



Leading and Presiding: developing the Presidency of the Conference

A briefing paper for
District Synods and
the Youth Assembly

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The 2010 Conference received a report on the roles of President and Vice-President of the Conference and adopted many of its recommendations. Most importantly it endorsed the model of Presidential leadership set out in section 5 of the report (see further below). That, together with decisions to continue the practice of the Conference electing members of the Presidency after prior designation of them by ballot at the preceding Conference but to discontinue the convention whereby the ex-President and ex-Vice-President do not contribute to Conference debates in the year that they cease to hold office, creates a significant new framework within which the roles can develop.

That framework is not now at issue. But on two key issues of detail about how it should be implemented, the Conference decided to consult the Synods and Youth Assembly before coming to a mind about them. They are: (a) whether the Presidency should consist of three persons, a presbyter, a deacon and a lay person, or of two, a presbyter and a layperson or deacon, as at present; and (b) whether they should serve for one year, as at present, or for a longer term.

In this paper the relevant sections of the report are summarised or quoted. Direct quotations are in italics. The full report can be found as Item 8 under Volume 1 of the Conference Agenda on the Methodist Church website at: www.methodistconference.org.uk/agenda

[n.b. In making its decisions to adopt the model of Presidential leadership in the report the Conference noted comments from the Joint Implementation Commission for the Covenant between the Church of England and the Methodist Church (JIC) that the biblical and theological material in the report provided a useful foundation for any further work on particular models of leadership and oversight but that it would be helpful if more work were now to be done on the Presidency in a way that took into account the suggestions made by the JIC in Chapter 5 of "Embracing the Covenant" (2008) that the Conference consider the model of a President-Bishop.]

Background

Since Methodist Union in 1932 the Conference has had an annual President, who is always a presbyter, and a Vice-President, usually a lay person but occasionally, as now, a deacon. In addition to presiding over the Conference these officers represent the authority of the Conference over the whole Church throughout the year. The office of General Secretary (which is held by the person, always a presbyter, who is also Secretary of the Conference) was instituted in 2003 and the responsibilities broadened in 2007.

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Those responsibilities are now stated in Standing Order 300 (2) and (3) as:

'to be the executive officer responsible for leading the mission and strategy of the Church', to 'play a part in the oversight and leadership of the Church', and particularly to be 'responsible for developing strategic management and the Church's vision of unity, mission, evangelism and worship'. This includes leading and directing the Connexional Leaders' Forum.

The remit for the report was

to examine and report upon all aspects of the roles of President and Vice-President and how they work together and relate to the senior leadership of the Church, including:

- i) how the roles might be further developed;
- ii) how they might work more closely with the General Secretary of the Church/Secretary of the Conference to present a shared vision and to energise the Church;
- iii) the length of office of each;
- iv) the title of Vice-President.

Summary of recommendations

The report's principal recommendations are summarised as follows:

- 6.1 *We propose developing the current offices of President and Vice-President into a collaborative team of President and two Co-Presidents, one a deacon and one a lay person, to be known collectively as 'the Presidency of the Conference', exercising the sort of leadership set out in 5.2 [quoted in Section A below].*
- 6.2 *We recommend that as many of the Presidential duties as possible, both within the Conference and during the year, should be shared by all three members of the Presidency on a mutually agreed basis.*
- 6.3 *We recommend an emphasis upon collaborative ministry, not only among the members of the Presidency but in their working with the General Secretary/Secretary of the Conference and other connexional officers, so as to secure coherence in the leadership offered to the Connexion.*

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- 6.4 *We invite the Conference to choose between a pattern in which the President and Co-Presidents each serve for a period of three years, with one successor being elected and inducted in rotation each year, or a pattern in which all three serve for one year only, with an annual induction of all three officers.*
- 6.5 *We recommend that the practice of election by ballot within the Conference after prior nomination, as at present, should be retained. [The Conference adopted this recommendation]*

Later in the report, to meet the objection that the proposed three-person Presidency would place undue emphasis on ordained ministry and proportionately reduce the lay contribution, the alternative was offered of a two-person Presidency, who would again exercise the sort of leadership set out in section 5.2 of the full report. This two-person presidency would consist of a presbyteral President and a Co-President who might, as is now the case with the Vice-President, be either a lay person or a deacon, serving either for two years or for one.

