



# Organisation and Worship of the Methodist Church

At the time of writing the following conveys a brief description of the structure and practice of the Methodist Church in Ireland. However, the church is a living organisation, and as such it is constantly changing and evolving to relate more effectively to a constantly changing world.

## **D.1 Organisation and Government**

The Methodist Church in Ireland extends throughout the island, and refers to itself as “the Connexion,” to remind individual members and local churches of their interconnected and interdependent nature. The governing body of that Connexion is the annual Conference, which consists of two sessions. The ministerial session, made up of all the ordained ministers in the Connexion, and the representative session, made up of equal numbers of ministers and lay people. Conference elects the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, appoints the various connexional officers and committees, reviews reports from those committees and passes legislation as appropriate.

Local Methodist congregations are known as "Societies," reflecting the origin of Methodism as a society for renewal within the Anglican tradition. Within these societies, discipline and spiritual oversight are exercised by the Church Council, made up of ministers, stewards and elected representatives of the congregation. Societies are grouped into circuits and the Circuit Executive, chaired by the superintendent minister, has authority in all matters of administration within the circuit. Stewards from Society and Circuit, along with other office holders, are members of this Executive. Circuits, in turn, are grouped into Districts, which meet in Synod twice during the year, chaired by a District Superintendent minister, who is elected by the Synod.

## **D.2 Membership of the Methodist Church**

Members of the Methodist Church are those who have committed their lives to Christ and have formally accepted the discipline of the Methodist Church. As such all members are expected to attend worship regularly, including Holy Communion, join with others for Christian fellowship, engage in some form of Christian service and financially support the ongoing work and mission of the church through regular giving.

For administrative purposes anyone over the age of 18 associated with a local Methodist Church is either recorded as a member or is on the Congregational Register. This register records those who regularly attend worship or with whom there is pastoral contact, but who are not actual members. Junior members are all those associated with the church under 18 years of age who have not yet accepted the obligations of being adult members.

All people associated with the Methodist church should receive pastoral support from the local minister and lay leaders, but only actual members are entitled to vote at congregational meetings or to be members of the Leaders' Meeting, Synod or Conference.

Reception into membership of the Church, which usually takes place after a course of instruction, is a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ. Such a public declaration strengthens faith and is important in encouraging others to confess their faith publicly. As well as a declaration of personal faith, however, it is also an acknowledgement that we are part of a worldwide fellowship of believing people. Within that fellowship we have a responsibility for mutual care, support and accountability, both on a local and a wider level. Sustained support and fellowship encourages growth in personal faith, whilst being accountable to one another prevents us from becoming self-absorbed in our religious practice. Commitment to membership of a local church also involves the dedication of a person's gifts and abilities to the work of that church, and enables people to be entrusted with positions of responsibility and leadership.



### **D.3 Lay Leadership and Local Preachers**

Lay leaders have always played an important role in the life of the Methodist Church, recognising that gifts of leadership and administration bestowed by the Holy Spirit are not confined to ordained ministers. Some lay people are paid on a full time or part-time basis as secretaries, pastoral and youth workers, and in other roles, but there are many more voluntary leaders. These can serve, for example, as stewards, treasurers, secretaries, pastoral leaders, group leaders, congregational visitors and local preachers.

Local preachers are lay people called by God to preach, having been trained, examined, approved and appointed. They are referred to as “local” preachers, because they generally preach only within the area that they live and work, in contrast to the ordained itinerant preachers, who go where they are sent by the annual conference. While to some extent this system arose out of the practical needs of the early Methodist societies where the numbers of ordained ministers were limited, Wesley recognised the office as a means of encouraging people in their Christian calling and a ready witness to the priesthood of all believers. Today both men and women may serve the Church in this way and in some churches they conduct many of the Sunday services.

### **D.4 Ordained Ministry**

Ordained ministers, or presbyters, in Methodism can be women or men. All candidates for the ordained ministry must first be fully accredited local preachers before undergoing a long selection process. Candidates approved by Conference are then given appropriate theological and practical training and a period of probation on circuit, during which further study and training take place. After this the person is ordained at Conference, by prayer and a ceremony of laying-on of hands by the President and other ordained ministers. There are two categories of ordained Methodist ministers: Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary Ministers. All ministers agree to go wherever Conference may direct, carrying on the tradition of those who first assisted John Wesley as travelling or itinerant preachers. All ministers are appointed to their "stations" each year, but the normal term for an appointment is understood to be eight years. If, however, a request is made to extend an appointment, an appraisal can take place in the seventh year, and every third year after that, with a view to allowing such an extension. Stipendiary ministers are paid what is known as a stipend, which is reviewed annually by the Conference to ensure that it is sufficient to meet personal living costs, together with those of spouse and family. Allowances are also given for expenses such as travel, and accommodation is provided. Non-Stipendiary ministers serve on a part-time basis in specified local churches, and do not receive a stipend or accommodation, although expenses are met.

### **D.5 Worship**

The introduction to the 1933 Methodist Hymnbook states that “Methodism was born in song,” and indeed John Wesley encouraged congregational hymn singing as an expression of worship to God and as a way of communicating theological and Biblical truths. He produced hymnbooks for the Methodist people containing hymns from many different Christian traditions, but particularly those written by his brother Charles. Methodism continues to use Charles Wesley’s hymns for worship, but follows John Wesley’s lead in using material, old and new, from other traditions.

