The Deed clearly sees no difference between the actions of the Methodist Conference and those of the Methodist Church.

2.3 The Deed of Union sets out our own understanding of ourselves as distinct from 'the assistance of the law of the land'. (Foreword to the sixth edition of CPD.)

The Deed of Union 18 makes it clear that *'the government and discipline of the Methodist Church and the management and administration of its affairs shall be vested in the Conference...'*

Our Church's Doctrinal Standards are set out in Clause 4. Clause 5 under the heading Interpretation of Doctrine, says, *'The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrine.'*

2.4 Once again, one is led to understand that the decisions of the Conference are deemed to be those of the Methodist Church as a whole.

Further, for our purpose, the Deed of Union 21(v) says,

'The Conference shall have power at its discretion ... to appoint boards and committees for the despatch of connexional business and for the exercise of any of the powers and duties of the Conference during or in the interval between its sittings, in such numbers and with such terms of reference, membership, powers and duties as the Conference thinks fit...'

2.5 The Standing Orders are the living expression of the Deed of Union and the 1976 Act, both of which give prominence to the Conference to make and amend Standing Orders within certain limits. A Standing Order expresses the mind of the Conference from time to time. It can be changed, but only by the vote of the Conference.

2.6 One Standing Order refers to a particularly strong expression of the Conference's mind - the Conference Statement which is *'a considered Statement of the judgement of the Conference on some major issue or issue of faith and practice, and framed with a view to standing as such for some years.'* (Standing Order 129)

2.7 The Conference also passes resolutions which may not necessarily find their way into Standing Orders but which *'have effect throughout the home Districts....'* (Standing Order 128)

Resolutions, although variable in the thoroughness of their preparation and the range and depth of their content, nevertheless play an important part in describing the mind of the Conference, and proscribe some of the limits within which those who speak for the Church must operate as set out below.

3. WHO SPEAKS FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH?

3.1 We have already seen that a range of people may speak for the Methodist Church, but some officers have it as their particular responsibility to *'represent the Methodist Church'*.

We should note also that the Methodist Council *'is authorised to act on behalf of the Conference' between Conferences 'providing that such action is not contrary to the Deed of Union or Standing Orders or to any subsisting resolution of the Conference.'* (Standing Order 211(1).)

3.2 The current job descriptions of the Secretary of the Conference and the Co-ordinating Secretary for Church and Society include *'To represent the Methodist Church to the media where required.'*

The Co-ordinating Secretary's key tasks include *'To represent the Methodist Church and its judgements, making public statements as may be required.'*

3.3 These reflect, for example, Standing Order 301(5):

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

Standing Order 303(5) should also be noted.

3.4 The opinion of the Law and Polity Committee is that speaking on behalf of the Church is within the scope of Standing Order 301(5) and in fact takes over the previous responsibilities of the Division of Social Responsibility at this point.

3.4 The opinion of the Law and Polity Committee is that our tradition recognizes the President of the Conference as the pre-eminent spokesperson of the Methodist Church on very important matters. The President is the senior officer of the Conference. Our understanding of the office of the Vice President would lead us to give similar prominence to the Vice President. Nevertheless, the office of the President uniquely represents the Methodist Conference, and it is the President who, as the occasion demands it, is best placed to speak for the Church as a whole.

When the President or the Vice-President speak on public issues it is highly likely that they will be seen as representing the Methodist Church.

4. SUMMARY OF THIS PAPER THUS FAR

4.1 The Methodist Church is complex and diverse.

4.2 There is a natural order of documents and decisions through which the mind of the Church is known (although not on every subject - and that is one of the difficulties of speaking for the Church on contemporary issues).

4.3 Our key texts envisage the Methodist Conference's decisions being effectively those of the Methodist Church. Because of the diversity of the Church, that does not mean that every Methodist or every local church agrees with those decisions. That is the inherent difficulty in speaking for the Methodist Church, and judgement is called for on the part of the speaker in deciding how to phrase her/his response to a particular question.

4.4 In our tradition, the President and Vice-President of the Conference are the principal spokespersons for the Methodist Church on all major occasions.

4.5 The Methodist Council can act on behalf of the Conference between the meetings of the Conference.

4.6 Certain officers are specifically responsible for representing the Methodist Church in the media - but within particular limits.

