

“Face-to-face and Side-by-Side”

A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action

A response from the Methodist Church

The Methodist Church has about 295,000 members and 800,000 people are connected with the Church. It has not been possible to consult widely within the church on this issue and its governing body, the Conference, which meets annually has not dealt with the specific issues raised in the consultation document. This response is consistent with views expressed by Conference in the past and draws on the knowledge and experience of those working on behalf of the Methodist Church on these matters.

While responses will be given for some of the questions posed in the document, it is considered that there are underlying presuppositions with which the Methodist Church is uncomfortable. Consequently the lengthy first part of this response relates to the underlying presuppositions of the Report, before responses are provided for some of the questions asked.

Underlying presuppositions of the Document:

The Methodist Church welcomes the DCLG statement in the forward that the government wishes ‘to develop a new inter faith strategy but is not seeking to reinvent inter faith’. The Report focuses on a very narrow understanding of inter faith, i.e. that inter faith activity is in order to ‘build good relations and break barriers’, and needs to recognise that inter faith relations has and continues to function in different kinds of ways, for example: the academic through conferences and journals, meetings of national or faith religious leaders, and participation in dialogue in local communities where members of different faiths meet together to share religious understanding in a ethos of respect and trust. Such dialogues are not in order to find ‘common ground’, to use the phrase of the report, but in order to engage in an honest and rigorous exchange where

differences of belief and practice are acknowledged and respected together with areas of common belief. Inter faith relations may also include working with members of different faith communities with respect to social action, that is similar to the definition of “side-by-side” found on page 8 of the DCLG report. It is necessary that the various kinds of ways engaging in inter faith relations be acknowledged in the report and its focus on community cohesion be understood as a focus on only one aspect of inter faith relations.

The issue of religious identity is problematic. For some faiths such as Christianity, that has no prescribed religious dress, there is the issue of how its members express their faith by their appearance. For religions such as Sikhism, accommodation to its dress requirements has been made in UK law by for example the exemption on the grounds of religious requirement (and national dress) in the Offensive Weapons Act. For other religions, where some members understand themselves to have a prescribed dress, they have been criticised by among others government ministers for wearing such clothes, even though this does not conflict with UK law. An example of this is Muslim women wearing the hajib. The Cattle Report concluded that celebrating differences between the faith communities was one of the reasons why there were positive relations in Southall and Leicester compared with various towns in the Midlands where they had been social unrest and rioting. The Methodist Church is concerned that the Report states that ‘more needs to be done ...to address those instances where religious identity had been advanced in divisive ways or had become a factor that had the potential to separate people from the wider community’. An implication of this statement, as does the desire referenced in the previous paragraph of finding ‘common ground’ between faiths, is a motivation to work towards the ‘lowest common denominator’ i.e. those beliefs and practices where agreement can be obtained between the different faiths. This is both contrary to the conclusions of the Cattle Report and not an authentic inter faith objective. It is considered that the definition of ‘face-to-face’ on page 8 of the Report that includes the ‘celebrating the values held in common as well as acknowledging distinctiveness’ and the definition of a cohesive community on page 12 as ‘.... diversity is appreciated and valued’ are more helpful and legitimate approaches to inter faith relations. The Cattle Report emphasises the need for diversity to be ‘celebrated’, which is far more positive than ‘appreciated and valued’ and, as Cattle

references in his Report, such celebration resulted in positive community relations at a time when similar communities in, for example, Blackburn were experiencing rioting and civil unrest.

Consideration need to be given to the issue of authentic representation for faiths that have no hierarchy of leadership, for example Sikhism and Islam, in any inter faith relations initiative. In both Sikhism and Islam there is no one person or organisation that can authentically be understood to represent 'Sikhs in the UK' or 'Muslims in the UK' as both of them have an internal diversity of belief and practice in a similar way that Christianity has denominations. This diversity also applies to local areas where there may be several gurdwaras or masjids from different traditions within the individual faith. There is the concern that one person or organisation, either on a national or local basis, will be regarded by government as the representative of a faith even though they are not recognised as such by the faith itself. Such people or organisations may be self appointed 'gatekeepers', people who know how to negotiate within local or national bureaucracy, or people who are known to members of local or national government as people 'with whom they can do business'. It is important when undertaking dialogue with faiths that people representing the diversity of belief and practice within a faith are invited to participate.

