

Brief History of Irish Methodist Conferences

The first Conference was held in 1752, when John Wesley gathered the ten preachers in Ireland together in Limerick. They were Joseph Whitford, John Haughton, Jacob Rowell, Joseph Cownley, Robert Swindells, Samuel Larwood, James Morris, Thomas Kead, John Fisher and Thomas Walsh.

The Minutes of Conference 1861 records that the Conference held that year was the 92nd and 80th Annual Conference. This means that there were twelve Conferences held in Ireland prior to 1782, because from that year the Conference was held on an annual basis in Ireland.

John Wesley himself presided at all these twelve early Conferences, so the years in which they were held must coincide with the years that Wesley visited Ireland.

C. H. Crookshank in his "History of Methodism in Ireland", published in 1885; refers to the holding of nine of these twelve Conferences ¹. They are as follows: "

1752	August 14th-15th	in Limerick
1756	April 16th	in Dublin
1758	June 21st	in Limerick
1760	July 5th-6th	in Limerick
1765	July 25th-26th	in Dublin
1767	July 22nd-23rd	in Dublin
1769	July 19th-20th	in Dublin
1771	July 18th-19th	in Dublin
1778	begun July 7th	in Dublin

After 1778, Wesley's next visit to Ireland was not until 1783. The Conference was first held annually from 1782. William Smith, in his "History of Wesleyan Methodism in Ireland"², says that Wesley directed Thomas Coke to convene a Conference of the Methodist preachers stationed in Ireland in his (Wesley's) absence. This Conference was held in Dublin and was the first at which Wesley himself did not preside, but if there was any record of its proceedings, it has not survived.

The 1782 Conference is, nevertheless, counted as an official Conference. So the remaining Conferences of the initial twelve must have been held in three of the other four years that Wesley visited Ireland prior to 1782, namely 1762, 1773, 1775 or 1777..

The 1863 Conference ordered the publication of the first three volumes of Minutes of the Methodist Conference in Ireland, covering the Conferences up to 1851. In the first volume which records the Conferences up to the year 1819, the "missing" three Conferences among the first twelve are recorded for the years 1762, 1773 and 1775, but not 1777.

No record of the Minutes of any of these Conferences was kept, so the question is why did Irish Methodism decide on those three years, 1762, 1773 and 1775 and omit the only other year that Wesley visited Ireland, namely 1777.

The answer is not difficult to find. Crookshank says that although Wesley does not mention the holding of a Conference during 1775, one of the Methodist preachers, Jonathan Hern stationed in Athlone, recorded in his diary that Wesley arrived in Dublin on Friday July 14th 1775 with Mr. Clendinnen, held a watch night service and "had a very smart Conference but concluded in peace and love"³. This appears to be a reference to an official Conference for 1775, even though there is no record of any official Minutes.

In 1777, Wesley's visit to Ireland was brief and apparently unexpected. It lasted for only nine days, from October 4th to 13th and was confined to Dublin. In view of the brevity of the visit, it is assumed that it was very unlikely that any Conference was held. Therefore the years in which the other three of the first twelve

Conferences held in Ireland prior to 1782, when Conference became an annual event, were most likely 1762, 1773 and 1775.

However it has to be stressed that this is based largely on assumption, as no official written records are available. But it is one that seems to be reasonable. Since 1861 the title page of the Minutes of Conference has noted the annual number as well as the actual number of the Conference, the difference being twelve.

The Legal Hundred

In February 1784, Wesley drew up a Deed of Declaration, which was then enrolled in the High Court of Chancery.

The purpose of this document was to give legal definition to the Conference and enable the appointment of preachers to be perpetuated after Wesley's death.

Before this deed was published, the prior arrangement had been defined in the 1763 British Minutes of Conference, namely that the local trustees of Methodist chapels should allow Wesley himself and anyone he appointed, the right to use the premises for preaching.

After his death, this right of appointment was to pass to his brother Charles and after Charles' death to the Rev. William Grimshaw.

This arrangement did not allow for any legal definition of what constituted the Conference. The Deed of Declaration remedied this by establishing what became known as the Legal Hundred. The Conference was defined as consisting of Methodist preachers, annually invited by Wesley to meet for the purpose of advising him on the promotion of the Gospel of Christ; to appoint preachers to the use of the chapels; to expel unworthy preachers and to admit preachers on trial.

