

THE CHURCH OF IRELAND AND THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND

REPORT OF THE COVENANT COUNCIL TO THE CHURCHES 2006

MEMBERSHIP

Church of Ireland

Rt Rev Harold Miller (co-Chair)
Mr David Brown
Ms Elva Byrne
Rev Nigel Dunne
Rev Canon Adrian Empey

Rev Dr Maurice Elliott
Rev Canon Virginia Kennerley
Mr Cyril McElhinney
Dr Andrew Pierce
Rev Peter Thompson

Methodist Church

Rev David Kerr (co-Chair)
The Secretary of Conference
Mrs Sandra Dickson
Rev Andrew Dougherty
Rev Geraldine Gracie

Rev Brian Griffin
Rev Don Ker
Rev David Rock
Mr Kenneth Twyble
Mrs Gillian Kingston (Secretary)

The Covenant Council has met in three residential sessions during the year, believing that residential meetings maximise on the time available, both in terms of work and of fellowship. There has been minimal change in membership. Mr Stephen Edgar has tendered his resignation, and the Council welcomes in his place Dr Andrew Pierce, subject to approval.

At the September residential, the Council was pleased to welcome the Primate of All-Ireland, the Most Rev Dr Robin Eames, and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Rev Desmond Bain. The Council is most grateful to them for devoting a very substantial amount of time out of their schedules for this meeting.

The Council is very glad to welcome the Rev Alan Martin, attending as a participating observer from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

While theological issues are prominent on the agenda, the Council is conscious that its work is always more than theological. The Council wishes to highlight the following five concerns:

Local Covenant Partnership guidelines

A discussion at the Church of Ireland Standing Committee noted that, at this point, the Church of Ireland does not have the relevant ecumenical canons in place (as, for example, in the Church of England) which would be necessary before bringing protocols for ratification to the General Synod. It was therefore felt wiser to produce a revised guidelines document for

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temporary/‘informal’ use in joint projects until such time as the Church of Ireland is in a position to provide the appropriate ecumenical canons.

Ecumenical Hospitality

The Council is aware of matters of particular sensitivity which can become evident when Methodist and Church of Ireland people start to work together. These may be pastoral, liturgical, social and ecclesiastical. It is proposed to draw up a document outlining these and suggesting how hurt may best be avoided. The motif of hospitality in the broadest sense has been a helpful one and the Council urges that at all times and on all occasions we treat each other as honoured guests.

The Covenant Facilitators Scheme

All the dioceses and districts have appointed Covenant facilitators whose brief is to enable and encourage relationships at local level. It is important that these facilitators are known to people locally and that they work together. To this end, the Council urges that they be given time at Diocesan and District Synods to report on how relationships are working – or not – in their area. Facilitators have been asked to report also to the Council and we are encouraged to see engagement with the task in a number of places. The Council is working on appropriate resource material.

Joint Celebration of the Covenant Relationship

The Council wants to encourage a time of celebration both of the Covenant and of our common heritage around September 26th, the anniversary of the signing of the Covenant. Material which might be used for such an event will be collated and made available both on the proposed website and in hard copy. A set order of service is not envisaged, but rather the provision of a theme and related resources. The Council urges that local congregations take this opportunity to worship and celebrate together.

Mission Event

Conscious that the leading motivation of the Covenant has been mission, the Council wishes to promote the idea of a substantial mission event, focussing on what it means to be church in the twenty-first century. It is inviting representatives of the mission committees of the two churches to discuss how, when and where such an event might take place.

Interchangeability of Ministries

The most significant theological issue under discussion is that of interchangeability of ministries. This was the main agenda item for the meeting with the Primate and the President. Issues involved for both churches were discussed.

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It is recognised that there is substantial agreement on the principle of *episcopate/oversight*. However, a considerable process of discussion and discernment would need to take place within the Methodist Church on the question of the reception of the historic episcopate. It is further recognised that the Church of Ireland needs to explore the nature and function of *episcopate* in the twenty-first century.