It is also necessary that there is some effective validation of an organisation or individual as an authentic representative of a faith. Furthermore using a single representative from a faith, or a non-representative person, will create tensions within a faith.

The Methodist Church welcomes the financial support that has been given to inter faith relations initiatives by government through the FCCBF grants. It is important, however, that such grants are awarded to different kinds of inter faith relations activities and to activities that include different faiths and are not limited to a small number. The Report states that the allocation of FCCBF grants has focused on interfaith activities between Christians and Muslims and Christians and Hindus. Information received from Methodist Church District Inter Faith Advisors, and other groups with which we work, indicates that were this emphasis to continue it could, first, lead to resentment among other faith groups that they are perceived to be of less importance. A belief is developing that the

possibility of receiving funding for their activities is increased if members of a faith are troublesome to government. Secondly, the present criteria under which the FCCBF grants are being awarded is affecting the work of local and national inter faith groups, many of which are of long standing, and who are being led to redirect their work to within the narrow parameters of the FCCBF grants or encounter financial difficulties. This will be exacerbated if there is an increase in the provision by different government funding programmes as the Report states. Several inter faith organisations, both local and national, who have made considerable contributions to inter faith relations since their founding many years ago are finding their continued activity in jeopardy due to lack of funding. There are also international organisations of long standing, such as the World Congress of Faiths which is over seventy years old, who provide effective inter faith activities both locally and nationally in the UK but who are neither included in the DCLG Report nor have been awarded FCCBF grants.

Whilst recognising the significant proportion of the population who are not members of a faith, there is a concern regarding the increasing secularisation of society and the way in which, for example, the public celebration of faith events are prohibited on the erroneous grounds of sensitivity to other faiths. While it is recognised that all members of a community – those of different faiths or none – should be actively involved in community cohesion, caution needs to be exercised to ensure that the inclusion of those of no faith does not lead to an increasingly secularist approach and a failure to celebrate the diversity of faiths in public life as recommended by the Cattle Report.

Inter faith relations is not only dependent upon strong relationships and partnership (page 11) which are based on mutual trust and respect that has been developed over several years; they can not be established in a short period. An example of a faith council, although not so named, is the community leaders' group, or enablers, that was developed in Southall, West London after the death of Blair Peach in 1979 and the community unrest in the early 1980s. The local police superintendent, who since his appointment had actively worked to develop positive relations with the different faith communities in the town [including the dominant Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities in order of numbers], was actively supported by the Revd John C. Newton, the Methodist minister in Southall, who was deeply respected and trusted by the faith leaders in the

town. This built on the positive relationships that already existed predominantly due to the work of two local interfaith groups. The leaders of both these groups, Brother Daniel Faive of Westminster Interfaith, a Roman Catholic organisation, and Sr. Margaret Norse of Christians Aware, an ecumenical group, had both over many years developed the respect and trust of both the leaders of the different faiths and members of the communities.

The Methodist Church welcomes the support in the Report for each Local Authority having a Faith Council. It is important that there are clearly stated aims and objectives of the group and that the achievement of them is facilitated by the varieties of belief and practice within each faith being represented, rather than a single person or organisation. There is a need for the aims and objectives of a Faith Council to arise out of, or to be enabled to develop from, relationships of trust.

Comments relating to questions raised in the Report:

Questions 4-8: Opportunities for building understanding:

The consultation document quotes the census figures which suggest that 71.8% of the UK population is Christian, 5.4% are from other religions, 15.1% have no religion and 7.8% did not complete that question. However, all churches know that regular attendance at worship does not support these figures for Christians; in fact the majority of the population of the UK has no faith or non-religious belief. It is far easier for people of faith to understand why those of a different faith behave in certain ways than it is for people of no faith to understand how faith permeates the whole of the believer's life, affecting one's behaviour in all contexts

These questions assume that understanding other faiths is simply a matter of learning what they believe, and for other people of faith this may be largely so. However, any increase in the religious literacy of the majority of people who have no faith, must start at

the more fundamental level of understanding what it is to adhere to a faith, the ethical implications of which affect every aspect of life.