The membership of the Conference was confined to one hundred preachers, hence the name the Legal Hundred. The names and addresses of these one hundred preachers were included on the Deed. The ownership of all Methodist property in Britain and Ireland was vested in the Legal Hundred.

Eleven of the original members of the Legal Hundred in 1784 were stationed in Ireland, Thomas Rutherford, Daniel Jackson, Henry Moore, Andrew Blair, Richard Watkinson, Nehemiah Price, Robert Lindsay, George Brown, Thomas Barber, Henry Foster and John Crook.

Of those stationed in England, three were Irish, Joseph Creighton, William Myles and William Thompson. The last named was elected President of the British Conference in 1791, after Wesley's death.

The Legal Hundred was to meet annually and their first item of business was to fill vacancies in their number, caused by retirement or death. The quorum was forty for any decision taken to be legal and the length of the session had to be minimum five days and maximum three weeks.

They elected a President and Secretary from among their members and any member failing to attend two successive annual Conferences without leave of absence and then failing to appear on the first day of the next Conference, automatically forfeited membership. Should the number fall below forty on three successive years or fail to meet in that period, the Conference would cease to exist:

In England, some who were omitted from membership of the Legal Hundred at its inception were offended and withdrew from the ministry. No such difficulty seems to have arisen in Ireland. At the Irish Conference of 1784, a resolution was passed which approved the terms of the Deed and stated a preference for the provisions compared to the previous arrangements set out in 1763.

A provision allowing for ten members of the Irish Conference to be elected to the Legal Hundred was introduced in 1811 after a protest by the Irish Conference that Irish representation had been reduced to two due to a policy of filling vacancies in the Legal Hundred with preachers from England⁴. The list of those Irish members only began to be recorded annually in the Minutes from 1889.

The Conference of 1888 first put in place the mechanism for holding two separate sessions of Conference, a Ministerial and a Representative session, each with their respective agendas. The first item of business in the Ministerial session was to nominate ministers to fill vacancies in the Irish membership of the Legal Hundred.

President of the Irish Conference

John Wesley presided over all of the first twelve Methodist Conferences in Ireland between 1752 and 1781. When the Conference was held annually from 1782 onwards, Wesley sent Thomas Coke to preside over the Irish Conference in the alternate years when he himself did not visit Ireland. This practice continued from 1782 up to 1791, the year that Wesley died. Almost immediately a lack in the provisions of the 1784 Deed of Declaration became apparent.

Wesley himself normally looked after any business that arose between Conferences. After his death, this responsibility passed to the Conference, but the Conference could only exercise this responsibility during its annual meeting. No provision was made in the Deed of Declaration to make decisions or conduct Connexional business in the interim as Wesley himself tended to do this personally. Nor was any mechanism put in place to appoint a successor to Wesley.

William Thompson proposed the holding of consultations throughout the Connexion to decide who should attend the Conference and what form of government should be adopted. Meetings were held throughout Britain and in Dublin and it was agreed that vacancies in the Legal Hundred should be filled by seniority, that the President and Secretary of Conference, with the Delegate to Ireland from the British Conference should all be annual appointments. It was also agreed that Districts under a District Chairman, composed of groups of Circuits, should hold meetings and make decisions in the interval between the annual Conferences.

In 1791 no provision was made for the Conference in Ireland to meet, since no Delegate had been appointed by Wesley to preside before his death. Normally he appointed Thomas Coke to preside in his absence, but Coke was advised not to preside in 1791, in case it should be construed as ambition to become Wesley's successor. He did, however, attend the Conference in Ireland that year, but not as President of the Conference.

The preachers stationed in Ireland in 1791 met and called to the chair one of their own preachers, John Crook. Stations were fixed and other necessary business was transacted. But no record of proceedings was printed and all decisions were referred to the British Conference for confirmation when it met on July 26th. Only the stations in Ireland were printed in the British Conference Minutes.

There is some doubt as to whether this meeting chaired by John Crook constituted an official Conference. Crookshank⁵ says that in the absence of a regularly appointed Delegate, a Conference could not be held and the preachers resolved themselves into a committee. William Smith⁶ agrees and says, "In consequence of Mr. Wesley's lamented death there was no Conference held this year in Ireland". He also stresses that although Thomas Coke was on a visit to Dublin at the time, he did not preside over the committee. On the other hand, Fred Jeffrey writing on the occasion of the 200th Conference in 1969, referring to 1791, claims that "it would seem that a legal Conference was indeed held even though there was no 'Conversations' for Minutes"⁷. By special invitation of the Methodists in Ireland, Thomas Coke presided at the Conference in Ireland in 1792 and continued to fill that office until his death in 1813, except for four Conferences during that period. In those four years that Coke did not preside, the following were appointed as President of the Conference, John Crook (1793), Adam Averell (1810), Adam Clarke (1811, 1812).

