

Methodist Belief



THE METHODIST CHURCH
IN IRELAND







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LIVING WHOLEHEARTEDLY AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD.



Foreword

The first version of this booklet was published by the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 1992, when the Faith and Order Committee was asked to prepare a short summary of Methodist belief for easy reference. The resulting booklet was well received within the Methodist Church and without, in Ireland and abroad. and it was reprinted a number of times. In 2003, it was presented in a fully revised form and this new publication follows a very similar pattern. Like the earlier editions, this booklet has been kept deliberately short and free of specialised language, providing no more than an outline, but it is hoped that this may encourage further enquiry and deeper study. Some resources for this are suggested towards the end.

With the increased availability of online resources since the last edition, Section E of this revised version has been designed in the form of signposts to more detailed information which will be updated over time on the Methodist Church in Ireland website: www.irishmethodist.org



METHODIST BELIEF

07

Methodism as part of the Worldwide Church



A.1 I Believe...

The Methodist Church as part of the worldwide Church shares those core beliefs passed down from the time of the Apostles. Those beliefs are founded on the Bible and are summed up in the creeds, which are regularly used in Christian services of all denominations. The word “creed” comes from the Latin “credo” meaning “I believe”. The two better-known creeds are the fourth-century Nicene Creed and this, the simpler Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.

A.2 I believe in God, the Father Almighty

This is not simply an affirmation of the existence of God against those who deny his existence. When Christians say, “I believe” they are not simply making a statement of what they think is true. They are making a statement of trust in God as Father, and a pledge of obedience to him.

We can only speak about God in the limited language of human experience. The Bible uses such experience to speak of God as creator, king, judge, lover, husband, mother and father. There is a sense in which he is the Father, or origin, of all people, and his love extends



to all people, not just to those who call him “Father”. Through Jesus, however, we can also know him in a more personal way, as “Abba” an Aramaic word reflecting an intimate relationship, like our word “Daddy”. (Aramaic was Jesus’ everyday language.) That is why in the Lord’s Prayer we address God as “Our Father”.

However, the creed also reminds us that “Our Father” is the “almighty” or all-powerful God who made the universe and everything in it.

A.3

I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

It is through trust in Jesus that we are accepted as God’s children. Paul in his writings however, clearly distinguishes between our relationship with God as ‘sons’ by adoption, and Jesus as the unique Son of God, sent to earth by his Father:

“When the time had fully come God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law... so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4: 4-6)

That is why both John in his gospel, and the creed itself are able to describe Jesus as the “only” Son of God. Jesus was not only uniquely the Son of God, and hence divine, he was also fully human, born of a woman, Mary. According to two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, this birth was unique also in that Mary was still a virgin at the time of Jesus’ birth.

A.4

Was crucified, died, and was buried

The reality of the death of Jesus by crucifixion is emphasised by adding that he was buried. There was no pretence about the reality of his human life and there was no pretence about his death. Jesus shared fully the human experience of death.

A.5

On the third day he rose again

If there had been no resurrection there would have been no Church. The distinctive feature of Christianity is that Jesus was raised from death by God on the third day. The New Testament repeatedly affirms that if we put our faith in Jesus we are joined with him in his death and will share in his resurrection. As the ancient hymn of praise to God 'Te Deum' puts it, "You overcame the sting of death: and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (Hymns and Psalms 833, verse 10).

A.6

He will come again to judge the living and the dead

We do not know when Christ will return; indeed Jesus himself did not know this (Matthew 24: 36), but the essence of this part of the creed is a belief that Christ will return and that everyone will be judged by him. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5: 10, writes: "We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ."

But this judgement is not solely an event in the future; it is exercised now, in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. This judgement will ultimately be completed at a time and in a manner, which God alone knows. Unlike human justice it will be exercised perfectly, with the same love and mercy revealed in Jesus. So for those who trust in Jesus there is no need to fear this judgement. As the beginning of all things was in his hand, so also are the present and the end.

A.7

I believe in the Holy Spirit

This statement is expanded in the longer Nicene Creed where we say together, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets."

Most of the writers of the New Testament were Jews and as such believed that God is one. This is still the belief of the Christian Church. But when Jesus Christ was worshipped as God and his followers experienced



the power and love of the Spirit of God working in them, they recognised God as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit: the Trinity. Legend has it that St. Patrick, when he came to Ireland, illustrated the Trinity by referring to the shamrock. Each leaf has three parts, yet it is one leaf.