4.7 The opinion of the Law and Polity Committee is that '*representing and acting on behalf of*' includes speaking for the Methodist Church.

5. SPEAKING FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH

5.1 The position of the President and the Vice President as the pre-eminent spokespersons for the Methodist Church is one that they should be enabled to sustain by regular briefings. It will be a matter of judgment, which they will exercise in consultation with senior colleagues, whether or not to become involved in highly controversial subjects. Each year, holders of those two offices will bring differing personal experience and skills which will have a bearing on which subjects they consider it appropriate to speak. One would not wish a President or Vice President to remain silent in the face of something about which they consider it their duty to speak. Equally, it may not be appropriate to embroil them in controversial subjects on which the mind of the Methodist Church may well be divided. In this situation where a Methodist voice is required, the appropriate senior Team member will be called upon.

Senior members of the Connexional Team will be called upon, because of the responsibilities of their office, to speak for the Methodist Church and to represent our Church's position on a whole range of public issues.

5.2 One will immediately recognize the difficulty of speaking for the Methodist Church. On the whole, the media do not understand the complexity of our situation. We have no right to expect that they should. Thus even the most carefully worded statement may well be headlined, "Methodist Church backs the..."

This cannot always be avoided, except by saying nothing, and to say nothing for the fear of being misunderstood or misquoted is to lower the profile of our Church, whose opinion is regularly sought, particularly on social issues.

5.3 If Methodists wish to silence their spokespersons or to reduce their references to the bland and the insignificant, then they may do so by Conference resolution or by sustained criticism, but the whole Church will be the poorer for that.

5.4 The Methodist Conference appoints its officers through an appointment system which is open to scrutiny and in which the successful candidate requires the consent of the Conference. Implicit in that appointing process is the responsibility that is given to the appointee together with a full measure of trust and support from the Council and the Conference, particularly if things unwittingly go wrong, as they sometimes will. The vast majority of responses by Connexional Team members go unnoticed or are accepted without adverse criticism and are our Church's quiet contribution to the social discussion of the day. Ultimately, senior members of the Team have to give an account of their stewardship to the Methodist Council and to the Conference itself.

5.5 In return for that trust, there are certain things incumbent on those who speak for the Methodist Church.

i) They must speak *"in harmony with the existing statements and resolutions of the Conference."* (Standing Order 301(5).)

This Standing Order is further amplified as it affects the Methodist Council by Standing Order 211(1):

"Between the close of any Conference and the opening of the next succeeding Conference the council is authorised to act on behalf of the Conference, provided that such action is not contrary to the Deed of Union or Standing Orders or any subsisting resolution of the Conference."

These two Standing Orders establish the parameters of what can be said with authority on behalf of the Methodist Church.

ii) On those subjects where the Conference has not expressed a stated opinion, it is expected of senior members of the Connexional Team that they will have their finger on the pulse of the Church as a whole, to the extent that they will know, by consultation with colleagues where necessary, what may properly be said.

iii) There are contentious areas where the position of the Church, as determined by the Conference, is nevertheless disputed by some members. In these cases, spokespersons will be wary of giving the impression that they are speaking for the Methodist Church as a whole.

The phrase "the Methodist Church believes" has proved especially contentious. As it has been heard in the Church at large and in conversations with others, it seems to imply "the Methodist Church believes... and you are a Methodist, therefore, you must believe it." The phrase "the Methodist Church believes" therefore, should be used sparingly.

Note: The word "believe" is capable of being heard in at least two, almost exactly opposite, ways. On the one hand, it has a definitive ring to it - "this is what we believe." On the other hand, it is a way of indicating that the speaker is not absolutely sure that what he or she is about to say would command general assent - "I believe this to be the case..." The context is all in deciding how the word is being used. Because Methodists live in an environment of "beliefs", it is always likely that part of our Church, at least, will hear the word "believe" and take it to be a formal expression of where we stand on a particular issue.

iv) Despite our wish to contribute to discussions on the important subjects of the day, we should expect our spokespersons to exercise their judgement as to when to speak and when to remain silent. Consultations with senior colleagues shall always take place where there is doubt.

v) Guidelines for the Connexional Team have been prepared consistent with this Report.

RESOLUTION

36/1 The Conference adopts the Report.

