



The Methodist Church

CONSULTATION DOCUMENT “PREVENTING EXTREMISM TOGETHER: PLACES OF WORSHIP” : RESPONSE FROM THE METHODIST CHURCH

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this consultation document. The deadline set for responses means that there has been no opportunity to consult widely within the Methodist Church and there is likely to be a variety of views among our 300,000 members. However, I have been able to consult colleagues here at Methodist Church House and this letter reflects our joint view. It is informed by our current involvement in consultation with ecumenical partners about appropriate legislative responses to the terrorist threat exposed by the London bombings.

We start from the position that action in this area is both unnecessary and counter-productive for the following reasons

- There have been very few instances where a place of worship has been used to foment terrorist behaviour. Only one has been publicly identified - the Finsbury Park Mosque - and in that case the authorities did deal with it.
- We see no reason to single out places of worship for these measures. Groups may meet in a variety of locations; the media report that the 7 July bombers met in a sports centre.
- If the discussion of these issues is removed from places of worship, there will be no opportunity for those in the mainstream of theological thought to argue for an alternative interpretation of the texts.
- While the proposals cover all places of religious worship, they will be seen as targeted at mosques. This will generate great resentment and may well drive those who already feel marginalised closer to believing that violence is their only option.

To turn to the paper itself, I have a couple of general points.

Firstly, we are concerned that the paper talks about preventing “extremism” in places of worship. Paragraph 17 defines extremism in terms of the Terrorism Act 2000, and that is certainly what we understand the proposal to be targeting, but that is by no means a complete definition. All faiths call upon their adherents to offer total devotion to God as understood by that faith. This can - and, perhaps, should - lead to behaviour that might be described as extremist but which is beneficial to society rather than imposing a threat; for example, a significant number of Christians believe that their faith enjoins them to embrace absolute pacifism.

Another example of extremist behaviour might be the question of martyrdom. Christianity and many other religions teach that their adherents should be

willing to suffer death rather than disobey the will of God and they honour those who did so. In no way does Christianity teach that believers should **seek** martyrdom, but in the present climate there is a real danger that such honouring of martyrs could be misinterpreted.

Secondly, we have an on-going concern about the definition of “terrorism” in the 2000 Act as including serious damage to property (section 1(2)(b)) and disruption of an electronic system (section 1(2)(e)). We accept that these are criminal offences but we do not think that they should be treated as “terrorist” in the same way as violence against people.

To turn to the specific questions in the consultation document:

- A. For the reasons given above, we do not think that this is a problem which requires measures other than those already in place or proposed in the Terrorism Bill. Anyone who encourages terrorism within a place of worship is subject to those provisions.

We see no need for a statutory responsibility to be laid on those “controlling” a place of worship. Model trusts for Methodist premises already provide that organisations which encourage terrorism cannot use the premises. Should a church allow an organisation to use its premises in good faith and then discover that it was encouraging terrorism, the terms of the agreement would require the church to evict the organisation.

- B. We need a climate in which these issues can be discussed openly. Young people are naturally passionate about the things they care for; if that is their faith, it must be possible for that passion to be channelled in ways which contribute to the well being of their communities and of society as a whole. Measures such as those proposed will close down discussion within places of worship and leave young people more open to the influence of destructive forms of extremism.

It would also be helpful if Government Ministers were willing to show more understanding of the reasons why people resent their policy in relation to Iraq. This need not involve any suggestion that the Government considers it did the wrong thing. It would simply take a little further what the Prime Minister has already said about respecting those who disagreed with the war in Iraq by acknowledging and responding sympathetically to the reasons for that disagreement.

- C. For reasons explained elsewhere in this letter, we believe that these proposals are unnecessary and counterproductive.
- D. Most Methodist premises are controlled by Model Trusts that govern the activities permitted within them and the organisations which may have license to use the premises., This includes the office building in which I am writing this letter. The Model Trusts and their charitable status preclude the use of Methodist premises to foment terrorism.

As we believe the proposals should not be implemented, clearly we would oppose any extension.

- E. We urge you not to implement these proposals so have no comment on this point.

We are content for you to publish these comments; we intend to put them into the public domain.

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