The Spirit is the breath of life, but was also seen as the inspiration of the prophets and psalmists in the Old Testament, who were said to be speaking the word of God. Eventually the whole of scripture was understood to be inspired by God. The Spirit still speaks to us through scripture, and we need the guidance of the Spirit to interpret scripture correctly. Indeed, we believe that the Spirit is available to all believers, to guide, empower and equip them for service, and is not just the life breath of the individual, but of the Church as a whole.

A.8 The holy catholic Church

The word “holy” means “set apart for God”. Although the whole world belongs to God because he made it and still loves it, there are particular things and people separated for God’s special use and service within the world. This is true of the Church, which is not primarily a building or an institution but is a body of people, the people of God.

The word ‘catholic’ means universal, the worldwide Church of all ages. This one, universal Church is expressed in local congregations, and each local congregation expresses this universal nature in a variety of ways. This may be through the range of their mission and prayer, which should be concerned with the worldwide Church of all denominations and cultures; through their worship, which will often draw on the prayers and songs of different traditions, nations and ages. Believing in this catholic nature of the Church, the Methodist Church in Ireland is committed to working in partnership with the worldwide Church of all denominations for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to seeking ways of strengthening relationships between different denominations.

A.9 The communion of saints

Members of the Church of the New Testament are frequently referred to as saints. They were saints, not because they excelled in virtue but because they belonged to God. The words “saint” and “holy” translate related Greek words, meaning “to be set apart for God”. The Church is God’s people just because he has called us, not because of anything in us.

To speak of the communion of saints is another way of speaking of the loving fellowship of all those who belong to God through Christ. This communion is not limited to those who attend our local church or worship our way: it embraces the holy catholic Church, all members of the Church, not only on earth at present (“the Church militant”) but those already in heaven (“the Church triumphant”). It is not just a fellowship between people, but with God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This fellowship is experienced and expressed in the whole life of the Church: in prayer, preaching, reading the scriptures, sacraments, music, witness and service.

A.10 The forgiveness of sins

The word most frequently used in the New Testament and translated “sin” originally meant “missing the target” at which one aimed. It implies that in sinning we fail to be what we should be: we do not realise our God-given potential. Sins may be wrongdoings, offences against what we know to be right, but sin is more than actions or even thoughts that we know to be wrong. It is, essentially, deep-seated selfishness. It may take the form of arrogant disregard for the welfare of others, or it may masquerade as humility. Our real offence is not against others or ourselves, it is against God our creator. The Psalmist cries, “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (Ps. 51: 4). And only the one who is offended can forgive. We receive God’s forgiveness when we repent and trust in Christ, whose sinless life, death and resurrection made possible our acceptance by God.



A.11
The
resurrection
of the body

Christianity believes in life after death, not in the reincarnation of our spirits into physical bodies, but in a rising into a “spiritual” body. Although our physical bodies will be destroyed by death, the New Testament teaches that there will also be continuity of our identity, and that this will have some kind of bodily expression. Paul writes: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable ... it is sown as a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44).

A.12
And the life
everlasting

The life everlasting does not only begin after death. Neither is it simply life that goes on forever. It is the new or eternal life, which is ours through faith in Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Eternity is not only a measure of quantity of life, but also of quality. It is life in union with the ever-living God, a life of love and service. Life of this quality is God’s gift to those who believe in Jesus Christ.



Methodism as part of the Protestant Tradition

It is widely accepted that the Protestant Reformation focused on three main matters of belief: the supreme authority of scripture, salvation by grace through faith in Christ and the priesthood of all believers.



B.1

The supreme authority of scripture

The Methodist Church affirms that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation, and that nothing should be thought necessary to salvation which is not contained within the books of the Bible or which may not be proved from them. As with other Protestant Churches we recognise only 66 books as part of the Bible, 39 in the Old Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, and 27 in the New Testament.

Other books, and portions of books in the so called "Apocrypha" are recognised as being suitable for reading and study, but are not regarded as having the same authority as the books of the Old and New Testaments.

In the Bible, which we seek to have in the most accurate and intelligible form possible, we have the record of God's revelation of himself in the experience of his people. As such the Bible is often referred to as the Word of God. This record of God's word to his people reflects the historical, cultural and religious circumstances of those people at various stages of history. Our circumstances are often very different from those in which the Bible was written, so we have to apply them with wisdom to our situation. For instance, the laws concerning the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy (Lev. 13: 1-14, 57) should not be applied directly to public health issues today.