It is the choices between a three-person or a two-person Presidency and between a one-year or a longer term that the Synods and the Youth Assembly are asked to discuss.

A. Presidential Leadership

The report sets out a model of Presidential leadership, complementary to that of the General Secretary, which was adopted by the Conference. That model is grounded in a theological understanding of the nature of the Church and the nature of the Conference [Section 3 of the full report]; of some Biblical characteristics of the nature of leadership [Section 3]; and of leadership in the Methodist Church [set out in general terms in Section 4 and spelt out with particular reference to the role of the General Secretary and other senior leaders in Section 11]. The key section is 5.2 which describes Presidential leadership as follows:

... a complementary ministry of leadership which

- embodies the collaborative nature of leadership in the Church, affirming the significance and value of both ordained (presbyteral and diaconal) and lay ministry,*
- presides over the Conference and by virtue of that fact represents its authority throughout the year,*
- can therefore formally represent the Conference and the wider Connexion on public occasions,*
- stands at some distance from the executive machinery of the Church and is able in consequence to serve as pastor and consultant, and when required, can assist in the resolution of misunderstanding and conflict,*

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- is available to visit widely in the Church, affirming and cementing the link between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' and can feed back insights gained thereby,
- is able to offer personal insights, experience and prophetic vision which may in time become Conference-endorsed policy but have not yet acquired that status,
- is thus able to energise the Church in its worship and mission.

B. A Presidency: three members

(c/f Resolution 8.3 in the full report, quoted below)

See Section D below for the alternative of a two person Presidency.

While over the years Presidents and Vice-Presidents have developed patterns of working together, constitutionally they are not required to do so. The report argues for a genuinely collaborative Presidency comprising three members:

- 7.2 *We propose a Presidency of three members because we do not think it is an adequate acknowledgement of the distinctive ministries of either deacons or lay people to retain the current office of Vice-President open to both, but held by a deacon only infrequently and then at the displacement of a lay person.*
- 7.3 *Nor, in general, do we think it appropriate that when a President is unavailable during the year the duties should devolve upon the ex-President. Rather, we believe that it is important to have lay, diaconal and presbyteral expressions of a single model of presidential office, working collaboratively and inter-dependently and sharing as fully as possible in the responsibilities currently carried by the President.*
- 7.4 *We believe that the title 'Co-President of the Conference' most accurately represents the roles we propose for the lay and diaconal members of the Presidency. It avoids the ambiguities of the current 'Vice-President' or the alternative 'Deputy President' which is open to similar objections. We have considered the often-advocated 'Lay President', but have not recommended it, for the reason that it could imply that the holder is the lay president of the Church, or the president of the laity of the Church with authority restricted to the laity (the title 'Youth President' is used in this way). The Vice-President represents the whole Conference, although it is of course true that a lay Vice-President does in a secondary sense represent the laity. Similar considerations would apply to 'Diaconal President', which might imply its limitation to presidency of the Diaconal Order.*
- 7.6 *The over-riding responsibility of the President and Co-Presidents would be to exemplify collaborative ministry and thereby affirm its importance for the whole Church, making it a pattern for every circuit...Methodism has a long history*

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of shared ministry, although in the past we must admit that the distinctive contributions lay people and deacons can bring to that sharing has not always been adequately recognised...The creation of the Presidency gives the Church an opportunity of demonstrating what collaboration can mean in practice.

