

GUIDELINES FOR CHURCHES DEALING WITH EXTREMIST POLITICAL PARTIES

Introduction

The Methodist Church has urged people not to vote for candidates who promote racist policies. Now that a number of councillors from extremist parties have been elected, how should churches respond, and apply these principles to this new situation? These guidelines offer answers to some of the practical questions that churches are now facing.

Background

In February 2004, the Methodist Church stated that it:

- 1. Affirms that the Methodist Church is open to all in its worship, fellowship and service to the community. The policies and practices of those who promote racism and religious intolerance are incompatible with the Methodist Church's social witness, biblical teaching and our understanding of the love of God for all people.*
- 2. Encourages people to vote in local, national and European elections. While not endorsing any particular political party, we urge people not to vote for candidates who promote racist policies.*
- 3. Expects members of the Methodist Church to practise and promote racial justice and inclusion, and reject any political parties that attempt to stir up racial and religious hatred and fear of asylum seekers.¹*

In response, the Methodist Church set up a website - **Countering Political Extremism** - to resource people in advance of elections where extremist parties were standing. See www.methodist.org.uk for further information.

The Methodist statement and website were issued in advance of elections to urge people not to vote for councillors who promote racist policies. In May 2006, 33 British National Party councillors were elected, making a total of 47 BNP councillors in areas across Yorkshire, Lancashire, West Midlands, Essex and London. Many thousands of voters are now represented by councillors who actively promote racist policies.

The challenge for the Methodist Church and others is how we now apply the statement of our principles in this changing situation. These guidelines, in the form of Frequently Asked Questions, are to help churches to make often difficult decisions. They arise from conversations with ministers and lay people in areas where extremist parties are active, and where churches are facing new challenges about how they relate to local politics and politicians. The questions represent real situations faced by local churches.²

For more information and resources about extremist parties, church statements, elections, and holding hustings meetings visit *Countering Political Extremism* at www.methodist.org.uk (via the A-Z index).

¹ Other Christian denominations and faith groups made similar statements. These can be found on the *Countering Political Extremism* site at www.methodist.org.uk

² These guidelines were written by the "NM31 Group", a group set up by Methodist Conference in 2003 in response to "Notice of Motion 31" which drew attention to ministry in areas of racial tension and particularly the operation of extremist political groups.

I. We have BNP councillors representing our ward. As they are democratically elected, shouldn't we try to work with them, even if we disagree with their policies?

Churches may come under pressure to co-operate with local councillors from extremist parties who, after all, the argument goes, have been elected by local people. Indeed many churches will feel that they are under an obligation to work with our democratic system. However people are not obliged to do so if this is not in the interests of the common good.

- **Policies proposed by extremist parties do not promote the well-being of all members of our society.** Their beliefs are very different from the healthy sense of patriotism or love for their country felt by most people. Nationalistic parties such as the BNP advocate the superiority of white British people, and support their rights and well-being over people with an African, Asian or mixed heritage, many of whom are equally British and whose families have lived here for generations. Their publicity has particularly targeted asylum seekers, talking of “floods” or “invasions”, and blaming them for shortages of housing and jobs. The party has also singled out Muslims, using the word “Muslim” as a codeword for “Asian”, talking about the “Islamic Menace”, and arguing that Muslims threaten the British “way of life”. These policies, and the myths, half-truths, fear and hatred that extremist parties promote, “*are incompatible with the Methodist Church’s social witness, biblical teaching and our understanding of the love of God for all people*”. Christians are called to consider seriously for which party they vote; for the same reasons they are also called to consider with whom they are prepared to associate themselves.
- **Co-operation can give extremist parties credibility.** When the first BNP councillor was elected in the Isle of Dogs in 1993 the community and the churches mobilised to encourage voter registration and support for other parties. Now Britain has 47 BNP councillors and there is little vocal opposition. There is the danger of some local complacency creeping in: “we have a BNP councillor, we didn’t vote for them, but it’s not too bad, they’ve not tried to expel any Asians yet”. Yet any co-operation with extremist parties gives those parties credibility. People should be reminded of the reasons for the original objections to the party and its policies.
- **Extremist parties are not democratic parties.** Although councillors may be elected democratically, the BNP itself is not a democratic party. Not everyone can join the BNP – they are explicit that people who do not come from a white British background are not welcome in the party – and their racist policies mean that one person’s vote is valued more than another person’s.