How then can we assess the authority of different parts of the Bible, and how can we hear the Word of God to us through its words? The Bible is effectively God's plan of salvation, which is crystallised in the life and work of Jesus Christ, described by the Gospel according to John as "the Word made flesh".

We must test scripture against other parts of scripture; never taking small parts in isolation, and ultimately all



interpretations must be made in the light of the words and actions of Jesus.

The Bible was the source of authority for John Wesley. He described himself as a “man of one book” yet at the same time he steeped himself in a wide variety of literature and learning and encouraged others to do the same, affirming that we must view the Bible through the windows of tradition, reason and experience.

B.2 Salvation by grace through faith in Christ

Salvation, in the terms of the Apostles’ Creed is the forgiveness of sins that allows us to enjoy eternal life, thus saving us from death. The Protestant reformers emphasised that this salvation is a product of God’s grace alone. As Paul said: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2: 8 & 9).

Salvation means not only the forgiveness of sins, but also freedom; freedom from the fear of death and hell, and freedom from the fear that life is without purpose or meaning. This can all be ours because of God’s grace, his undeserved goodness to us. Neither good deeds nor pious religious practices in themselves, can earn salvation, whether they are done by us or on our behalf. Indeed such attempts to earn salvation show our concern to do something by ourselves for ourselves. This concern with self is the very opposite of that denial of self which is required of those who would follow Jesus. All that is asked of us is that we have faith. Faith in this context is not a confession of faith such as the Apostles’ Creed or a specific religious faith, but primarily trust in God through Christ. We have to recognise God’s loving kindness reaching out to us, especially from the cross of Christ, and accept this personally.

B.3 The priesthood of all believers

The title “priest” is never used in the New Testament of any office holder or leader in the Church, other than of Christ, the head of the Church. The reformers taught, however, that there was “a priesthood of all believers”; not primarily that each individual believer has a priestly function, but that the Church as a whole exercises a priestly role. This is based on both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament promised that the people of Israel would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19: 6), whilst the New Testament describes Christ as “The Great High Priest”. Therefore the Church, as the “New Israel” and “the Body of Christ”, also exercises a priestly function, as a “royal priesthood, a holy nation”.

Every Christian can approach God directly without any human intermediary. Each can receive the forgiveness of God without any priestly absolution. All Christians, however, share the responsibility and privilege of intercession and leading others into personal relationship with God.

Within the Church there are different gifts or functions, but all are included in the “priesthood of all believers”. There is, however, no sacrifice for other priests to make because Christ has made the one sufficient, perfect and unrepeatable sacrifice. All that we as individuals, and as a Church, can do is to follow the sacrificial example of Christ.



Distinctive Emphases of Methodist Belief

John Wesley believed that certain aspects of the Christian Faith required special emphasis. Methodists still hold to these emphases. There is no more simple or indeed better way of presenting these distinctive emphases than by using the four statements that collectively are called the “Four Alls”.

Although this is a twentieth-century creation it admirably represents Wesley’s mind and is certainly more comprehensive than any single statement of his.

The ‘Four All’s’ are:

1. All people need to be saved.
2. All people can be saved.
3. All people can know they are saved.
4. All people can be saved to the uttermost.



C.1

All people need to be saved

Wesley stressed the biblical analysis of the human condition that all men and women are sinners having “fallen short of the glory of God”(Romans 3: 23). Like Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation, Wesley’s sense of his own sinfulness gave a sharp focus to his theology. He was consumed with a passion for holiness and a living relationship with God. But his own life of ruthless religious discipline could not produce any relief from the consciousness of sin, or any real sense of fellowship with God. Even a period of missionary endeavour in Georgia served only to increase his feelings of alienation from God. As he wrote in his Journal towards the end of that period: “This, then, I have learned in the ends of the earth – that I am fallen short of the glory of God... and having nothing in or of myself to plead I have no hope...” Wesley insisted that all of humankind was in this position and wholly incapable of extracting itself.

So everyone needs to be saved from sin and its consequences; there is nothing anyone can do to save himself or herself.