- 7.10 *We believe that there is benefit to the Church in the present practice by which both President and Vice-President continue during their year of office to be rooted in the everyday life of the Church, in the case of the Vice-President by keeping contact both with his or her local church and circuit and with his or her everyday employment or other activities. For the President day to day contact is generally less possible and most of the duties of his or her normal station are covered, either by the appointment of a President's Assistant or by colleagues between them sharing the coverage...We are keen to see this rootage preserved in the future, although we recognise that if a three-year term of office is adopted for the Presidency it will be more difficult. We resist the notion that any of these offices should become by definition 'separated' or set apart full-time.*
- 7.11 *Traditionally the President, and to a lesser extent the Vice-President, have been expected to travel widely in the Connexion, sometimes together, and this has proved to be a major demand upon the available time...We think that the appointment of a Presidency gives an opportunity for revision of the pattern. While we would not wish to rule out joint visits by two or all three Presidency members on special occasions (it would be a clear expression of collaboration), the sharing of responsibilities could mean fewer demands upon any one member for district and similar visits, leaving more time for study and reflection.*

The President

- 8.1 *Even within the Presidency there will be need for one member to be identified as the lead figure for legal and practical reasons. We recommend that the title of 'President' be retained for the lead figure...*
- 8.2 *We further recommend that the President, as the lead figure, should continue to be a presbyter. The principal reason for this is theological. Our doctrinal standards in the Deed of Union, while affirming that there is no exclusive priesthood pertaining to the presbyterate and that Christ's ministries are shared by both ordained and lay, nevertheless assign a 'principal and directing part' to those who are ordained as presbyters. This principle is observed in local church, circuit and district alike, and should be the case with the Conference also...The Conference is more than a business meeting: it is a gathering of the Church and should express that fact in the way it is ordered. This is not to deny the value of other ministries, lay or diaconal, but to affirm the distinctive character of each. In the report What*

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is a Presbyter? adopted by the Conference of 2002 it is made clear that the particular calling of a presbyter (as of a deacon) can only be understood within the general calling of the People of God to worship, mission and service, and serves to focus, express and enable it. To this end presbyters are ordained to a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility, and to elect a presbyter to the Presidency would be an authorisation to exercise that ministry in the context of the Conference and the Connexion at large.

- 8.4 As a presbyter the President's particular ministry should therefore be essentially presbyteral. It should focus on a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility. In the Conference that would include presiding at an ordination and at the Conference service of Holy Communion. Additionally we think that the person who presides in the name of the Conference over the reception of others into full connexion should be one who is himself or herself in full connexion. During the year also it is desirable that the President should be given opportunities to preside at Holy Communion, and to share in baptisms and confirmations. It is appropriate too that the President should be available as a pastor, especially to presbyters and deacons, and to have time for those who seek help and advice.

The lay Co-President

- 9.1 By having a lay member of the Presidency the Church affirms the calling of lay people to be Christians in the world and in the Church. The principal responsibility of a lay Co-President is to exemplify that calling. The gifts he or she brings to the office are personal experience of discipleship in the world of work and voluntary service and an understanding of and love for the Church from the perspective of a lay person, which can be shared with the Church in a variety of ways. For that reason the office should not be full time, enabling the holder to continue as far as possible with his or her regular occupation.
- 9.2 The lay Co-President would be more than a representative of the laity of Methodism. He or she would be a lay representative and embodiment of the authority of the Conference, and would share in all the responsibilities...In the Conference he or she would be able to share insights acquired as an active lay Christian in the world and a member of the Methodist Church, and offer particular encouragement to lay representatives to play their full part, especially those who are new to the Conference or unaccustomed to public speaking. Throughout the year there would be the opportunity, by writing and speaking, to encourage reflection on the implications of Christian discipleship for the particular area of life in which he or she is normally engaged, e.g. by meetings of professionals in his or her field of expertise.