The appointment of John Crook as President of the Conference in 1793 occurred because the appointed delegate, Alexander Mather was unable to travel to Ireland and was the second time that an Irish preacher occupied that office. It happened again in 1944 when Rev. George A. Joynt presided in lieu of the British President, Rev. Leslie Church, who was unable to attend because of a ban on travel during the Second World War. Joynt's signature was sufficient to validate the Conference business.

Adam Clarke was to preside at the Conference of 1814, but was unable to visit Ireland, so the Irish preachers voted into the chair as President, Rev. Adam Averell, who had previously presided at the 1810 Conference. Averell was a deacon in the Church of Ireland who resigned his curacy in 1792 and having independent means began to engage in a preaching ministry of his own. That same year he attended his first class meeting and seems to have been unofficially associated with Methodism from that time, his name first appearing on the list of stations as a Methodist preacher in 1796. He ultimately joined the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Connexion in 1818 of which he was President until his death in 1847.

The 1816 Conference marked the separation of Methodism in Ireland from the Church in Ireland in practice. In that year, Conference gave permission to Methodist preachers to administer the sacraments under certain limitations. Up to this, Methodists had received the sacraments in the Church of Ireland. But the Conference was divided on the issue, many believing that Methodism should continue as a preaching order within the Church of Ireland.

A meeting of those opposed to the decision to allow the preachers to administer the sacraments met in Clones in 1816. This was exclusively a gathering of lay members, which led to the establishing of a separate Methodist Connexion, joined, as noted above, by Adam Averell in 1818 and which adopted the title "Primitive Wesleyan Methodism" that same year, 1818.

For sixty years, from 1816, two separate annual Methodist Conferences were held in Ireland, a Wesleyan Conference and a Primitive Wesleyan Conference. In 1878 the two Connexions were united and, the Wesleyans adopted the principle of lay representation at Conference for the first time, "Which had been accepted by the Primitive Wesleyans from their inception. All preachers from both Connexions were recognised as being in Full Connexion with the united Conference.

Vice President of the Irish Conference

The admission of ministers on trial, their stationing and discipline were the responsibility of the Legal Hundred. Any decision in these matters made by the Conference in Ireland was not legally valid until ratified by the Legal Hundred at its meeting during the British Conference. This arrangement had difficulties for the Irish Conference since it was impractical for the ninety members in England (or even a minimum of thirty to make up the quorum of forty) to attend the Irish Conference in order to legalise its decisions. So it became normal practice for the British President to visit Ireland as the representative of the Legal Hundred with power to authenticate the decisions made by the Irish Conference on behalf of the Legal Hundred.

The British President was referred to as "The Delegate" and validated the business of the Irish Conference by signing the proceedings of the Conference Journal, which was then taken to the British Conference as the "Acts of the Delegate". The Delegate had no authority over any business outside the terms of reference of the Legal Hundred as defined in the Deed of Declaration of 1784.

In 1867 the British Conference decided that a preacher from the Irish Conference, who was also one of the ten Irish members of the Legal Hundred, should be nominated by the Irish Conference to be the representative of the Legal Hundred at the Irish Conference.

That Irish preacher had the power to authenticate decisions on behalf of the Legal Hundred as the Delegate in place of the British President.

The same person could not be nominated two years running. This was accepted in 1868 and so the office of Vice President of the Irish Conference was created, though the title was not used until 1883. In 1921, the title "President of the Methodist Church in Ireland" was added to the office.

Rev. William H. Smyth was the first preacher to be officially called "Vice President of the Conference and President of the Methodist Church in Ireland". Since the holder of that office had to be one of the ten Irish members of the Legal Hundred, a number of ministers were elected to the position more than once. In 1928 "The Methodist Church in Ireland Act" was passed through the parliaments in Dublin and Belfast. This Act was in fact the abolition of the Legal Hundred. The last ten Irish members of the Legal Hundred were, William H. Smyth, James M. Alley, Randall C. Phillips, William Moore, Frederick E. Harte, John A. Duke, R. Lee Cole, John E. Neill, John A. Walton and William H. Massey.