C.2

All people can be saved

Into such a bleak and hopeless situation comes the grace of God with the gift of salvation. Since no one can save herself or himself, Wesley believed that salvation must be a gift of God. Yet as a gift he believed an individual must respond by accepting it, for God will not force that gift upon anyone. Here Wesley differed from Reformers such as John Calvin. Wesley saw God’s grace as, first of all, setting the human will free in order to allow the individual the space to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation (sometimes referred to as Prevenient grace). All can be saved but not all may choose to be saved. As Charles Wesley put it in one of the many hymns with a similar theme:



*Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
You need not one be left behind,
For God has bidden all mankind.
Sent by my Lord, on you I call;
The invitation is to all;
Come, all the world; come, sinner thou!
All things in Christ are ready now.*

(Hymns and Psalms 460, verses 1-2)
(Singing the Faith 401, verses 1-2)

All men and women without exception have the opportunity of experiencing God's free gift of salvation. So everyone can be saved because God makes it possible. All that is required is faith in Christ crucified.

C.3

All people can know they are saved

What do people know when God's free gift of salvation has been received? They know that they have been justified (put in the right with God), pardoned and accepted by God. They know that they have a new life as a child of God and a new power with which to live this life. But how do they know? Wesley believed the "how" was through the work of the Holy Spirit. He referred to the direct and the indirect witness of the Holy Spirit. He quoted from Romans when he stated: "(God's) Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children" (Romans 8: 16). So deep within the believer there is what Wesley called the "inward consciousness" of the assurance of salvation. While such an assurance may be accompanied by feelings it was more than emotion or feelings. The "inward consciousness" is the direct and inward impression of the Holy Spirit on the individual. The indirect witness of the Spirit is the development of Christ-like attitudes and actions in the everyday life of the individual, described by Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5: 22-23) as "the fruit of the Spirit".

The words of Charles Wesley are again appropriate:

*How can a sinner know
His sins on earth forgiven?
How can my gracious Saviour show
My name inscribed in heaven?
His Spirit to us He gave,
And dwells in us we know;
The witness in ourselves we have
And all its fruits we show.*

(Methodist Hymn Book 377, verses 1 & 7)

In the early years Wesley was quite dogmatic – “unless they knew their sins were forgiven they were under the wrath and curse of God” but he mellowed in later years accepting that not every Christian did enjoy such assurance. Nevertheless, he still maintained it to be the “common privilege of the children of God” and urged every Christian to expect and pray for it.

So every person can know that he or she is saved. It is not simply a doctrinal truth but an assurance given them by the Holy Spirit in the heart.

C.4

All people
can be
saved to the
utmost

Wesley maintained to the end of his life that Christian Perfection was the key emphasis of the Methodists. Convinced that there was no limit to what the grace of God could do in us and with us he used the concept to spell out what he saw as normal Christianity.

In his classic essay, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766), he concluded with six statements, which highlighted what he saw as essential in understanding Christian Perfection.

So, in Wesley’s words, Christian Perfection is:



- Loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves;
- Renewal in heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God;
- Being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit;
- Having all the mind of Christ and walking as he walked;
- Devoting soul, body and substance, not in part, but all to God;
- Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers.

In Wesley's understanding this is what it means to be a real Christian. Both in terms of a relationship with God and relationships in the world this requires total commitment. Wesley refused to countenance the notion of being what he called "half a Christian". He held before the people a quality of Christian living that was dynamic and vibrant, like that described by Jesus Christ as "abundant life". It was a quality of Christian living available to all through grace, energised by the Spirit and continually encouraged by the means of grace, such as corporate worship, prayer, scripture, the sacraments, fasting and fellowship.

Of course the use of the term Christian Perfection has created confusion with notions of sinlessness and infallibility. Yet if properly understood and rightly presented this distinctive emphasis offers an effective way for the promotion of inward spiritual growth as well as outward social righteousness.

Everyone can be saved to the uttermost. Everything is of grace. There can be no limits on what God can do in our lives.

C.5

Distinctive Emphases in Wesleyan Christian Living

The journey of “going on to perfection” means that for Methodists Christian discipleship is a lifelong pursuit.¹ Methodists expect that throughout their lives they will continue to grow and develop in ever-increasing love of God and neighbour. This focus on lifelong discipleship helps to shape a culture of ongoing learning and growth and an emphasis on personal and group Bible study, devotion, and service.

Wesley underscored the centrality of God’s grace in this journey of lifelong discipleship pointing to the “means of grace” and urging Methodists to engage them fully. Prayer, Scripture reading and the Sacraments are important means of grace, and their centrality is acknowledged by many Christian denominations. Among more distinctive elements in Methodist understanding of the means of grace are the importance of “Christian conference” and “works of mercy”.² Each of these have had an important impact on the ways that Methodists practise their Christian faith.