The diaconal Co-President

- 10.1 *A deacon would bring to the Presidency all the gifts, insights and commitment of a deacon, and the appointment of a diaconal Co-President is an affirmation by the Church of that ministry. As a Co-President he or she would primarily be a representative of the Conference, not just of the Methodist Diaconal Order, and it would be important to ensure that that is recognised. The diaconal Co-President would share in all the duties...and would have the opportunity, in the Conference and throughout the year, to advocate to the circuits the value of diaconal ministry, so as to enhance awareness of the importance and possibilities of such ministry and to encourage local churches and individual members to see their own lives and ministries in diaconal terms. She or he should be available as a pastor, especially to deacons, and to have time for those who seek help and advice.*
- 10.2 *The distinctiveness however of diaconal ministry needs to be recognised. Although, like presbyters, deacons are ordained to their ministry, the two ministries are different. Deacons, like many lay people, exercise pastoral care, but they are ordained to a ministry of witness and service and not to a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility, and they preach only if authorised to do so as local preachers. For these reasons we do not believe that deacons should occupy the lead role in the Presidency, aspects of which they would not be authorised by their ordination to perform.*
- 10.4 *Diaconal appointments are very diverse in nature and care is taken to ensure that charisms and skills of individual deacons are matched to the particular needs of the appointment a circuit has identified as specifically diaconal. As a result, it is not an easy matter to offer the kind of support that could be expected from a President's Assistant in the case of a presbyter, should the deacon involved be appointed as Co-President. For this reason as well as for the reason advocated in 7.10, we do not recommend that the office should be full time, but should be held alongside either a diaconal station if a deacon was in active circuit ministry, or retirement if a deacon was a supernumerary, thus allowing the deacon to remain rooted in circuit life whilst at the same time raising the profile of diaconal ministry.*
- 10.5 *It was noted that a possible objection might be brought against the appointment of a diaconal Co-President that it would place an unbearable strain on the relatively small membership of the Diaconal Order. However, the Order is growing consistently year on year and in particular the numbers of deacons in active circuit appointments are considerably greater than its supernumerary membership, and of those members who are supernumerary, many are still very active in their local circuits. Given the proposal that the diaconal Co-President becomes a part-time role, combined with the fact that there is no bar on re-*

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election to the office it was felt that numerical size of the Order would not present any real difficulties.

Sharing of responsibilities

There are over a hundred references to the President in Standing Orders and most refer to formal duties which could be shared by other members of the Presidency. The report recommends however three exceptions to this: (a) the power of the President in cases of extreme emergency to call an extra meeting of the Conference during the year; (b) responsibilities related to the exclusive authority of the Ministerial Session of the Conference over ministerial (presbyteral) discipline on appeal and the oversight of ministerial students and probationers; and (c) presiding at the Conference Diaconal Committee. These should be reserved to the President.

C. Term of Office: three years or one year

(c/f Resolution 8.6 and 8.8 in the full report, quoted below)

See Section D below for the length of office for the alternative of a two person Presidency.

In sections 4.1-4.4 the report addresses the often-repeated calls for stronger and more coherent leadership in the Connexion, and points out that the office of General Secretary was created to meet this need. In reply to the argument that a longer term of office for the President would lead to him or her becoming better known in the public media, the report says:

In the view of the working-party this aspiration is misplaced and misunderstands the nature of modern news reporting. Professionals who work in the media endorse the experience of those in connexional office over many years: the media have their own criteria for what is newsworthy. They will take notice when we have something to say which they judge worth reporting and will then report it regardless of who says it on our behalf. What is required is a message relevant to public concerns, effectively and concisely expressed. We no longer live in the days when the churches were a powerful voice in British politics. We can be grateful for the influence that can still be exercised by the churches, including the Methodist Church, but we should not succumb to envy if one or other of our partner churches succeeds in being heard in the public arena expressing views we all in fact share. We need as churches to speak for one another. We do not believe it to be the case that if we had a five-year President the media would take more notice, although clearly a longer term would enable the Methodist people to become more familiar with the identity of the person holding the office [section 5.4].

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Nevertheless the report accepts that there remains a case for a longer term of office, and offers two alternatives: a three-year Presidency with the election of one member in rotation each year, or a one-year Presidency with an election of all three annually.

