

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

Background

1. As part of the Team Focus process all areas of the work of the Connexional Team were evaluated through ground clearing projects. To facilitate this a working group was established to review the ecumenical relationships of the Methodist Church. The group consisted of: The Revds Gareth Powell (Chair), Alan Ashton, Anne Brown, Jacqui Horton, Peter Sulston, Liz Smith, Andrew Wood, Ms Emily Young, Dr Chris Sissons (Resource person), Mr Trevor Durston (Facilitator).
2. Their work concluded with a 22 page report covering what had been achieved and making suggestions about where further work needed to be undertaken. The report was presented to the Methodist Council in April 2008 and included the following vision statement:

In response to God's all-inclusive love the Methodist Church holds a vision of ecumenical commitment which seeks to reflect:

- ∞ *God's ongoing creativity;*
- ∞ *God's passion for justice revealed in the love of Christ;*
- ∞ *God's Spirit moving as catalyst in the world and the church.*

The 1996 *Statement of Purpose, Our Calling and Priorities for the Methodist Church* express a vision of Methodist identity and discipleship and a commitment to working in partnership – 'building partnerships with other churches and other groups who share

some of our mission aims' (*Statement of Purpose*), 'with others wherever possible' (*Priorities*).

3. The report to the Council also included a commentary on this statement along with guidelines as to how it could be realised. It established that any refreshed and renewed ecumenical vision, or vision of ecumenical work, must take account of various aspects of our present context. An extract from the report can be found at Appendix 2 to indicate some of the thinking which underpins the Methodist Church's ecumenical commitment.
4. A workshop was then organised at the 2008 Conference to take this discussion forward. Attended by about 100 people, it explored the priorities for ecumenical involvement in the coming years; what Methodists should be prepared to give up for the sake of the unity of the Church; and what Methodists should be prepared to do differently in order to realise the breadth of our common life.
5. Some of the themes that emerged from this workshop were as follows.
 - ∞ Local ecumenism needs to be focused on mission.
 - ∞ The Methodist Church must accept that local partnerships with an increasingly diverse range of churches will be messy and that there needs to be a great deal of flexibility by all to make these partnerships work.
 - ∞ Rigid structures and processes

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

may need to be challenged (eg the Circuit Plan, and LEP arrangements).

- ∞ Prayer is the foundation for growth and mission and needs to be undertaken in partnership with other local congregations.
 - ∞ Unnecessary bureaucracy and other barriers need to be removed.
 - ∞ The Covenant relationship with the Church of England Church needs to be worked out more at local level.
 - ∞ Those things which are distinctive to Methodists need to be held dear when engaging in partnerships and offered to enhance the richness of local ecumenical work.
6. Following the 2008 Conference a new working group was formed to continue to work with the outcomes of the workshop and the work of the ground clearing project. The membership of the group was; Christine Elliott, (chair), Mrs Elaine Robinson, (convenor), Mr Trevor Durston, The Revds Alan Ashton, Carole Challis, Jacqui Horton, Kenneth Howcroft, Colin Smith, Mark Wakelin. This group presented an interim position statement to the Methodist Council in February 2009 (see Appendix 1 below).
7. Further work led to a further report being presented to the Council in May 2009. The Council commended the following vision statement for ecumenical work. It is hoped that this

vision statement (together with the position statement and the extract from the report to the Methodist Council in 2008) will be used by Local Churches and Circuits when considering new ventures in mission.

Vision Statement

Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century

The Methodist Church affirms its commitment to its covenant relationship with the Church of England and Churches in Wales, and beyond that to work with ecumenical partners wherever possible.

Living in Ecumenical Partnership: Practical Steps

In all that it does, the Methodist Church will commit itself whenever possible to:

- ∞ **Worshipping with other Christians**
We will seek opportunities to pray and worship with people from other Churches regularly and invite them to pray and worship with us, looking to develop more opportunities for ecumenical expressions of worship and prayer.
- ∞ **Learning and Caring with other Christians**
We will seek opportunities to learn with other Christians about our common faith and heritage to support our growth

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

as Christians, through mutual support and care.

∞ **Serving with other Christians**

We will seek opportunities to work in partnership with other denominations to be good neighbours to those in need and to challenge injustice, upholding the integrity of creation.

∞ **Evangelism with other Christians**

We will seek opportunities to join with other Christians in sharing the Good News of the Gospel and to make more followers of Jesus Christ through together bearing witness to the unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Living in Ecumenical Partnership: *Supporting one Another*

We will support our ecumenical partners in our common mission by:

- ∞ working and campaigning with other Christians to remove stumbling blocks which currently inhibit ecumenical partnerships;
- ∞ participating in ministries that extend beyond the boundaries

and possibilities of any single church;

- ∞ support in all ways possible those in united and uniting churches, and ecumenical projects;
- ∞ supporting our ecumenical partners in their needs and struggles, celebrating their hopes and joy.

Living in Ecumenical Partnership: *Celebrating our Unique Identity*

Successful ecumenical working does not ignore the differences between Christians and between Christian denominations. Its success comes when we embody a Christian love and discipleship that instills the desire to live a common life that welcomes and embraces difference as enrichment and possibility.

Recognising this, we will nurture our own Methodist identity within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We will offer the distinctive charisms of Methodism as a gift to the whole Church and in turn cherish the distinctive charisms of other Christian traditions.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

45/1. The Conference received the Report.

45/2. The Conference directed the Methodist Council to ensure that the Vision Statement was made available to Circuits and Local Churches to encourage and help them to share resources for worship and mission as they seek to fulfil the priority for the Methodist Church to work ecumenically wherever possible.

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

Appendix 1

POSITION STATEMENT:

"I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23)

In seeking to be faithful to Christ's prayer we work to be united in witness and mission to further God's kingdom.