First, in treating Christian conference as a means of grace, Methodist belief highlights Wesley’s insight that the Christian life is never solitary.³ He urged believers to recognise the interdependence of their faith lives and formed early Methodists into a system of smaller groups which emphasised accountability and mutual support in the Christian journey. Methodism still expresses the insight that we do the Christian life together through its local communities called Societies, and its larger grouping, known as Connexion. In addition, Methodist belief includes a core commitment to the importance of every Christian person’s contribution to the ministry of the faith community. Gatherings of believers to share in the Christian life are one way God sustains us in our lifelong journey of faith.



Second, in treating works of mercy as a means of grace, Methodist belief affirms that serving God's purposes in the world is not just a good thing to do, but a way in which we journey in God's grace.⁴ Wesley urged involvement with social issues of his day including responses to poverty and engagement with the movement to abolish slavery, as well as such practices as visiting the sick and imprisoned.⁵ Modern-day Methodists practise their Christian discipleship through a variety of approaches to social engagement.

Lifelong committed discipleship is at the core of Methodist belief and has a significant impact on Methodist practice. Methodists engage in a journey of personal and social holiness, relying throughout on God's grace.

For further information about distinctive elements of Methodist belief and their relationship to Mission in contemporary Ireland, please see the Faith and Order Publication: 'A Fresh Expression of Our Mission' which can be viewed on the Faith and Order page of the Irish Methodist Church website.

www.irishmethodist.org/resources

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 from among the ordained ministers. The President is designated a year ahead of taking office and serves for one year. Conference elects a Lay Leader to serve with the President. The Lay Leader is designated a year ahead of taking office and serves for two years. The Conference 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 under the pastoral care of the District Superintendent who is appointed by the Conference. Each District appoints a Lay Leader or Lay Leaders to assist the District Superintendent.

There are three Districts: Southern, North Western and North Eastern.



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 16 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 16 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 Church Council, 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 encourage 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.

A Lay Leader of the Conference is appointed by the Conference on the vote of its members; s/he is designated a year ahead of taking office and serves for two years alongside the President.

Each District appoints a Lay Leader or Lay Leaders to assist the District Superintendent.



D.4 Ordained Ministry

Ordained ministers, or presbyters, in Methodism may be women or men. All candidates for the ordained ministry must first be fully accredited local preachers before undergoing a selection process. Candidates approved by Conference enter into a process of formation for ordained ministry which integrates theology with practice and formation, and is designed to enable them to develop in their character, knowledge and ministry. This context-based formation normally takes place over six years. Normally ordained ministers in training are stationed as probationer ministers after two years and ordained after four years. Ordinations take place at Conference, by prayer and a ceremony of laying-on of hands by the President, as an episcopal minister, and by other ordained ministers. Two years of post-ordination formation provide further opportunity for individuals to continue to reflect upon their practice.

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; the length of appointment may vary according to personal circumstances and local needs. 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.

The President of the Conference is installed and consecrated by prayer and the laying on of hands. Following the signing of the Covenant between the

Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland, among those participating are three bishops of the Church of Ireland. In a reciprocal action, the President and at least one past President of the Methodist Church are involved in the consecration of bishops of the Church of Ireland. Thus the ministries of the two Churches are regarded as interchangeable.

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 practised 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. The document, 'God's Mission, Our Mission' spells out in detail what it means for the people called Methodist to be a mission-oriented movement.

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 to the European Methodist Council and to the World Methodist Council. It also belongs to the Conference of European Churches and to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is a partner in a number of shared churches throughout Ireland with either the Church of Ireland or Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In 2002, a 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. This led to the churches agreeing to interchangeability of ministries in 2014.

The President of the Methodist Church in Ireland participates in the Church Leaders’ Meeting with the Presbyterian Moderator, the Primate of the Church of Ireland, the Primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland and the President of the Irish Council of Churches.



Practical Expressions of Methodist Belief

The Council on Social Responsibility (CSR) is the body appointed by the Conference to undertake study and analysis of social, political and moral issues. It operates through northern and southern executives as well as meeting on an all-Ireland basis. Over the years, the Council has issued reports and statements on a wide range of matters. These reports and statements may be found on the website of the Methodist Church in Ireland; www.irishmethodist.org/csr-archives. Each statement listed below can be read in full by clicking the title links.



