

## **THE METHODIST CHURCH OF GREAT BRITAIN (for the Interfaith Legal Advisers Network)**

The Methodist Church of Great Britain is part of a worldwide family of Methodist Churches.

The Methodist Church has local churches in England, Scotland, Wales, Shetland, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, Malta and Gibraltar. Most local churches are grouped together into Circuits (to which ministers are appointed). Circuits are formed into Districts. There are just over 30 'home Districts' and one remaining 'overseas' District, The Gambia, which is currently working towards autonomy (hopefully on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2009).

The governing body of the Methodist Church is The Conference, which meets annually. A President (presbyter) and Vice-President (lay person or deacon) of the Conference are elected and serve for one year.

Most Methodist property is held under Model Trusts, with property vested in a custodian trustee (the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes and equivalent bodies in the Channel Island and Isle of Man). Managing trustee responsibilities are exercised connexionally (i.e. for the MCGB as a whole) by the Methodist Council; Districts managing trustees are appointed by District Synods to be responsible for District property; Circuit Meetings act as managing trustees for Circuit property and Church Councils for local church property.

The governing documents of the Methodist Church are contained in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church (CPD), volumes 1 and 2. Volume 1 contains the principal Act, the Methodist Church Act 1976, other statutes (the Methodist Church Act 1939 and the Methodist Church Funds Act 1960) and historic texts. Volume 2, published annually, contains the Deed of Union, the Model Trusts, Standing Orders (amended annually by the Conference) and other material, mainly in the form of Guidance.

The Constitutional Practice and Discipline contains sections dealing with governance at every level of Church life, doctrinal standards (in the Deed of Union), the status, stationing and terms of service of ministers, property and most other matters relating to the life and work of the Methodist Church. There is little concerning ritual, but the Conference authorises the publication of hymn and worship books.

Section 02 of Standing Orders sets out the complaints and discipline procedures which apply to ministers, office holders and members of the Church.

The purpose of the Church's internal rules is mainly to regulate what makes us Methodist, and 'how we do things round here' (though much of the latter is governed by custom as much as written rules. Having the rules available in a rule book makes them available to all and is seen as a matter of justice. Our rules apply to us all. They reflect our theology and, arguably, our spirituality.

Regarding any benefits or challenges provided by civil law, like other churches the Methodist Church is currently working on the implications of Charity Law Reform in

the different jurisdictions in which we are located. Employment status of ministers is an area where there seems to be change, and we want to ensure that our theology and ecclesiology are respected and understood.

A matter of current concern to us is that we appear not to be able to allow our premises to be used for any purposes including worship by people of other faiths. We have sought counsel's opinion twice, and the fact that the first of our charitable purposes under the 1976 Methodist Church Act is 'the advancement of the Christian faith in accordance with the doctrinal standards and the discipline of the Methodist Church' is interpreted as preventing us move forward on this issue – even though the same legislation makes clear that the Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

David Gamble  
9<sup>th</sup> March 2008.