In addressing this question we have been governed by two convictions:

- 12.1 *The first is that the President and Co-Presidents should all serve for the same length of time. It would undercut the emphasis on shared ministry if one member had an extended term while the others were annual and would create an imbalance in relationships.*
- 12.2 *The second conviction is that a term of five years is too long. It needs to be remembered that at present a President or Vice-President, although in office for only one year, effectively serves for three, one year as designate, when plans for the year of office are being developed and induction involves attendance at a number of committees, and one as 'Ex-', when experience gained is drawn upon in committees and elsewhere and some formal duties are carried out. With a five-year term of office this would mean seven years overall. It is doubtful if any lay person, unless retired, would be free to serve for so long. For the presbyter concerned a five-year Presidency would inevitably become a station, requiring stipend and manse. For a deacon in the active work, serving part-time, a shared appointment would be required, but, as noted above, each such appointment in different ways is specialised, and finding a second person would be difficult, if not impossible.*
- 12.3 *Moreover there is a danger that the distinction we have sought to draw between presidential leadership and that of the General Secretary would become blurred. It is the General Secretary upon whom rests the responsibility for developing and co-ordinating the Church's shared vision. The leadership to be expected of the President and Co-Presidents has a different emphasis. It is already evident that this distinction is not everywhere appreciated (although we believe it will become clearer as the arrangements adopted by the 2007 Conference continue to be implemented). Many of those calling for a five-year President may not have realised that what they are essentially asking for is already provided in the office of General Secretary.*
- 12.4 *Appointing officers for such an extended period is bound to have an effect in time on the process of appointment. It is highly likely that an interview process would be introduced, and the element of choice left to Conference members would be reduced. Appointment of the Presidency would become assimilated to the process for the appointment of District Chairs and senior members of the Connexional Team.*

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The report expresses no preference but invites the Conference to choose. The arguments are set out as follows:

Three-year Presidency

The report recommends that if the three-year option is adopted, one member should be elected in turn each year, thus bringing fresh insights and vigour to the team. It would avoid a total break in continuity every three years, would enable Conference members to consider issues of complementarity and inclusiveness when electing persons to the Presidency, and would give space for just one keynote address each year.

13.3 *The advantages of a three-year Presidency include the following:*

- 13.3.1 *There would be greater continuity in the leadership offered. Experience gained in the first year could be built upon and shared in the following two. There would not be a total change of personnel each year. At present there is little or no opportunity for an ex-President or ex-Vice-President to make use of the experience they have gained in office.*
- 13.3.2 *There would be greater opportunity for collaboration and mutual understanding to develop between the members of the Presidency and the General Secretary.*
- 13.3.3 *District visits and similar events could be spread over the three years, allowing greater space for reflection upon the Church's calling and greater opportunity for engagement with outside bodies. There is evidence that the involvement of senior representative figures in such outside contacts is welcome support for the staff members assigned to such work.*
- 13.3.4 *There is evidence that some lay Co-Presidents might find it easier to set aside time for commitments spread over three years than coping with an intensive commitment over one year.*
- 13.3.5 *Three years would enable stronger ecumenical and other contacts to be built up.*
- 13.3.6 *A three-year term would respond to the frequent calls for a longer term of office for the President.*

One-year Presidency

- 14.1 *The disadvantages of three years and arguments in favour of one year include the following:*

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- 14.2 *While at present districts and circuits are able to make arrangements for one year to cover the work the President or Vice-President does, this would be much more difficult over three years, even with the reduced work load envisaged for members of the Presidency. The likelihood is that over time the need would be felt for a separate station to be provided both for the presbyter and for the deacon, with consequent stipend and manse costs. They would thus come to be regarded as full-time appointments, and each would then feel obliged, and be expected, to fill their time. They would no longer be 'rooted' in the way advocated in 7.10 above. The lay Co-President would in most cases be unable to match that time commitment, and employment legislation alone would rule out the possibility of a salaried appointment, because security of tenure would be involved. The dynamics of relationships within the Presidency would be changed for the worse, making the lay partner an adjunct to the others.*
- 14.3 *The point made in the previous paragraph is reinforced by the experience of many ex-Presidents who find that at the end of the year of office it is difficult to return to normal duties and pick up the threads, as things have inevitably moved on. The difficulty would be greater over three years and would apply equally to the Co-Presidents.*
- 14.4 *While, as noted in 13.3.4, some recent Vice-Presidents have indicated that might have found a three-year commitment easier to manage, others have stated clearly that they could not sustain a commitment for longer than one year in combination with their regular employment. It would be a severe loss to the Church if able candidates were prevented from standing because of the extended time demand.*
- 14.5 *The danger noted in 12.3 of the distinction between the leadership of the Presidency and that of the General Secretary becoming blurred over five years also exists over a three-year term.*
- 14.6 *Although we recommend below that the Presidency should be elected by the Conference, more or less as at present, there might well be a tendency over time with a three-year Presidency to move to an appointment process with interview, thereby removing the effective choice from the Conference.*
- 14.7 *In the past the Conference has often elected a President or Vice-President for their particular emphasis, style or theological position, so that over a period of years the diversity of Methodism is honoured and each emphasis can be balanced or complemented by an alternative in another year. With a three-year term of office the Conference might be less willing to do this, so that President and Co-Presidents would regularly represent a 'safer', more 'middle-of-the-road' position.*