All of these, except one, John E. Neill, were to hold the office of Vice President of the Conference and President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. John Neill's health failed in the year that he was elected President Designate in 1933, so that he was not installed as President in 1934. Instead the President in 1933, R. Lee Cole, was succeeded by John A. Waiton in 1934. R. Lee Cole, who died in 1963, was the last surviving member of the Legal Hundred in Ireland.

If the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland were to become President of the Irish Conference, the Constitution of the Methodist Church in Ireland would have to be changed. That would involve a process over a period of three successive annual Conferences.

The procedure would begin with the Conference being asked to accept a Notice of Motion of a Special Resolution. If accepted, that Resolution would be brought to the Conference the following year for discussion and vote. The Resolution would have to be passed at that second Conference by a 75% majority with 50% of the members of Conference present. The Resolution would then be brought to Conference the following year to be voted on again. If accepted by that third successive annual Conference by the 75% majority with at least half of the Conference members being present and voting, then the Resolution would come into effect and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland would become President of the Conference.

Attempts to enable the Irish President to preside at the annual Conference as of right, as President of the Conference, have been made in the past, most recently in 1982 and 1992.

In 1982 Conference accepted the initial Notice of Motion but in the vote on the Resolution in 1983 in Enniskillen, failed to receive the required 75% majority. In 1992 the Conference again accepted the initial Notice of Motion and passed the resolution in 1993 at the Conference in Dublin. But it failed to receive the necessary 75% majority in the crucial final vote in 1994 in Portadown.

Some Irish preachers have chaired the Irish Conference, most notably, John Crook (1791, 1793), Adam Averell (1810, 1814), Adam Clarke (1811,1812,1816,1823), Walter Griffith (1815), Henry Moore (1824), George A. Joynt (1944). When Kathleen Richardson presided at the Conference in Dublin in 1993, she had to return to England before the end of the Conference due to family illness and the Vice-President, Richard Taylor, presided for the latter part of the Conference and signed the Journal and Daily Record. The custom of the British President presiding at both the British and Irish Conferences in the same year began in 1816-1817 with Richard Reece.

Only four Irish preachers hold the distinction of being elected as President of the British Conference, William Thompson (1791), Henry Moore (1804,1823), Adam Clarke (1806, 1814, 1822) and Walter Griffith (1813). Only three Irish preachers have presided at both the British and Irish Conferences, Walter Griffith, Adam Clarke and Henry Moore, the last two named presiding at the Irish Conference in their official capacity as President of the British Conference.

In 1791 the year that Wesley died, both the Irish and British Conferences had an Irish preacher presiding, John Crook in Ireland and William Thompson in England. In 1993 the first woman to preside at the Irish

Conference was Kathleen Richardson held in Dublin, having been elected President of the British Conference in 1992. The second woman to preside at the Irish Conference was Christina Le Moignan in 2002 in Enniskillen.

The Secretary of Conference became a separated appointment in 1970 during the tenure of Harold Sloan who held the office from 1968 until 1978. Since then only Charles G. Eyre and Edmund T. I. Mawhinney, W Winston Graham and Donald P Ker have served in this separated appointment to date.

The first layperson to be elected to the Conference Secretariat as Journal Secretary for the Representative Session of Conference was Elaine Barnet in 2000.

Fathers and sons in the ministry have been President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Charles Crookshank: (1899) and Henry Crookshank (1937); James Robertson (1906) and John Robertson (1929); Robert Ker (1926) and Ernest Ker (1959), Robert Gallagher (1946) and Eric Gallagher (1967); Robert Good (1928) and Harold Good (2001). Leslie Wallace entered the ministry as a pre-collegiate probationer in 1944 serving as a mission partner in Sierra Leone from 1949 until his retirement in 1988. Although he never became President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, he served as Secretary of the Conference in Sierra Leone from 1975 to 1976 and from 1981 to 1986 and was President of the Sierra Leone Conference on three occasions, 1971-1975; 1976-1981 and 1986-1987.

1 Volume 1 p 91,107,131,146,186,209,228,250,324.

2 P 64-65

3 History of Methodism in Ireland Volume I p 298

4 D. A. Levistone Cooney The Methodists in Ireland p 128

5 History of Methodism in Ireland Volume 2 p 38

6 Wesleyan Methodism in Ireland p 74

7 Conference Handbook 1969 p 24