

APPENDIX M

INTERCHANGEABILITY OF MINISTRY WORKING GROUP – INTERIM REPORT

The Group has had two meetings at which it has considered in some depth the challenge posed not least by the Covenant Council to find a way forward in relation to this issue which has textured Anglican/Methodist relations over many generations. It recognises that there is a missiological imperative to make progress within a reasonable timeframe and that the fruitful outworking of the existing Covenant relationship demands courageous yet theologically principled action. We also acknowledge the responsibility and sensitivity of our task – this is an issue concerning which there are significant fears and inhibitions on both sides of the discussion and which if not happily addressed at this stage will perhaps have to be put aside for yet another generation.

It is widely recognised that key features of the historic three-fold ministry can be discerned, although to different degrees and in varying ways, within our two Churches. It is also acknowledged that in both contexts the exercise of personal, collegial and communal episcopate can be readily recognised. For the Church of Ireland – let us be honest – a mutual experience of some form of personal episcopacy (arguably not quite the perfect word of course) is likely to be the greatest catalyst for progress although it is indeed dangerous to get prematurely impaled by difficult matters of terminology and the actual manifestation of any such oversight may be significantly different in style from what we consider familiar at present. We would wish to explore how the existing acknowledged oversight of the Methodist Conference might be for certain purposes focussed in one or more individuals, and we would affirm our understanding that as such personal oversight is a matter of order rather than merely of function, it is an office to which duly appointed individuals need to be admitted for life.

We feel that courageous progress requires an avoidance of any form of ‘pilot’ scheme or taking refuge in the kind of mutual participation in one another’s ordinations that is superficially comforting and affirming but lacks any great clarity as to intention. In this matter a clear goal has to be identified and pursued with passion – without any subliminal inclination to backtrack. That goal should probably be a federal arrangement between the Churches, where our ministries are fully interchangeable subject to normal disciplines of appointment and licensing, but where at least for the foreseeable future there is no agenda of formally ‘merging’ our Churches constitutionally. (We recognise of course that there is likely to be some measure of internal constitutional adjustment to make possible the way forward we are inclined to envisage).

We feel there is existing potential within Methodism to identify individuals whose personal roles in relation to order and oversight might, without breach of principle or unnecessary compromise, be readily exercised and indeed enriched if such persons could be called, in the name of the Methodist Conference and of the wider Church, to exercise that ministry in a form consonant with a generous and sympathetic understanding of the historic episcopate.

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This last term is used as a desired basis for unity much as it is used in the Lambeth Quadrilateral itself, and mindful of how it has with a measure of plasticity served the cause of unity in other countries where difficulties relating to interchangeability of and convergence within ordained ministry have already been addressed. How in our setting such people might be brought within that understanding is not for us to define precisely at this stage. Such persons would need to be afforded the most generous and effective recognition within the Church of Ireland itself in a way that would perhaps go beyond mere hospitality and the Church of Ireland would also need to be open to receiving from Methodism great and transforming gifts in relation not least to evangelism and social action. In such areas mutual rediscovery of the potential of the diaconate could prove very helpful. It should be stressed that if by this means a route emerges to eliminate current difficulties in relation to future ordination practice, then all existing priests and ministers of both traditions should be fully and mutually accepted as being within the order of the presbyterate. In pursuing any vision such as this there will inevitably be interim anomalies, themselves in fact potentially creative.

Before we can make any more concrete recommendations to the Standing Committee in an area concerning which we feel deeply, we feel that both courtesy and common sense demand that our group explores humbly and attentively together with the similar group in the Methodist Church what may be regarded by both as possible and desirable. To talk of these matters other than openly in the presence of our Covenant Partners will be to remain less than fully informed; it could also spawn misunderstanding. We therefore request the Standing Committee to request the Covenant Council in turn to facilitate such conversation and in the aftermath of it we would hope to present a further report in the reasonably near future.

We wish to acknowledge that while the historic episcopate is very important to us (in a way we acknowledge that we have not always assisted our Methodist friends to grasp readily), it is a sign rather than a guarantee of the succession of the people of God in the apostolic faith. It is a sign which in our polity is considered necessary, effective and firmly rooted in ancient practice but we also affirm and celebrate the continuity in faith and order which is corporately represented by the Methodist Conference. If we are to have a ministry which is truly interchangeable, it must in the future be seen to derive its authority from both these strands of apostolic continuity. In many ways this reality is already glimpsed in our own ordination rites and prayers, where the action of a bishop is needed, but so also – indispensably so – is the affirmation and the Amen of the people of God. Our conversation with our Methodist Covenant Partners now needs to focus on how we can all with a shared intention and a common longing to strengthen the Church's mission, proclaim our AMEN as we celebrate each other's ordinations.