

MULTI-FAITH WORSHIP (1985)

Preamble

The Conference of 1984 received a Suggestion from the North Lancashire Synod noting 'with deep concern the proposals to involve the Methodist Conference in Multi-Faith Worship'. The Conference referred the suggestion to the Faith and Order Committee and the Inter-Divisional Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths for report. Both groups have been active on the matter during the year. There is, however, a practical difficulty about two separate bodies producing a joint report in a short space of time, and this is compounded by the fact that the Faith and Order Committee in full session meets only in December or January. Consequently the present report, which is the product of work in both committees, has not reached the stage of final approval in both groups. Nevertheless we present this report to Conference for adoption with the assurance that discussion of the matter will continue and that further reports will appear in the **Agenda** in future years.

1. The Suggestion refers, we assume, to an event called 'Rapport '84', which was organised by Wolverhampton Methodists on the Thursday evening of the Representative Session of Conference, i.e. at a time when it has been customary to hold a Christian 'Festival of Praise'. The timing may have led to the assumption that a multi-Faith act of worship was replacing a Christian act of worship. Such, however, was not the intention. The aim of those who organised 'Rapport '84', was to celebrate the common humanity of all people, whatever their race, colour, culture or tradition of Faith. In particular, they wished to portray the richness of religious life to be found in Wolverhampton, without requiring agreement with all beliefs and practices, hoping that those who attended might be prompted to reflect, as perhaps never before, on the questions posed for us all by the fact of religious diversity.
2. At the same time, the Suggestion appears to imply that an act of multi-Faith worship necessarily involves some compromise of 'belief in the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God and Saviour of the World'. It thereby raises a major matter of 'general principle'.

Multi-Faith worship has tended to take one of three forms:

- i. Services from one Faith with guest participants from other Faiths;
- ii. Inter-Faith services in which each Faith group contributes from its own tradition what seems appropriate to the occasion;
- iii. Inter-Faith services with an agreed common order.

In the first case, all participants can offer testimony to their own convictions and religious experience; in the second case, all the participants are free to respond as they feel able to what is offered by the others; and in the third case, Christians need never agree to any common order which compromises their own faith.

The still developing situation nevertheless presents many problems. Suppose, for example, that a group of Methodists proposes to attend the worship of another Faith in their area.

For some Christians, even being present at another religion's place of worship can seem to be a betrayal of the gospel. For others, there is no problem in being present as an observer. But what if an observer is drawn to participate in some way, as might be expected of him or her by Hindus in their temple? The kind of participation involved seems to many to be the crucial issue.

Such concerns, reflected in the North Lancashire District's Suggestion, were present also in the minds of those who organised 'Rapport '84'. Indeed, an important benefit resulting from that event might prove to be the sharing of such concerns with the Methodist Church as a whole.

3. Issues raised by worship in a multi-Faith society are posed and discussed in **Can We Pray Together?**, a British Council of Churches publication prepared by its Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths. This valuable document is indispensable reading for people concerned with issues raised by 'Rapport '84'. This is shown by the booklet's sub-title, **Guidelines on Worship in a multi-Faith Society**.
4. It may be of value to indicate the nature of some of the most important of these issues.
 - i. Can members of different world religions learn from one another about the nature of God?
 - ii. How are Christians in multi-Faith Britain to understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and in particular his atonement?
 - iii. What is the mission of the church in a multi-Faith society?

To raise these questions is not to presume upon the answers, but to enable adequate discussion to take place amongst us.

5. What is of the greatest importance is that Methodists should realise how and why the matter of multi-Faith worship has recently arisen with such urgency. Especially since the end of World War 2, parts of many cities of this land have become populated by people of other Faiths than Christianity. Neighbourliness will face many Christians with new and delicate questions. For example, what kind of funeral service, if any, can be devised to enable members of other Faiths to express their respect for a Christian who had been much involved in community relations? Or how can a Christian respond with integrity to an invitation to the wedding of the child of friends of another Faith? The Faith and Order sub-Committee on Other Faiths and the Inter-Divisional Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths will continue to reflect on such matters and bring the fruit of such reflection to future Methodist Conferences. It is equally important, however, that both committees should stimulate adequate discussion at every level of the Church's life.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Multi-Faith Worship.

(Agenda 1985, pp.635-637)

The Conference, in adopting the above resolution, added:

'This Conference encourages the Methodist people to engage in multi-faith dialogue with their neighbours as the first steps towards mutual understanding, tolerance and love.'