The Methodist Church welcomes the recognition of the importance of Religious Education. There was a substantial increase both in the time allocated to RE on timetables and a reduction of the numbers of people teaching RE who had no qualification in the subject as a direct result of the introduction of OFSTED Reports. Furthermore, OFSTED Reports were used by SACREs to enable them to fulfil their statutory responsibility; without these reports there is no objective data upon which they can do so. However, the change in OFSTED regulations means that their Reports no longer make specific reference to the quality of the RE provision or the extent to which the school fulfils its statutory responsibility with respect to both RE and the Collective Act of Worship. In view of the Report's acknowledgement of the importance of Religious Education, consideration reversing this change in the OFSTED regulations.

Questions 9-11: Shared spaces for interaction and social action:

While recognising the Biblical teaching to be a good neighbour, there needs to be a recognition that first, for some faiths there is no restriction between the premises they own and religious buildings but for others there are restrictions. For example many Anglican Churches have halls that do not require the same restrictions of use as the sanctuary, however, the Methodist Church Act of 1870 prohibits the use of Methodist Church premises (i.e. all property) for any activity that is not in accordance with the teachings of the Methodist Church. Secondly, the teachings of some faiths prohibit certain practices. For example, the use of tobacco and alcohol is strictly prohibited by Sikhs, and alcohol by Muslims. It is necessary that a religion is not expected to provide what it is not possible for them to do, because to do so would be contrary to their teachings or, in the case of the Methodist Church, Parliamentary law.

Questions 16-17: Specific barriers experienced by young people:

Information from District Inter Faith Advisers and other groups with which the Methodist Church has contact indicate that some of the most effective ways of inter faith activity

involving women have been by identifying and meeting their social and educational needs, for example classes on keep fit/self defence, English as a foreign language and basic computer skills. There are also flourishing multi-faith nursery/pre-school groups. Consideration could also be given to facilitating women in obtaining the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in religious activities within their faith. For example in Sikhism women can perform kirtan (singing and playing religious songs which are a substantial component of worship services) or reading the Sikh scriptures and in Islam women may also teach other women to read and understand the Qur'an. This knowledge will enable them to discuss knowledgeably the teaching of the Qur'an on, for example, the role of women. Whilst accepting that women are not presently permitted the same level of leadership as male members in some faiths, it is important that they are enabled to achieve a high level of knowledge and skills so that they can train their successors to take advantage of present and future opportunities that may be available.

It is important that any Faith Council is not perceived to be imposing western standards on women members of faiths. For example, among those Muslims with which The Methodist Church has contact, some women wear the hijab and jilbab for reasons of commitment after considerable prayer and reflection while other women do so from their personal choice in order to proclaim their Muslim identity. Likewise some Sikh women wear a turban for reasons of spirituality and devotion to faith, while others wear one because it is practical in their profession. While in Western thinking there is a dichotomy between the religious and the cultural [or spiritual and temporal], many faiths teach that such a dichotomy does not exist but that all that a person does is an expression of their spirituality. Faith Councils need to respect the right of both women and men to express their spirituality in accordance with the teachings of their faith, while supporting women in participating in inter faith activities. The diversity of belief and practice within a faith also needs to be respected.

Questions 18-19: Specific barriers experienced by young people:

The most helpful way of involving young people in inter faith is by working through the faith communities. While some faiths, for predominantly cultural reasons, have a developed concept of respect for age that often leads to young people feeling unable to

participate actively in the presence of elders, it is important that inter faith activities do not exacerbate any frustrations felt by the young people. Within the different faiths, the experience of District Inter Faith Advisors and those people and groups with whom it has contact indicates that where young people themselves initiate activities, or when activities are organised specifically for young people, they are effective. There are existing models that are effectively bringing young people together, for example the 13th Sikh Scout Group in Southall, West London, and various initiatives focused around sport, which could be developed further with respect to inter faith relations. (The 13th Sikh Scout Group was formed in 1999 and is now the largest Scout troop in their region and has participated in national and regional scouting events.) Young people tend to have people who they recognise as leaders and people of influence in their lives. Such people need to be identified and consulted by local and national government regarding the most helpful strategies for bringing together young people in order to promote inter faith relations. Imposing someone as a leader on a group of young people is very seldom effective and usually constitutes a waste of resources and a missed opportunity.

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