Worship, however, includes much more than singing. Here again, Methodism is influenced by many traditions in the form and content of its worship services. There are various written liturgies, or service books, approved for use in Methodist Churches, reflecting the formal Anglican traditions of the Wesleys. They contain some material that goes back to the early church and is thus shared with fellow Christians of many other traditions. Many Methodist services, however, follow a less liturgical pattern, reflecting Free Church influences.

### **D.6 Prayer**

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means we need no intermediary to approach God with our personal praise, confession, thanksgiving and concerns. Methodism encourages the use of set and spontaneous prayers in public worship and in private devotions. Set prayers put us in touch with the riches of Christian tradition as well as offering us a discipline for prayer. Spontaneous prayer reflects a personal relationship with God, our Father. Whichever form is used, through prayer we express confidence, not just in the power of prayer, but in the one to whom we pray.

### **D.7 Preaching**

The preaching of John Wesley throughout Britain and Ireland prompted many conversions and



changed lives, and indeed brought the Methodist societies into being. Preaching, by both lay and ordained people, continues to play an important part in Methodist worship, because belief in the authority of scripture means that it needs to be interpreted and applied.

### **D.8 Bible Study and Fellowship Groups**

The belief in the authority of scripture is reflected not only in Bible-based preaching, but also in the fact that it is recommended for study. This occurs privately, and in small fellowship groups meeting for Bible study, discussion and prayer. Such groups reflect the importance of Bible study and prayer, as well as the need for members of the Church to sustain, support and encourage one another in their spiritual lives. This need was met in the early days of Methodism in “Class meetings.” Today’s groups tend to be much less formal, although some follow specific courses, including Alpha, Disciple and the Emmaus Way.

### **D.9 Sacraments**

The Latin word 'sacramentum' meant a soldier's oath of allegiance, and Christians see the sacraments as signs of their allegiance to Christ. Methodism, following the Protestant tradition, recognises and observes only the two sacraments commanded by Christ himself, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It nevertheless acknowledges the sacred nature of other services such as marriage, ordination and confirmation.

Baptism with water has been practiced from the earliest days of the Church as an act of initiation, and represents the cleansing or forgiveness of sins. Both adult baptism and infant baptism are practised within Methodism. However, since scripture emphasizes that there is only one baptism, just as there is one Lord and one faith, Methodism holds that baptism is unrepeatable, whether administered to a child or an adult.

Baptism is symbolic of the undeserved grace of God reaching out to us all through Christ. This is the key element in infant baptism, where we look forward in faith and hope to the time when children will accept what is offered to them in Christ, becoming his followers, committed members of the church. Parents and congregation promise to do all they can to facilitate and encourage this. Adult baptism, of people not baptised as children, should include a clear declaration of their personal faith in Christ, and as such is a powerful symbol of personal commitment.

John Wesley encouraged his people to receive the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, 'at every opportunity', so it is administered regularly in Methodist Churches: monthly in many churches and not less than once a quarter. An ordained minister normally presides at the service, where both bread and wine (in either a common cup or individual glasses) are shared with all who will receive. Wesley regarded the Lord's Supper not just as a means of experiencing the grace of God, but as a means of conversion (a converting ordinance) and so the person presiding often invites 'all those who love the Lord or who seek to do so' to share in the sacrament.

### **D.10 Mission**

The belief of Methodists that 'all people need to be saved' and that 'all people may be saved' is the foundation for their interest in mission and evangelism. This interest goes back to Wesley himself, a key figure in the 18th century evangelical revival. Wesley and his successors however, recognised that salvation affects the whole person, and so 'Missions' have been established in major cities, carrying out a wide range of social work. Today many local societies are also involved in social outreach programmes. This concern for people in need has also prompted the appointment of ministers to serve as chaplains to the armed forces, hospitals, prisons, schools, universities and colleges of further education.

In addition to mission at home, there is also a strong tradition of service overseas. Ministers and lay people from Ireland serve or have served in other parts of the world. The Methodist Church in Ireland also receives people from overseas, for periods of training or for service, emphasising that the mission of the world church is multi-directional. We are all part of one church with one mission. This mission is carried out, not only by institutions and individuals set apart for ministry and mission, but is dependent upon the work and witness of every Christian, wherever they live and work.

### **D.11 Ecumenism**

Ecumenism, a word derived from the Greek meaning “the whole inhabited earth,” is a movement



dedicated to fostering the unity of the whole Church throughout the world. Methodists have often been described as ‘the friends of all and the enemies of none.’ Seeking to be true to this description and to the command of Jesus that his disciples’ love for one another should act as a witness to others, the Methodist Church is committed to working with Christians of other traditions throughout Ireland and abroad in the interests of mission.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is a founding member of the Irish Council of Churches and of the Irish-Inter Church Meeting. It belongs to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and to the World Council of Churches, as well as the European Methodist Council and the World Methodist Council. It is a partner in many shared-churches throughout Ireland with either the Church of Ireland or Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland regularly takes part in events with the Presbyterian Moderator, and the Primates of both the Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. In 2002 a Joint Covenant between the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland was ratified, committing them to closer working relationships in the interest of the extension of God’s Kingdom.