Some people feel that it is only by debate that the falseness of policies can be exposed, whilst others argue that such extremists should not be given the “oxygen of publicity”. Churches face a dilemma of whether they should refuse to give extremists credibility by engaging with them, or take the risk of working to change people’s minds. There are great risks of being used by extremist parties, of appearing to give them credibility and of alienating those who are threatened by extremist policies, and churches have to guard against naivety. In most cases it is better to refuse to work with extremist politicians, and instead to build up broad community relations. Churches should not dismiss the grievances which lead people to vote for extremist parties, and work to tackle these. Churches should consider the issues very carefully, talk with others, and consider the impact on others, before deciding to work with extremist parties.

However there are some people for whom such policies of “non-engagement” are not possible. Many Christians are employed by local authorities and have to work regularly with local councillors, whether or not they agree with their policies. Some

senior people will be prevented from joining in the alternative political activity open to others who wish to oppose extremism. Churches should be aware of the complex ethical dilemmas these people will face on a daily basis and be prepared to offer them pastoral support. This might include prayer, listening, offering opportunities to talk with other church members in similar situations, and having a sensitivity to how their employment commitments may force them to limit their participation in church activities.

2. We've been approached by our local councillor who is a member of an extremist party asking for our co-operation in a campaign to tackle litter. Shouldn't we work with them to improve our community?

Extremist groups often use "community campaigns" on uncontroversial issues such as tackling litter or road safety to improve their credibility in the area. People who have felt neglected by mainstream politicians or are frustrated by local conditions often respond warmly to practical approaches, regardless of the politics which underpin them. Local politicians can often be seen in isolation from the policies of the national party - this can be particularly true if the extremist councillor is a likeable, apparently a-political local person. But churches should be extremely careful before giving their support to such campaigns.

Councillors may have their sights on re-election in the work they undertake. How can this action, this campaign, this photo opportunity be used to improve the candidate's chances at the next election? For extremist parties, being able to demonstrate co-operation with local churches increases their respectability and gives credence to their racist analysis of local situations.

Party politics is to some extent always a compromise. In a democracy individuals cast their vote in the knowledge that they are not signing up wholeheartedly to every aspect of the package of policies in a party's manifesto. They are choosing the party that has the closest "fit" to their personal outlook. As a result, some people may feel they are having to choose to compromise over deeply held beliefs, such as funding nuclear weapons, because there is no mainstream party offering an alternative policy. It may be argued that working with an extremist party is a similar compromise: you work together on the things you can agree on, but continue to reject their racist policies. The difference here, however, is that whilst some policies may appear indistinguishable from other mainstream parties, extremist parties base their whole ideologies on a racist strategy.

Therefore although a campaign might purportedly be on a topic with which most people would agree, such as tackling litter, it is not possible to separate out this policy from the policies which underpin parties such as the BNP. These are policies which demonise particular religions and people of different skin colour, and glorify an illusory white society of the past. Even an apparently uncontroversial policy on litter is underpinned by an agenda which blames asylum seekers and people of different races for changes and a deterioration in local communities.

If approached about a local campaign such as litter clearance, churches could even consider setting up their own event, working with faith groups or other community partners, and use the occasion for positive publicity. The fears and grievances which can lead people to support extremist parties should not be ignored. Instead churches can be very positive about what they are doing in local communities to help cohesion and tackle underlying concerns.

