

Inter Faith

Contact Name and Details	Doug Swanney, Connexional Secretary, swanneyd@methodistchurch.org.uk ,
Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Decision
Draft Resolution	44/1. The Council receives the report. 44/2. The Council directs the Connexional Team to undertake further based on the priorities identified through the discussion at the Council.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	A report updating the Council on the progress made with Notice of Motion 210.
Main Points	In responding to Notice of Motion 210 this paper will explore: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Strengthening the network of advocates and practitioners B. Practitioners C. Learning from our experience
Consultations	Touchstone, Queen's Foundation, District Chair for West Yorkshire, Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group and Inter Faith Officers in partner denominations and the ecumenical instruments.

Summary of Impact

Financial	£15,000 Connexional Grants Committee funding (Networking Events) was put in place and the CGC have graciously enabled us to make best use of that money in the months to come. There is a £15,000 Inter Faith budget contained in the budget proposals.
Personnel	n/a
Wider Connexional	n/a
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Work has been ongoing by the Free Churches Group to consider what an Inter Faith Desk Officer post might undertake. We are committed to those conversations as they continue.

Inter Faith

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to report to the Council on the progress made with Notice of Motion 210 from the 2013 Conference.

Notice of Motion 210 – Inter Faith Policy

In view of the multi-faith context in which we are called to be disciples, and the growth of racist politics targeted at various faith groups, the Conference affirms the work of Touchstone in Bradford, as a centre of excellence in faith to faith relations.

Following the non-renewal of Connexional grant funding to Touchstone and the limited progress made on Inter Faith Policy through the Review Group and the Methodist Council, the Conference:

- (a) *directs the Council urgently to develop an Inter Faith policy and strategy for the Methodist Church using the expertise of its centres at Touchstone, at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham and in relation to the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network;*
- (b) *allocates £70,000 interim funding to allow the work of Touchstone to continue for a limited period of one year, in order that vital work is not lost as alternative ways of working are developed, and so that the resource continues to be available to the Connexion as it develops an Inter Faith policy.*

The Conference adopted the Motion.

Background

2. The importance of Inter Faith relations to the Methodist Church has been stressed over the years through a number of reports to the Conference, statements and resources. These are what form our guidelines for Inter Faith work. Some of these are worth noting at the outset:
3. In 1994 the Conference endorsed eight Principles for Dialogue and Evangelism which had been contained as part of the Code of Conduct of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. These were then offered to the Methodist people and to local church, circuit, district and connexional officers, in the hope that they would be adopted and implemented in appropriate ways.

These principles are:

- i. Our multi ethnic society is a gift from God, an expression of the sort of society God wants us to establish, within which all human beings can flourish.
- ii. Meeting with people of other faiths is essential for building relationships of trust through mutual understanding.
- iii. Opportunity must be given to Methodists to learn about the beliefs and practices of people of other faiths.
- iv. Methodists engaged in working among people of other faiths should be encouraged in their work, and assured of the Methodist Church's warm support for what they do.

- v. The faiths of humankind are diverse and do not all aim at the same goals.
 - vi. Methodists must be encouraged to share the stories of their faith.
 - vii. The story of Jesus is the Church's greatest gift, to explore and to share. It is usually Jesus, not the churches, who fascinate others.
 - viii. Methodists need to affirm a variety of vocations within the body of Christ, which affect relationships with people of other faiths.
4. In the 1999 Methodist Conference statement: 'Called to Love and Praise' it further states in point 3.2.1; "In this mission, the Church's vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom. This involves both evangelism and social action, and, in our day especially, engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths".
 5. In response to Memorial 63 of 2001 there was a further report 2004 Inter-Faith Relations: Exploring Principles and Practice Guidelines for the Methodist People on the theology and practice of relationships with people and communities of other faiths.
 6. Included in its response the Conference affirmed that 'these [eight principles] remain relevant and important'. The Conference received the Report and commended 'Faith Meeting Faith' to Districts, Circuits, local churches and individuals and groups within them as a valuable resource in continuing exploration of the theology and practice of inter faith relations.
 7. 'Faith Meeting Faith' consists of questions with different possible responses and ways forward. Its overall aim is to provoke thought, discussion and action, recognising that Christians come to inter faith relations with different experiences and different approaches. From January 2010 it has been available in pdf format on the Inter Faith Relations pages of the Methodist Church website. It is also available in printed format.

Since the 2013 Conference

8. Following the Conference, and with the cessation of the Inter Faith Officer post, the work relating to Inter Faith has fallen to the Connexional Secretary to provide a connecting point. Due to the willingness of volunteers, those in other roles and with support from ecumenical partners, progress continues in building networks, developing new relationships with partners and encouraging the wider Connexional Team to think about our multi-faith context. It should be noted at the outset that much of the developmental thinking for the way ahead was contained within the work of the Review Group which reported to the Council in 2013. Although the Council did not approve the staffing suggested in that paper, much else of what was suggested has been the backbone of recent work. Following the work this year it is still believed that a dedicated post for this area of work is not required.
9. The key continuing work has been the ongoing work of the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group. This group, which consists mainly of local practitioners and meets twice a year, has gone through many different forms of being and has most recently (at least from the Methodist perspective) needed to redefine itself in the absence of a Connexional Team post to lead on this work. The group has entered into this with willingness and diligence. Work continues to ensure that the group plays a central role in the resourcing of networks and advising the Church where appropriate. We note with thanks their contribution and that of our partners from the URC.