The *1996 Statement of Purpose, Our Calling and Priorities for the Methodist Church* express a vision of Methodist identity and discipleship and a commitment to working in partnership – 'building partnerships with other churches and other groups who share some of our mission aims' (*Statement of Purpose*), 'with others wherever possible' (*Priorities*).

Our Ecumenical Position

The Methodist Church in Britain, in heritage, practice and persuasion, is a mission-orientated, outward-looking movement. It seeks to continue to strengthen and enrich its pilgrimage of faith and witness.

We do not make this pilgrimage alone. We cherish our place within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church as part of the worldwide body of Jesus Christ. We believe that we are called with the whole Church to share in God's mission of caring for the world, with a passion for justice and peace.

The Methodist Church already shares its pilgrimage with a number of other churches, especially through the Covenant relationship with the Church of England, but also through local ecumenical agreements and international accords. We rejoice in holding continued conversations with many of the major denominations, both nationally and also internationally.

Therefore, we pledge ourselves to work ecumenically with our traditional church partners and with new pilgrim partners, with all that would seek to follow Christ and proclaim his Good News throughout our nation and beyond. We acknowledge that we must journey together in the power of the Spirit, proclaiming God's gracious love until all of creation is transformed into the fullness of what God would have it be.

We believe that we are called to work towards unity in mission. We will seek to talk and act, wherever possible, with our partners on matters of faith, order, life and witness, joining in common discipleship and taking every opportunity to share in worship, prayer and fellowship.

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

What part can we play in embodying this?

By what we do and say, by who we are, we embrace in joy and hope Christ's promise of life in all its fullness. We become a living expression of that promise for the rest of the world. Through the body of Christ, we share together in the worship, prayer, work and mission of the whole Church of Christ.

How will we do this?

We will engage wholeheartedly with other Christians wherever and whenever we can, in large things and small, through conversation, hospitality, worship, and mission, guided by the creative imagination of God's transforming Spirit.

Appendix 2

Extract From a Report to The Methodist Council April 2008

A recognition of where we have come from.

We begin with the nature of the gospel as the Methodist Church has received it, paying particular attention to the biblical call to holiness as it requires us to be one in Christ. Based upon this we continually endeavour to grow in grace and to be faithful in prayer and worship.

Our historic ecumenical stance.

In its broadest sense this is contained within the classical Methodist self-understanding clearly set out in Clause 4 of the Deed of Union:

'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the body of Christ.'

This was developed further in the 1999 Conference Statement on the Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice, *Called to Love and Praise*. So, for example, there is reflection on unity as one of the marks of the Church:

The Church is one because God is one. This is not simply an aspiration, but a God-given reality. The Church, however, reflects the oneness of God most fully when its search for unity with God goes hand in hand with the search for and realization of unity within its own life.

The consistency with which the Methodist Church has responded to the ecumenical question.

The particular circumstances have kept changing since the response to Archbishop Fisher's invitation in 1946 to the Free Churches to take episcopacy into their system. Yet the desire to work with others has remained constant whether the question has been put to the Methodist Church, or the Methodist Church has itself raised it. So there is an ecumenical presumption equally in approving the constitution for a new Local Ecumenical Partnership or encouraging a fresh expression of church.

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

The variety of commitments made along the way which we cannot lightly revoke. These range from the general commitment to seek the visible unity of the Church to the more particular; for example a multilateral covenant in Wales, a bilateral covenant in England, a pastoral strategy with the United Reformed Church, or a readiness to explore the possibilities for taking the historic episcopate into our polity.

These points are clearly stated in a variety of reports adopted or received by the Conference e.g. *Episkope and Episcopacy* (1999) and *Towards an Ecumenical Strategy* (2001); and, most notably, in *Called to Love and Praise* (1999). In addition to this there exists a corpus of material that represents the breadth of Methodist ecumenical commitment and engagement. Such statements and responses often provide a rich seam not simply for the study of ecumenical hermeneutics, but for clarifying particular positions and the way in which Methodism has either sustained a view or sought to refine a view, e.g. the response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), and more recently, responses to reports of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Dialogue.

The realities of the present ecumenical situation include taking note of the wide variety of existing ecumenical structures. The present ways of working developed at a time when the profile of inter-church relationships in Britain was significantly different. There was a clear recognition that there were three main strands of church life: Anglican, Free Church and Roman Catholic (see, for example, the provision for consultation with the Churches about religious education in schools enshrined in the 1944 Education Act for England and Wales).

The realisation that God may call us to work and express our identity in new ways is crucial to any Christian community. It is particularly important for a church such as the Methodist Church which began life as a religious movement that believed it had been raised up by God to do a new thing.

Because of the worldwide movement of peoples there are now many Christians in Britain whose Christian nurture and formation was in churches rooted in other parts of the world. Orthodox Christians from various parts of Europe and Asia and independent, evangelical and charismatic churches, many of them African-instituted, are a significant feature of British church life.

Globally there has been a radical shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world from the North to the South, from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and Latin America. This shift has begun to be reflected in the awareness of the World Council of Churches. An initiative that began at the 1998 WCC Assembly in Harare culminated in the first meeting of a Global Christian Forum in Kenya in 2007. That gathering brought together representatives of most of the major streams of Christian tradition from around the world (although inevitably Christians from a number of countries eg China and Myanmar

45. Our Ecumenical Calling: Making a difference together in the twenty-first century.

were absent for political reasons and the most truly independent churches were almost certainly under-represented).

What vision and structures will enable that 'big picture' of what it is to be part of the one worldwide Church of Jesus Christ to be developed, and for contemporary British Methodism to be open to the prompting of the Spirit? In this changed context that is the compelling question.