

Dear Friends

Next year's Methodist Conference in Telford and the recent Methodist Conference in Birmingham might turn out to be two of the most significant in our recent history. The *Conference Business Digest: A report for local churches about the business of the 2019 Methodist Conference* is being made available to every member of the circuit meeting. It is not confidential and should be widely circulated. If you have not received a copy and would like one please enquire through the circuit office. Happily, it is only two pages. A copy can be sent to you by email or ordinary post. Two Conference Reports that will gain a lot of attention, in the Methodist Church, in other denominations and even among the wider public are *Marriage and Relationships* and *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*.

The 67-page report on Marriage and Relationships, *God in Love Unites Us*, has been commended by the Methodist Conference for prayerful discussion and response across the Methodist Church over the next year. The report makes a number of proposals, including: principles or qualities of good relating; an understanding of cohabitation; to allow same-sex couples to marry in Methodist Churches; providing resources and liturgies to celebrate civil partnerships; prayers for when marriages end in divorce.

The 31-page report on *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* is the latest joint paper from the Faith and Order bodies of the Methodist Church and the Church of England prepared for the Methodist Conference and Church of England General Synod. The main proposals, if implemented, will enable an interchange of presbyteral ministries between the churches that has not been possible since the parting of the ways between Anglicans and Methodists in the late eighteenth century. In short, future Methodist ordinations would be by bishops in the historic episcopate but Methodist ministers who were not episcopally ordained (the majority of Methodist ministers) would not be required to go through any further ordination or commissioning. Such ministers would be considered an anomaly, a temporary situation in the life of the church.

It is fair to say that Methodist ministers, let alone members, probably do not spend all their spare time meditating on the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church set out in the Deed of Union, which brought the three separate Methodist traditions (Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist and United Methodist, the last of which included the Bible Christians) together in 1932. However, two important principles are enshrined in these standards. The first is that the Methodist Church acknowledges that the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures is the supreme rule of faith and practice. The second is that Methodist ministers (presbyters) hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people (commonly called 'the priesthood of all believers') and that no priesthood exists which belongs to a particular order or class of persons.

The challenge of the two reports, both to be presented to the Methodist Conference in 2020, after the required period of prayerful discussion, is whether adopting them will mark a fundamental departure from the Methodist Church's doctrinal standards – the first because some of our ministers and members are contending that the marriage of same-sex couples is not acceptable in a church that acknowledges that the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures is the supreme rule of faith and practice; the second because accepting the necessity for future ordinations to be into the historic episcopate (i.e. that they are conducted by duly consecrated bishops in the three-fold order of ministry) suggests that there is a particular order of class of persons who have a priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people.

Finally, I am sorry to have to let you know that our friends at Kingskerswell are asking for permission to suspend public worship. We shall be sorry if the church closes but we also recognise the ministry that the church has exercised and the faithfulness of people who have served there.

God bless

John M. Haley
Superintendent Minister