10. Conversations concerning an ecumenical partnership to provide Inter Faith support continue with the Free Churches Group. Plans for a Free Churches Inter Faith Post are currently unfolding and we remain committed to those conversations. The Methodist Church would need to be sure that any new post met the needs of our constituency and added to the range of expertise that already exists.

Inter Faith Networking Events

11. Following the awarding of a Connexional Grants Committee (GCG) grant of £15,000 for a one-off Networking event, permission has been given that this money can be used over a longer period of time and for more than one event. This has given more flexibility and time to ensure that resources are being used in the most appropriate and effective way.
12. The aspiration has been to have at least two smaller Methodist Networking Day Events this Connexional Year (2013-14). One has already taken place on 11 December 2013 and was well attended by Methodist people from around the Connexion (further details in paragraph 15 below) and another is envisaged for the spring of this year hopefully under the leadership of the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group.
13. The purpose of these smaller events is to bring people together before considering what other activities or support needs to happen. While remaining committed to having larger events with other partners, it was proposed to the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group, when they met in February 2014, that the next Inter Faith Day Event envisaged for the spring, could be for both the Methodist and URC churches.
14. Within Churches Together in England (CTE) work is underway to host another ecumenical Inter Faith Conference in 2015 following on from a successful conference in 2013. This event is targeted at those involved in Inter Faith work on the ground and will be an excellent opportunity to ensure that Methodism is part of this ecumenical focus on Inter Faith work. We are committed to sending 20 people to this Conference in February 2015 and plan to make use of some of the grant money to ensure those willing to attend can be properly supported to do so. It is hoped that attendance at this event will be co-ordinated through the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group.

Methodist Inter Faith Networking Day Event, Wednesday 11 December 2013

15. An Inter Faith Day Event was held at Methodist Church House where various representatives from around the Connexion attended. Participants heard input from Ray Gaston, tutor at the Queen's Foundation in Birmingham, where the topic of 'Faith, Hope & Love – Discipleship in a Multi-Faith world' was discussed. A large proportion of the day was spent listening to the stories of those present as they shared the Inter Faith issues in the communities in which they live, work and worship.

Inter Faith Round Table

16. To establish a future way of working, in response to Notice of Motion 210; colleagues from the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network including the Queen's Foundation, Touchstone, the District Chair for West Yorkshire and the Connexional Secretary attended this Inter Faith Round Table meeting. This has enabled some thinking about the future to take place in the context of all that has already happened since the Conference.

17. The Round Table asked: what would shape a distinctively Methodist approach to Inter Faith engagement, recognising that it is important to be attentive to this question as the work proceeds.
18. One key view of those who met at the Round Table was that the Methodist Church did not require any new policy statements. The Methodist family has very significant Inter Faith resources and in areas and eras have been the leading Christian voice and example. We have a wealth of Wesleyan resources and statements including those listed previously on the Inter Faith pages of the Methodist website. What requires attention is how we look to the future and ensure that resources are fully accessible.

Looking to the future

A. Strengthening the network of advocates and practitioners

19. It is hoped that the network of 'advocates', commonly known as District Inter Faith Advisers (volunteers, enthusiasts and those with a keen interest in Inter Faith relations), might be strengthened. Individuals who are already involved in Inter Faith work are one of the strongest assets the Church has in this area. It is hoped to strengthen this network through regular communications and one off networking events. It is also hoped to widen the existing network of advocates to include paid Inter Faith post holders, Chaplains (particularly in Further and Higher Education), Presbyters, Deacons, the Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network and those involved in Methodist Schools.
20. It is proposed that the network of advocates could be co-ordinated by the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group. The reference group has expressed an interest both to organise and facilitate a networking day event for advocates within the Methodist Church and the URC this spring. If the spring is deemed too soon for planning purposes then it could take place by the end of this year (2014). Some of the annual budget for Inter Faith would be made available both for the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group to continue its work as well as to host networking days.
21. The Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group is currently working through the key issues identified by attendees of the Inter Faith Day in December (2013). The advocates raised key issues that exist for them as they work and worship within a multi-cultural and multi-faith context. The key issues identified relate to the need for more locally accessible resources, to equip and enthuse people at a local level and the need for further contact information within the Districts for any Inter Faith queries.
22. The Methodist URC Relations Reference Group has now agreed to take over the responsibility for the content on the Inter Faith web pages of the Methodist website; it is hoped that the key issues concerning resources and District contact information, will be resolved via these pages. There are existing resources known to both the Methodist Church and the URC that will be promoted via the website. Links to the Districts will appear within the Inter Faith pages allowing people to locate the advocates and practitioners within those Districts.
23. The Inter Faith Day Event held in December also identified other key issues for the Methodist Church to address: opposition in the Church to working with those of other Faiths, advocating for those persecuted in other countries and assisting in dialogue when international issues impact. The Methodist URC Relations Reference Group plans to look at these issues as a way of strengthening the network of advocates and practitioners.

