

THE COVENANT COUNCIL REPORT 2026

The Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland

MEMBERSHIP AND ATTENDANCE

Church of Ireland

Rt Rev Michael Burrows, Bishop of Tuam, Limerick and Killaloe (Co-Chair) (2/2)

Ms Elva Byrne (0/2)

Rev Canon Dr Maurice Elliott (0/2)

Ven Barry Forde (1/2)

Rev Clare Kakuru (0/2)

Rev Martin Steele (Appointed May 2025) (0/2)

Methodist Church in Ireland

Rev Canon Dr John Alderdice (Co-Chair)

Mr Colin Burrows

Rev Andrew Dougherty

Canon Gillian Kingston

Rev Canon Dr Janet Unsworth

Rev Dr Sahr Yambasu

In Attendance

Dr Nicole Gallagher (Synod Officer)

Mr Linto John (Synod Support Officer)

Executive Summary

The Covenant Council continues its work in advocating for the furtherance of the Covenant agreed between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland. We welcome the opportunity to gather in a residential format yearly as well as to hold other one-day meetings as helpful to the business before us.

Areas of Current Discussion

As reported over the past couple of years, the current work of the Council is focused on the various practicalities, opportunities and obstacles faced by both the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland in the realisation of interchangeability of ministry between the two denominations.

The principal areas of discussion continue to be:

- Understandings of Ministry and Episcopate within each denomination and the implications of these for those who move to serve in the other denomination
- Covenant Partnerships and Local Expressions of Cooperation
- The nature of co-operation and collaboration at local and Diocesan/District level as well as at a national level (Chaplaincy in further and higher education, prisons and healthcare, formation in ministry, and lay readers/local preachers)
- Pioneer Ministry
- Safeguarding policies and interchangeability
- Clarifying how to enable interchangeability in a range of contexts, including both occasional and long-term exercises of ministry across traditions.
- Looking ahead to the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Covenant in September 2027 and the production of a renewed common declaration to mark this occasion.

Safeguarding Protocols

Safeguarding within the context of interchangeability has been one of the most discussed topics by the Council over the past year. In the context of Covenant Churches, safeguarding must be a foundational and clearly agreed aspect of the partnership. When a Covenant Church is created, a written agreement should be established that sets out which denomination's safeguarding policy will be followed, including training requirements, recruitment standards, and all associated procedures and how those policies will be implemented in practice during transition and ongoing ministry. The Council is currently liaising with the Safeguarding Officers in both denominations in regard to arrangements for Covenant Churches and to cover both clergy and those in authorized lay ministries who move from one denomination to the other, either on a full time or occasional basis.

Current and Future Projects

Covenant Council is greatly encouraged by the Local Covenant Partnership at Christ Church Primacy, Bangor. This has provided an opportunity to update the regulatory framework for Covenant Partnerships, ensuring these will fulfil all ecclesiastical requirements of both denominations and be compliant with the charity regulator. We anticipate that this will form a precedent enabling current and future local covenant partnerships to thrive in common life and ministry.

Following on from the success of the pilot scheme that took place in the Dublin area concerning the interchangeability of accredited local preachers from the Methodist Church and diocesan lay readers from the Church of Ireland, discussions continue on holding a similar scheme in a more rural setting.

A revision of the *Guidelines to the Journey* booklet is still taking place. This update will be an editorial update of the previous booklet but will also include some new material. It is envisaged that this new booklet will be available online in PDF format and will be a 'living document' that can be revised and updated as the need arises.

The Council also plans to issue a guidance document within the next year outlining the practicalities of interchangeability for clerics. Substantial work has already been undertaken, and it envisaged that this would include details of the processes to be used in moving from one polity to the other, including a clear, separate section on safeguarding. One of the challenges in compiling such a process document has been to reconcile the need to render canonical obedience to a diocesan bishop and be under his / her jurisdiction with the fact that being in full connexion with the Methodist Conference is so much a part of a Methodist minister's spiritual DNA. Last year the Methodist Church agreed that when a Methodist minister takes up a Church of Ireland post, their full connexion would be 'in abeyance' for so long as they remained in that post. The Council welcomes this decision and is of the mind that this particular challenge in our creative relationships has now been addressed, reconciling the issue of a minister remaining in full connexion (and, thus, not jeopardising their spiritual identity) while being under the sole jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop.

Now that interchangeability is firmly embedded into the Constitution of the Church of Ireland, work continues on its inclusion within the Manual of Laws of the Methodist Church which will form part of a wider revision. Updates on this will come in due course.

Covenant Council is looking forward to marking the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Covenant in September 2027. It is our hope to renew the Covenant with aspirations to shape our common life and mission that we might grow together so that unity might be fully realised.

Membership

The Council is delighted that Rev Canon Dr Janet Unsworth has been appointed as President of the Methodist Church in Ireland for the upcoming year and the Council sends its prayerful good wishes to her as she undertakes this new role and in her appointment to the Anglican-Methodist International Coordinating

Committee (AMICC). Dr Unsworth has served as secretary to the Council for the past number of years until this February and the Council is grateful to the staff members of the General Synod department for their continuing secretarial support.

Last year's report noted that a number of members have been on the Council since its inception. A rolling plan was, therefore, put in place to allow some of the longer-serving members to step down over the course of the next two to three years. The first Church of Ireland member to step down last summer was the Dean of Cork, the Very Rev Nigel Dunne. The Council wishes to pay a sincere and heartfelt tribute to Dean Dunne for his tireless work on the Council and for being a key figure in getting Interchangeability 'over the line'. Rev Martin Steele was elected as a Council member at last year's General Synod to fill the vacancy that occurred on the resignation of Dean Dunne. It is planned that a couple of other long-serving members will be afforded the opportunity to step down from the Council in the coming years, once suitable alternative members can be found. From the Methodist side of the Council, Rev Canon Dr Heather Morris resigned as Co-Chair and this position has now been filled by Rev Canon Dr John Alderdice. The thanks of the Council goes to Rev Canon Dr Morris for all her work during her tenure as Co-Chair and the members look forward to working with Rev Canon Dr Alderdice and another new Methodist member, Mr Colin Burrows, over the coming years.