E.1 Abortion

The Church is opposed to abortion on demand and urges support and resources for those who have a crisis pregnancy. It is recognised that there are complex situations in which early termination of pregnancy should be available; these include when a mother's life is at risk, when a pregnancy is the result of a sexual crime or in cases of fatal foetal abnormality.

Ref:

- Statement on the proposed Abortion legislation NI December 2012
- Oral submission to the joint Oireachtas Hearing 2013
- Response to Memorial to Conference presented 2015
- 2018 statement prior to the Eighth Amendment Referendum
- Response to NIO consultation on abortion in NI

E.2 Alcohol and Substance misuse

Conference directed CSR to re-examine the effects of alcohol and to produce guidelines for the Methodist community. These were received by Conference 2017. The death rate from substance abuse is rising as more potent forms of illicit drugs are readily available in our cities and towns; abuse of prescription drugs is also having devastating effects on many lives. For ministers, street pastors and prison chaplains the problems associated with drug addiction are a daily reality.

E.3 Community Relations and legacy issues

In the years since the end of the armed struggle the CSR has sought to support and dialogue with political parties to promote joined-up government and healing of community relations. Reconciliation remains high on the agenda and further resources are being produced. Responses to significant consultations such as legacy structures are on the website.

Ref:

- NIO Consultation on the Proposed Legacy Structures
- Healing the Hurts Liturgy



E.4 Domestic Violence

Violence from someone in a close relationship is a common phenomenon which cuts across all of society. Information and guidelines which have been developed seek to help people recognise and respond appropriately to the problem.

Ref:

- Statement on Domestic Violence 2015
- Guidelines on Domestic Violence 2016

E.5 Environmental Issues

The Church is called to be responsible stewards of God's created world.

The Environmental policy encourages all church members to re-evaluate their lifestyles and the Church continues to seek out and share best practice in living sustainably and justly. At the time of writing CSR is preparing further resources on environmental change.

Ref:

- Environmental Policy 2011

E.6 Euthanasia / Physician- Assisted suicide

There is often pressure from society to make provision for people who are terminally ill or who have a degenerative condition to be able to end their lives at a time of their choosing. The resource on this subject does not explore the theological issues of euthanasia as there is broad consensus in the Church on this matter that no one has the right to take precious human life; instead, it outlines the implications and inherent dangers of changing the law.

Ref:

- Physician-Assisted Suicide 2013

E.7 Gambling

The Church is opposed to all forms of gambling and has produced a theological reflection on gambling and the National Lottery. The Church does not accept grants from lottery funds.

Ref:

- Theological Reflections on Gambling and the National Lottery 2013

E.8 Marriage and sexuality

In responding to the Marriage Equality Referendum in the Republic of Ireland, the Church affirmed and re-iterated the understanding of marriage as received by the Methodist Church and found in the Marriage service in the Methodist Worship Book. Pastoral responses regarding those of homosexual orientation were adopted by Conference in 2011.

Ref:

- Referendum on Marriage Equality (ROI) May 2015
- Pastoral Responses regarding those of Homosexual Orientation Conference 2011
- Response to NIO consultation on Religious same sex marriage

E.9 Migration

With the rise in anti-migrant rhetoric and far right sentiment in society, we have attempted to focus on the biblical mandate for welcoming the stranger and those who are oppressed. Examples of good practice from our congregations have been collated into a welcome directory.

Ref:

- Reflections on Migration 2016
- Welcome directory 2017



E.10

Pornography

Pornographic material is only a click away on the internet and it is easily accessed by anyone. A factual resource explains the harmful emotional and social consequences of viewing pornography and the addictive nature of this activity.

Ref:

- The Uninvited Guest 2012

E.11

Poverty

The majority of those in poverty today are “working poor”. Public views are often shaped by misleading media reports and generally there is a lack of compassion for those in financial hardship. We promote a biblical view of those who are poor and published a series of Bible Studies on the subject in the Methodist Newsletter April 2016.

Ref:

- Poverty and Deprivation 2012

E.12

**Social
Action
programmes**

All City Missions and many local societies are engaged in social outreach programmes. CSR draws attention to issues and activities on which local congregations can advocate and act e.g. direct provision, domestic violence, welfare reform etc.

E.13

Suicide

The suicide rate in Northern Ireland has doubled in the last 20 years, exceeding that of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The incidence of suicide is almost four times greater in men than women. Suicide is most common in the under 30 age group.

While suicide rates in Ireland were at a low in 2016, Pieta House, a leading suicide prevention service recorded a record high in 2018 of just over 8,000 accessing their services.