Some church leaders have found themselves in a difficult position when photographs taken at meetings with members of extremist parties are then later used for publicity purposes implying church support for candidates. Whilst this can be challenged as

photos should not be used without permission, the damage will already have been done. Churches need to guard against naivety when dealing with such situations.

3. Should we offer pastoral support to a councillor from an extremist party? What about communion?

In November 2006 the chair of the Commission of Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, called on churches to refuse communion to supporters of the British National Party. The Methodist Church explained that Methodists understand communion to be a means of grace and a means of conversion. Communion is therefore offered to all who are looking for a deeper relationship with God. And, for all, taking Communion involves self-examination. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 Paul suggests that if people come to communion and don't allow themselves to be challenged in this way, then it is God who will judge them. We welcome everybody into Methodist churches. However there is no room within the Church for racism under any circumstances. We will always challenge racist attitudes and behaviour but we will never turn people away unless their continuing actions puts the safety of the rest of the congregation at risk.

Similarly if a member of an extremist party approaches a minister for pastoral support, ministers will have to consider the nature of that support and how it can be offered without offering implicit backing for racist beliefs and thereby making others unwelcome in the church. God never gives up on people, and neither should we.

4. Our local BNP councillor says the party is “defending traditional Christianity”. What do they mean?

Some people who vote BNP do so because they feel that the country is facing frightening forces of change, citing immigration and the growing number of people from other faiths, particularly Islam. The BNP claims to offer a way of preserving “our past”, and this includes the preservation of a culture based on Christianity. But their claim that they are representing or defending “Christianity” is nonsense. Christianity is neither exclusively white nor British. Christianity in urban areas has experienced a revival from black Christians. Indeed our confidence that Christ speaks to all people is reflected in the fact that Christianity is the most multiracial, multicultural movement on the planet. All Christians should be deeply concerned that some people are now appropriating Christian language and symbols for policies that are the very opposite of Christian values.

The real agenda behind the claim is a cultural one – partly in opposition to a perceived secular liberal elite, and largely in an attempt to whip up opposition to Muslims and others of minority faiths. It also exploits the confusion between faith and race – extremist parties claim they are not being racist because they are opposing a religion rather than members of a particular race.

The BNP has recently been linked with a body calling itself the Christian Council of Britain. Although the BNP denies that the Council is a front organisation, it has clearly been involved in setting up and defending the Council.

The Methodist Church has made it clear that it is outrageous for extremist parties to use Christianity to further their agenda of segregation and division, and reaffirmed its earlier statements that Christian belief is incompatible with any political party or philosophy that is based on hatred or treats people as inferior because of their race, religion or for any other reason. It has consistently promoted inter faith dialogue as a means of promoting understanding between people of different faiths, clearly rejecting methods based on confrontation.

5. What if our church is approached by a BNP councillor seeking a venue for a surgery or meetings with constituents?

Many BNP councillors struggle to find meeting spaces as community organisations often refuse to allow them to rent their rooms. People who are unhappy with this situation argue that councillors are democratically elected and constituents should not be denied the right to meet with their representatives.

What is the role of the church in offering space to those with whom it disagrees? Some churches are currently having conversations about offering “radical hospitality” to people with different theological views or different faiths. Yet even this is within the context that these groups must be committed to building understanding between faiths and not discriminate against people on the grounds of race.

Churches are not obliged to rent rooms to a particular political party, even if other parties use the rooms, if it is felt that they represent values which are contrary to the purposes of the Methodist Church. Standing Orders of the Methodist Church warn churches against hosting meetings which “*would have a detrimental effect on the peace and unity of the Church and its witness*” (SO921(1)). The Charity Commission states that, although charities should not generally discriminate between organisations on the basis of the views they hold, “*a charity may be justified in declining to allow a particular organisation or individual to use its premises because of the risk of public disorder or alienating the charity’s beneficiaries or supporters.*”¹ (CC9 – Political Activities and Campaigning by Charities)

There is a significant danger that, by allowing members of extremist parties to rent rooms, the church gives them credibility. There is a perception amongst many church members, and possibly many non-church goers, that the church approves of activities and groups held on church premises. Would you be comfortable if a local person with housing problems came to a surgery on Methodist premises to be told by their local councillor that they couldn’t get a new home because of the number of “foreigners” being housed locally?