It was recognised that, when the time came and in order to facilitate the reception of the historic episcopate, there would necessarily be a period of living with anomaly, during which there would need to be an acceptance of, and a living with, difference until the ministries of the two churches could be fully aligned.

This is not without historical precedent: Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury (1533-53), at the time when certain Calvinist clergy were being forced to flee continental Europe, was willing to admit them without re-ordination into the ministry in England, on the basis of their existing ordination by presbyters. In recent times, the Church of South India (1947) adopted a process of gradual aligning of ministries to the historic episcopate.

Recognising that there are steps which may be taken in the interim, the following are suggested:

- 1) that local clergy and ministers should be encouraged to interchange on an occasional basis and in a manner appropriate to the respective congregations;
- 2) that observers from each church have full membership at both the General Synod and the Conference, with right to speak and to vote, subject to the necessary legislation being put in place;
- 3) that an interim statement towards mutual recognition of ministries, drawing on and acknowledging the 1973 statement and 2001 Covenant document, be produced by the Council and publicised by the two Churches;
- 4) that the concept of episcopacy be considered for serious study in the Methodist Church in Ireland. Reference might be made to (a) the debate in the Methodist Church of Great Britain, and (b) models of episcopacy in wider Methodism;
- 5) that the Church of Ireland consider a serious study of the role and function of the episcopacy in the twenty-first century;
- 6) that a way forward be found to enable Methodist ministers in certain circumstances to administer Holy Communion according to the Church of Ireland Book of Common Prayer;
- 7) that the possibility that a Bishop's Curacy might, in certain circumstances, be filled by a Methodist minister be investigated. Similarly, that a Methodist minister might be enabled to serve in a parish during a vacancy;

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- 8) that the Methodist Church might consider legislation to enable a Church of Ireland priest to serve on a Methodist circuit;
- 9) that places should be identified for new joint work, with exploration of the possibility that someone be jointly ordained (with episcopal involvement) for this task at an appropriate stage;
- 10) that there be meaningful involvement of the sister church in significant rites such as the installation of the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland and in the consecration of new bishops might be considered.

(A number of these proposals would need the approval of the General Synod and the Conference and would involve liaison between the Board of Nomination for the local parish and the Stationing Committee of the Methodist Church. They should be reviewed by the General Synod and the Conference after a stipulated period of time.)

The Covenant Council is continuing this discussion, looking at the churches which were signatories to the Porvoo Agreement and at how their relationships, particularly in Norway and Sweden, are evolving with the Methodist Church. Similarly, the Council is considering corresponding agreements in North America between the Lutheran and Anglican churches.

It continues also to bear in mind the particular needs of already existing Joint Schemes and the urgency to provide protocols within which these may operate and evolve.

Finally, the Council recalls the fact that, in 2003, the Covenant proposals were unanimously affirmed by the General Synod of the Church of Ireland and overwhelmingly so by the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland. That our two churches should move forward in a closer relationship and in the cause of mission on this island was clearly the wish of those charged with that level of decision-making in the churches. It therefore urges all those in leadership positions in the two churches to embrace, in word *and* spirit, the opportunities offered by this very special relationship.

Ms Gillian Kingston, having served three years as Honorary Secretary, is standing down and the Council has appointed the Rev Nigel Dunne to take her place for the next three-year period.

The Council wishes to place on record its appreciation of Ms Kingston's valuable work for the Council. She has brought efficiency and order to our working and we have benefited from her considerable experience of inter-church relations over many years. We are delighted that she will continue to be a member of the Council.

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RESOLUTION

1. The General Synod receives the Report of the Covenant Council
2. The General Synod encourages Church of Ireland congregations to celebrate the Covenant relationship with neighboring Methodist congregations on or around September 26th each year.
3. That the following be elected to The Covenant Council for the period ending 31 May 2009:

Rt Rev Harold Miller (co-Chair)
Mr David Brown
Ms Elva Byrne
Rev Nigel Dunne
Rev Canon Adrian Empey

Rev Dr Maurice Elliott
Rev Canon Virginia Kennerley
Mr Cyril McElhinney
Dr Andrew Pierce
Rev Peter Thompson