

The Response of Y Cyngor to the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales

1) Y Cyngor is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the recommendations from the Commission of Covenanted Churches. These are contained in the two papers on Church Governance and Pastoral Oversight that were launched at the Gathering that took place in Aberystwyth in October 2012. It recognizes that these recommendations, although outline in nature, are nevertheless far-reaching as they envisage a process in which the non-episcopal partners to the Covenant would take episcopacy into their system through the creation of three new jurisdictions alongside the six existing Anglican dioceses, a commitment to episcopal ordination within the jurisdictions, an act of reconciliation for those ministering within them and an annual Gathering to provide for governance of the proposed Uniting Church in Wales. It also recognizes that these recommendations, and indeed the Gathering which launched them, are part of an Agenda and Work plan for the Commission for the years 2011-16 to which Y Cyngor made its response in 2010 (as was reported to the Conference in 2011 and to which we shall return later.)

2) In seeking to take seriously and make an informed response to the recommendations, Y Cyngor undertook an extensive process of consultation across the 16 circuits and 12 ardaloeedd ('areas' in Synod Cymru) that make up the Methodist Church in Wales. This took place between January and September 2013 and all circuits and ardaloeedd were provided with an introduction, a summary of the recommendations and template form to reply. Moreover, as we are a connexional Church and part of the British Methodist Conference, this process of response was agreed at the 2013 Conference and also included a similar consultation with two connexional bodies, the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees.

3) In addition this process led to a memorial from the Wales Synod meeting in September that raised concerns about a specific part of the Commission's recommendations, namely the proposed 'act of reconciliation' (see paragraph 9 below). However this memorial will go separately to the Conference and a response to it will be prepared by the Memorials Committee for agreement at Conference in 2014.

4) This consultation resulted in a total of some 55 responses and Y Cyngor would like to pay tribute to the seriousness with which circuits and ardaloeedd engaged with the process. Responses were received from all 16 of the circuits and a majority of ardaloeedd, and in addition there were some 24 responses received from other groups or individuals. Y Cyngor also received responses from the Faith and Order and Law and Polity Committees, both of which were very helpful to the process.

5) The nature of the questions asked and variety of responses received make it hard to offer a simply statistical analysis of this process. As might be expected from such an extensive consultation there was a range of views offered, including some positive responses which looked favourably on the Commission's papers, either in principle or in response to particular recommendations.

6) However the group commissioned by Y Cyngor to prepare its response was struck by the emergence of similar themes which emerged across the responses. These raised a series of concerns about the recommendations that could be summarized under the following headings:

- They were too focused on church structures and not enough on shared mission opportunities
- They were too much 'top down' and not 'bottom up' in terms of vision and implementation
- They were less about 'mutual recognition' and more about being 'conformed' to an episcopal model of oversight and ministry
- There was too much focus on ordained ministry and not enough about shared lay ministry

7) In addition, there was a number of specific points raised in the responses:

- There was little mention or discussion of the ministry of deacons in the recommendations
- There was little mention of working with partners outside the covenant (particularly an issue in Welsh-speaking work where there is a range of formal and informal relations with other partners)
- Some questions were raised about the role of the Welsh language in the Uniting Church

8) Section 10 of the paper on Pastoral Oversight acknowledged that there were some 'immediate difficulties' which could be identified in the Commission's recommendations, and that for Methodists these involved being part of a connexional church in which ordinations took place at Conference presided over by the President. It acknowledged that the Church in Wales (then) position on women bishops raised problems should the other partners wish to consecrate a women bishop for one of the other jurisdictions. It also recognized that the recommendations provided a process by which future ministers in the United Church would all be episcopally ordained, but that this might leave 'in limbo' those currently serving in Wales who had not been episcopally ordained; to address this situation, the paper proposed an 'act of reconciliation' involving the 'laying on of hands' by 'at least one Anglican bishop' and 'one other bishop' following the model of the Church in South India.

9) These difficulties identified in the Commission's papers were very much picked up in the responses received by Y Cyngor. A significant number of responses re-affirmed the importance of being part of a connexional church and of ministers being ordained at, and in connexion with, the Conference. The concern expressed was that the recommendations threatened to sever the Methodist Church in Wales from being part of the wider Connexion, something that could undermine our ecclesiology and damage our ability to work as a connexional church across three nations and other jurisdictions. Many of the responses were submitted before the decision of the Church in Wales (in September 2013) to admit women to the episcopate, and so continue to reflect Methodist concern to uphold the equal role of women in positions of leadership. However, even though this recent decision by the Church in Wales is welcomed, it is also recognised that much still needs to be done to show how it will work in practice. In particular there is significant disquiet about the recommendation for an 'act of reconciliation', which to many respondents seem to imply a rejection of Methodist orders and the prospect of 're-ordination'. It was this disquiet that led to the Wales Synod agreeing a Memorial raising concern about the proposed 'act of reconciliation' to go separately to the Methodist Conference (see paragraph 3 above.)