24. These key issues outlined above are not solely for the Methodist URC Relations Reference Group but need to also be on the consciousness of the Network, Queen's, Touchstone and wider Connexional Team as they engage with Inter Faith work.
25. It is also noted that the 18-23 age stream from 3Generate 2013 are passionate about Inter Faith relations and this should be strengthened, resourced and encouraged. As the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group reviews the membership of their group, they have been inspired to think about the representation of young people on this group and are engaging with the Youth President about this.

B. Practitioners

26. Methodism is part of the CTBI Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group (IFTAG). The group's role is to advise the churches theologically on Inter Faith Engagement. This is a welcome opportunity for us to explore issues relating to Inter Faith and the Christian Churches, as it was perceived that there was a gap for those Methodists involved in Inter Faith work who wanted to delve deeper into issues in this area. It was thought that an Inter Faith Practitioners Forum, brought together by Touchstone, Queens and the Network (and in particular the Director of Scholarship, Research & Innovation), would provide a place for these discussions to happen. Further work needs to be done to examine the extra call on existing staff in these places to ensure that this can be supported properly. It is proposed that some of the annual budget could be put to use in this area.
27. The other significant area for the Church in terms of practitioners relates to how we train those who offer leadership in our Churches in relation to Inter Faith.
28. The Queen's Foundation has long recognised the importance of theology in a multi-faith context for ministers and currently employs a member of staff as Inter Faith Engagement Tutor. This has enabled the development of a systematic programme of learning, drawing upon both the multi-faith context of the West Midlands and national networks to develop formational courses in Jewish-Christian Relations and Christianity and Inter Faith Engagement. These courses are undertaken by a majority of ministers in training, both full and part time, other optional courses are also available. The Foundation has also developed links with educational institutions of other faith communities including the Al Mahdi Islamic Institute and Leo Baeck Rabbinical College and joint learning initiatives with these institutions are developing. The Foundation also runs, as part of its MA programme, a Post Graduate Certificate in Inter Faith Engagement for practitioners in the field.
29. For a number of years Cliff College has explored issues of mission within a multi faith world. BA in Theology students volunteer at an Inter Faith encounter centre in Sheffield. In their 2nd year a College course is taught in Jerusalem where issues regarding what it means to be Christian in a Jewish and Islamic culture are contextually explored, and there is a further 'Mission and Religious Pluralism' unit in the final year. The College has taught an MA in Mission (Religious Pluralism) stream for some years with Inter Faith issues resourced by a faculty member whose MPhil and PhD are both in Inter Faith engagement and a further faculty member who has been involved with historic Christian communities in the Middle East for the past twenty years.
30. The development of the training of Local Preachers and Worship Leaders will need to take account of the multi-faith dimension.
31. There is also a need for the training of the trainers in relation to Inter Faith engagement, which the Network hopes to facilitate in collaboration with Queen's and Touchstone.

32. As with everything we do, we look for partnership with others wherever possible and it is noted that there are many other organisations we can work with as we strengthen our Inter Faith networks; eg the Inter Faith Network for the UK, bilateral and multilateral national bodies such as the Council of Christians and Jews and the Christian Muslim Forum, and FbFE (Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education).

C. Learning from our experiences

33. It was evident at the Inter Faith Day Event held in December that the power of sharing stories allows us to learn from each other particularly within an Inter Faith context.
34. It should be noted that as much as we celebrate the good news stories of Inter Faith engagement currently taking place in our churches and communities; we should also be hearing the stories of struggle and challenges. All these stories will help to shape both the Church's engagement in Inter Faith relations and our learning.
35. The Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group plans to approach those who attended the Inter Faith Day Event in December and request their Inter Faith stories so that they can be shared within a new section of the Inter Faith web pages of the Methodist website.
36. As work moves forward on the strengthening of networks of Inter Faith advocates and practitioners throughout the Connexion, all Districts are encouraged to think about what they can input. The recent Inter Faith Day was well served by representation from all over our Connexion, particularly hearing about Inter Faith work in Shetland.

Conclusion

37. As work continues within the Network, Queen's, Touchstone, the Methodist URC Inter Faith Relations Reference Group and wider Connexional Team; it hoped that by strengthening the network of advocates and practitioners and learning from our own experiences within an Inter Faith context; it will allow the Church to stay in the hard places, inspire those who have no real interest in Inter Faith relations and offer something distinctively Wesleyan and Methodist from the riches of our tradition to a multi-faith and multi-cultural world.
38. Inter Faith engagement should be on the agenda for the whole Church as we undertake our discipleship in a multi-faith world.

Question for the Council

As detailed above, there are a number of initiatives resulting from this review that will place a call on the Inter Faith budget of £15k p.a.

The Council is asked, therefore, to offer direction as to where the priorities should be placed; Building the Networks, the Practitioners Forum, or the work with the Free Churches Group.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

44/1. The Council receives the report.

44/2. The Council directs the Connexional Team to undertake further work based on the priorities identified through the discussion at the Council.