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- 14.8 *The year of office under present arrangements, with its combination of travel, high profile events and committee work, can be very tiring. Would a three-year term be too exhausting or would it lighten the load?*
- 14.9 *Since the death of John Wesley in 1791 Methodism has held the conviction, shared by other Free Churches and the Church of Scotland, that the office of President (and Vice-President) should not be held for long periods by any one individual, underlining the belief that oversight in the Church should rest collectively in the Conference.*

D. An Alternative: A two person Presidency for one or two years

At its conclusion the report takes account of opposition expressed to the proposal of a three-person Presidency, partly on the grounds that it reduces lay participation from a half to a third, thereby giving greater prominence to the role of the ordained. On advice from the Methodist Council the report therefore offers the alternative of a two-person Presidency, comprising a presbyteral President and a Co-President who may be, as is now the case with the Vice-President, either diaconal or lay. Connected with this is the alternative of a one-year term of office, or a longer term, which, after weighing the alternatives of three years (which would leave one year in three without an election) or four years (which would extend the term too far) it recommends should be two years.

It must be clear however, that a decision for a two-person, one-year Presidency would not be a decision for the status quo, but for a more fully collaborative style.

E. Costs

The report concludes with an indication of the costs related to each option. In summary these are:

Current arrangements (expenses and support, including President-Designate and Vice-President-Designate) £35k

or with a President's Assistant £62k
(an Assistant for a diaconal Vice-President as well would raise the figure to £89k)

3-person Presidency	for one year	£72-104k
	for 3 years	£62-104k
2-person Presidency	for one year	£62-94k
	for 2 years	£57-99k

If the Presidency became a full-time 'separated' appointment there would in addition be annual manse costs of £10-20k and one-off capital costs of £450-900k

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference referred resolutions 8/3, 8/4, 8/6, 8/7, 8/8 in the full report to the Synods and Youth Assembly for consideration and report to the Conference of 2011. These are set out below, and the Synods and Youth Assembly are asked to deal with them as follows:

1. 8/3 and 8/4 are alternatives, as are 8/6, 8/7, and 8/8.
 2. If 8/3 is carried, 8/6 should be voted on. If 8/6 is not carried, 8/8 should be voted on.
 3. If 8/3 is not carried, 8/4 should be voted on, followed by 8/7. If 8/7 is not carried, 8/8 should be voted on.
- 8/3 *The Conference adopts the recommendation that the current offices of President and Vice-President be replaced by a Presidency as set out in section 7 of the report, consisting of a presbyteral President, a lay Co-President and a diaconal Co-President.*
- 8/4 *The Conference resolves that the current offices of President and Vice-President be replaced by a Presidency as set out in section 7 of the report, but consisting of a presbyteral President and a Co-President who may be either a lay person or a deacon.*
- 8/6 *The Conference resolves that each member of the Presidency shall hold office for three years, with one member being elected each year.*
- 8/7 *The Conference resolves that each member of the Presidency shall hold office for two years, with one member being elected each year.*
- 8/8 *The Conference resolves that the members of the Presidency shall each hold office for one year.*

It is requested that the votes, for and against, each resolution be recorded and reported to the Revd. Kenneth Howcroft at Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Road London NW1 5JR asc@methodistchurch.org.uk by the end of November 2010. In the light of these responses the Working Party will prepare a further report to the Conference of 2011.

The **Methodist** Church 

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