The refusal to rent rooms to extremist councillors should not leave local people without access to support. Most wards are multi-member, and where the other members represent other parties, residents can attend their surgeries instead. In areas represented solely by a single party, the other parties can also hold surgeries, sometimes attended by councillors from other wards. The majority of case work undertaken by councillors now takes place via phone or email and it is always open to councillors to visit constituents in need of help in their own homes. People may approach their MP, or voluntary groups such as Citizens Advice with particular problems. Finally if people do want to meet with their councillors they can make appointments to see them at the Town Hall or council offices.

6. There is a joint Anglican-Methodist school in our area. The local authority nominates some of the governors from local political parties. What can we do if we are faced with a school governor who is a member of the BNP?

This may be a concerning prospect for parents, teachers and governors at all schools in areas with extremist councillors, but it will be of particular concern to faith-based schools where the governing body determines the religious ethos of the school. For Methodism, as for other denominations and faiths, these schools are an expression of ministry. Statements by the BNP, for example, are incompatible with our understanding of the Gospel, the purpose of education, diversity and inclusiveness.

Governors who fundamentally disagree with schools' equality or admission policies risk undermining the purpose of the school.

There is no provision for the governing body of a voluntary school to prevent the local authority appointment of a particular person as their representative, although if the person has already made public statements that would conflict with the school's ethos, it would be wise for the promoters to point out that there could be difficulties. However, governing bodies have a specific duty to promote equality of opportunity and to promote good relations between persons of different racial groups. No single governor can take any action or promote any activity separately; governance is a corporate activity and governors can suspend a governor who "has acted in a way that is inconsistent with the school's ethos or with the religious character and has brought or is likely to bring the school or the governing body or his or her office of governor into disrepute"³. This suspension can only be pursued as a last resort "after seeking to resolve any difficulties or disputes in more constructive ways". Going through these procedures will clearly be difficult for the school and for governors who will be required to act rigorously and in the face of opposition. Churches may look for ways to offer support to governing bodies which decide to proceed in this way.

7. Our minister is regularly contacted by local journalists for comments on BNP campaigns. Should we respond?

There are very valid concerns about giving groups such as the BNP more publicity by responding to requests for comments on their activities. However if journalists are seeking comments it is likely they will run stories anyway, and it may be worth taking the opportunity to speak out against racism, whilst bearing the following points in mind:

- Reference should be made to the Methodist Church's stance on racism and extremist parties, as contained in the February 2004 statement
- Extremist parties are skilled at exploiting genuine local concerns. Whilst untruths should be carefully rebutted, you should not get pulled into a debate on the concerns themselves, or solutions to them. Rather keep the focus on the fact that the Methodist Church is opposed to racist parties because they are racist parties
- Similarly do not be drawn into commenting on the individuals involved. However "nice" and hard-working individual councillors may appear, the policies and practices of extremist parties are racist and intolerant and must be opposed on that basis.

Methodists may choose to support many different political parties or policies, and the Church does not endorse any particular choice: rather we are all urged to be wary of racism dressed up as "sensible politics," to speak out against racism wherever we see it and to challenge it in our communities. If you have particular questions regarding the media, contact the Methodist media office on 020-7467-5221 or enquiries@methodistchurch.org.uk

We hope you find these guidelines useful.

If you have any comments or would like further information, please contact nm31@methodistchurch.org.uk or write to The NM31 Group, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5JR

Further resources

Countering Political Extremism – www.methodist.org.uk

Relating to Parties Promoting Racist Policies – www.cofe.anglican.org

³ See School Governance (Procedures) (England) Regulations 2003