Mental health problems are common in those who take their own lives. This situation poses a huge pastoral challenge for the Church.

Ref:

- From Despair to Hope
(see Appendices: Other Resources)



Appendices: Scripture References, Other Resources and Notes

We encourage you to explore the Bible for yourself.

Following are some of the Scripture references that relate to the sections on previous pages.



- A.2 James 2: 19; I Peter 1: 21; Deuteronomy 32: 6; Psalm 24: 10; James 4: 12; Isaiah 54: 5; Isaiah 49:15; 1 Corinthians 8: 6; Romans 8: 15-16
- A.3 Matthew 1: 23; John 1: 12; John 3: 16; Luke 1: 27; Romans 8: 13-17; Galatians 4: 4-7
- A.4 Matthew 27: 58-60; 1 Corinthians 15: 3-4a; Philippians 2: 8
- A.5 Acts 2: 24; 1 Corinthians 15: 14-15, 20-22
- A.6 Matthew 24: 36; 2 Corinthians 5: 10; John 3: 19; John 5: 24; Matthew 25: 31-46; 2 Timothy 4: 1; Acts 10: 42; Acts 17: 31
- A.7 John 16: 7ff; Matthew 28: 19; 2 Corinthians 13: 14; 2 Timothy 3: 16; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11
- A.8 1 Corinthians 1: 1-2; 1 Peter 2: 9 John 13: 34-35; John 17: 20-23
- A.9 Romans 1: 7; Hebrews 12: 1; Acts 2: 43; 1 John 1: 3; 2 Corinthians 13: 14; Philippians 2: 1
- A.10 Romans 3: 23; Isaiah 53: 6; Psalm 90: 8; Psalm 51: 4; Psalm 130: 3-4; Acts 2: 38; Acts 13: 38; Colossians 1: 13-4; Ephesians 1: 7; 1 John 1: 8-9
- A.11 1 Corinthians 15: 42-44
- A.12 John 3: 16; I John 5: 11-12; Mark 10: 29-30
- B.1 2 Timothy 3: 16; Hebrews 1: 1-2; John 5: 39; Acts 18: 28; 2 Peter 1: 20-21
- B.2 Ephesians 2: 8-9; Titus 3: 7; Acts 4: 12; Romans 1: 16; Romans 5: 1
- B.3 1 Peter 2: 9; Hebrews 4: 14-15; Hebrews 10: 12; Ephesians 4: 11-12
- C.1 Romans 3: 23; Ephesians 2: 8-9
- C.2 John 3: 17; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-5; 1 Timothy 2: 5-6; Romans 11: 32; 2 Peter 3: 9; 1 John 2: 2
- C.3 1 Timothy 1: 12; 1 John 5: 13; Romans 8: 16; Galatians 5: 22-23; 1 John 3: 24; 1 John 4: 13
- C.4 Matthew 5: 48; 2 Corinthians 7: 1; 2 Corinthians 13: 11; Luke 10: 27; Romans 12: 2; Psalm 51: 7-10; Romans 8: 5-11; Philippians 2: 5; 1 John 3: 9
- D.1 Ephesians 4: 16
- D.2 Romans 12: 4-5; Galatians 6: 1-3; Ephesians 4: 11-15
- D.3 Romans 12: 4-8; 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6; Ephesians 4: 11-2
- D.4 2 Timothy 1: 6; 1 Corinthians 9: 14; 1 Timothy 5: 17-18
- D.5 Ephesians 5: 19-20; Romans 12: 1; John 4: 23-4
- D.6 Matthew 6: 6; Acts 1: 14; Ephesians 6: 18; Romans 8: 26; Matthew 26: 41; Luke 18: 1; 1 Thessalonians 5: 17; James 5: 13; Isaiah 65: 24; John 15: 7; John 16: 24
- D.7 Mark 16: 15; Romans 10: 14-17; 2 Timothy 4: 2; Matthew 10: 27; Acts 5: 20
- D.8 Hebrews 10: 24-5
- D.9 Matthew 28: 19-20; Acts 17: 33; Ephesians 4: 5; Luke 22: 19-20; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26
- D.10 Luke 4: 18-9; John 20: 21; Matthew 28: 19-20; Mark 13: 10; James 2: 14-7
- D.11 Matthew 28: 19-20; John 13: 34-35; John 17: 20-23
- E.1 Romans 12: 18; 2 Corinthians 5: 18-20; Ephesians 2: 11-18; 1 Peter 2: 23
- E.2 Psalm 146:9; Ephesians 3: 26-28
- E.3 Matthew 5: 13-16; Matthew 25: 31-46; James 2: 14-17
- E.4 Genesis 2: 18-24; Matthew 19: 4-6; 1 Corinthians 7: 3-5; Hebrews 13: 4; 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11, 18-20; 1 Corinthians 13: 13; Galatians 6: 1-2
- E.5 Matthew 19: 3-12; 1 Corinthians 7: 12-16
- E.6 Psalm 139: 13-16
- E.7 Exodus 20: 13; Revelation 21: 4
- E.8 Psalm 23: 4; Isaiah 43: 2
- E.9 Romans 13: 13; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 5: 18
- E.10 Matthew 6: 19-21, 24; 1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13: 5
- E.11 Genesis 1: 26-9; 4: 9-10; Leviticus 19: 9-11; Deuteronomy 24: 17-22; Psalm 82: 3-4; Isaiah 58: 6-9; Amos 5: 21-4; Luke 4: 18-19; 6: 20; Matthew 25: 31-46; James 1: 26-7
- E.12 Matthew 5: 9, 38-48; Luke 6: 27-36; Romans 12: 17-21; Romans 13: 1-7