10) The same concerns which were picked up in the responses from across the two Synods in Wales, were also identified in those from the connexional bodies. All of them highlight the importance of ensuring that an accurate and adequate understanding of Methodism informs such discussions. For example, the paper on Church Governance emphasises the commonalities between the Covenanted Churches while ignoring or underplaying the theological differences between them, while the paper on Pastoral Oversight underestimates both the theological differences about oversight and the ramifications such a scheme might have for a Welsh Methodist Jurisdiction. They also suggest that some more theological work is required before any recommendations concerning governance structures and the role of bishops in a Uniting Church in Wales can be further explored.

11) It could also be said that within the Commission's papers themselves there is some material which runs counter to what is then contained in the recommendations. Section 6 in the paper on Pastoral Oversight summarises the Methodist position by means of quoting extensively from the guidelines on '*Episkope* and episcopacy' which formed part of the 2000 report to Conference. Amongst other things, these affirm the importance of personal *episkope* being exercised 'within connexional structures', express unease about the 'development of any models of personal *episkope*

which isolated Districts from the whole Church' and maintain that 'there should be freedom of interpretation as to the significance of the historic episcopate'. It seems to Y Cyngor that these same guidelines were not taken fully into account in the jurisdictional or diocesan model of episcopal oversight which is then offered in the Commission's papers.

12) In addition, Y Cyngor is also aware of discussions taking place in another covenant relationship, namely through the Joint Implementation Commission under An Anglican- Methodist Covenant involving the Church of England. In these conversations a very different model of personal *episkope* is being discussed, one which is based on the role of the President of the Conference, and which appears much closer to a Methodist and connexional, rather than a diocesan or jurisdictional structure.

13) Taking all these strands together, it seems to Y Cyngor that there is a significant degree of consistency in the responses received from across the two Synods in Wales and the wider Connexion. Both from within Wales and from the connexional bodies there is recognition that what is contained in the Commission's recommendations i) does not adequately address our understanding of what it means to be part of a connexional church, ii) poses real challenges as to how a Methodist jurisdiction would remain in connexion with the British Methodist Conference and iii) raises fundamental questions about our ecclesiology, not least our understanding of oversight.

14) The underlying question asked by the Commission through its papers was whether there was sufficient support for the recommendations among Covenant partners to proceed towards drawing up a more detailed scheme for a Uniting Church in Wales. Based on the responses received, it is clear to Y Cyngor that there is not sufficient support for them among Methodists both in Wales and across the wider Connexion. Indeed the recommendations themselves reveal both a lack of understanding of our polity as a connexional church working across three nations and other jurisdictions and also of the Guidelines that were adopted by the Conference in 2000 as a summary of its position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.

15) However, this does not mean that the Methodist Church is turning away from ecumenism or from the Covenant. Reflecting back on the responses received, Y Cyngor is struck by how far they resonate with the response it made to the original Work Plan from which the Commission's recommendations emerged (section 1). Our response then, which was reported to the Conference in 2011, was to say:

"Our concern is that the Agenda proposed by the Commission, in particular the first 3 points, appears too focused on matters concerning structural schemes, and not enough on deepening existing relationships and exploring what is possible under existing agreements. In particular we consider that its focus is too much on ordained ministry and not enough on the opportunities afforded by lay and mission-shaped ministry to which Covenant partners are also committed."

16) Examples of what this might mean in practice include a serious attempt to explore the possibilities available, but hardly used, of the ecumenical canons of the Church in Wales, to further develop our work with Fresh Expressions, building on our joint involvement in Mission Shaped Ministry courses, and to commit to a regular pattern of meeting with church leaders from the Covenant partners.

17) Our reflection is that this response was not heard as clearly as it might have been by other Covenant partners at the time. It may be, as partners now reflect on and respond to the Commission's recommendations, that our original response may be heard afresh; and with it the positive affirmation with which we closed, pointing to the Agenda that we see as crucial to the Commission's future work:

“We also consider that more work needs to be done to explore what ‘visible unity’ might mean for this new century. Accordingly, we would want to see the future Agenda of the Commission adjusted to address these issues and so to focus on work which reflects the practical mission priorities in the areas where we seek to serve.”

Y Cyngor on behalf of the Methodist Church in Wales,
November 2013