Other Resources

The Sermons of John Wesley

Wesley's Notes on the New Testament

Hymns and Psalms: A Methodist and Ecumenical Hymn Book (1983)
Published by Methodist Publishing House, London. ISBN 0 946550 00 X

Singing the Faith (2011) Published by Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd
London. ISBN 978 1 84825 067 3

Methodist Worship Book (1999). Published by Methodist Publishing
House, Peterborough. ISBN 1 85852 116 5

**What we believe: A Catechism for the use of the people called
Methodists (2000)**. Published by Methodist Publishing, London. ISBN
978 1 85852 455 9

The Methodists in Ireland: A Short History by D.L. Cooney (2001).
Published by Columba Press, Blackrock, Co Dublin. ISBN 1 85607 335 1

**Thoughts from a Warmed Heart: A Commentary on John Wesley's
Notes on the New Testament** by J.T. MacCormack (2002). Published by
Colourpoint, Newtownards, Co. Down. ISBN 1 898392 28 5

**From Despair to Hope: A Christian Perspective on the Tragedy of
Suicide** edited by R. Cochrane et al. (2002). Published by Veritas, Dublin
on behalf of the Council on Social Responsibility of the Methodist
Church in Ireland. ISBN1 85390 672 7

The Role of Women in the Church (1998). Published by the Methodist
Church in Ireland

A Guide to Church Membership (Revised edition 2001). Published by
Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough

The Methodist Conference in Ireland by I.D. Henderson (2001). Printed
by Cavern Design Printing, Donegal Town, Eire

Notes

¹ John Wesley, 'The Scripture Way of Salvation' in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater; Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 374; See further Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 99-100.

² Stephen W. Manskar, *Opening Ourselves to Grace: The Means of Grace and Discipleship* (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 16. Online: <https://www.igrc.org/files/tables/content/12654187/fields/files/87bbac5ac0b54f3a99c98fb8667223f7/opening+ourselves+to+grace+-+steve+manskar.pdf>. Accessed 15.10.19.

³ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739): Preface*, 8. Accessed online: https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/04_Hymns_and_Sacred_Poems_%281739%29.pdf. 14.10.19

⁴ Manskar, *Opening Ourselves to Grace*, 16.

⁵ See Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (trans. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 29, 72-75.

Further notes

As observed in the introductory paragraph to Section E, the work of the Council on Social Responsibility is ongoing; it is important to check www.irishmethodist.org for the most up-to-date information and reports.

E6. Euthanasia / Physician Assisted suicide

A Private Member's Bill on euthanasia is going through Dáil Éireann. Dying with Dignity has reached the committee stage in the process towards legislation at time of writing (Spring, 2021). Submissions were invited and some churches have responded.

E8. Marriage and sexuality

At the time of writing (Spring, 2021), a sub-committee of the Faith and Order Committee is reflecting on and guiding the Connexion in a public consideration of issues of human sexuality.





Edgehill House,
9 Lennoxvale,
Belfast,
Co. Antrim,
BT9 5BY

E: office@irishmethodist.org
W. irishmethodist.org/contact-us



**THE METHODIST CHURCH
IN IRELAND**