

A METHODIST STATEMENT ON

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Adopted by the Methodist Conference 1995

CONTENTS

1. Setting the Scene
2. Ideology: seeing the whole picture
3. Public Institutions: how the world works
4. Civil Society: How the world changes
5. Christian faith and politics
6. A continuing task

Chapter 1 SETTING THE SCENE

1. The Christian community believes in one holy and gracious God. In the Methodist tradition, we believe that by the operation of the divine Spirit, the nature and activity of God are revealed to us in the interaction of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Thus theological reflection seeks both to unlock from the historic resources of our faith a givenness which demands our obedience; and, through free enquiry into contemporary reality, to discern God at work in the world today.

2. Our classic faith is this:

The universe is the free gift which flows from the creative love of God the Father. God remains unfailingly devoted to the creation, in spite of the sin which distorts all existence.

In Jesus Christ God revealed himself and the depth of the divine commitment to the world. In Jesus Christ God brought to fullest expression the divine purpose in creation: to create free and mature persons living in harmony with one another, with a redeemed universe and with God. God's love-unto-death in Jesus Christ broke once for all the stranglehold of sin and death which threatened to thwart God's purpose. The resurrection of Jesus Christ presages the victory of God's love; and it is the ground of our hope for the redemption of all that God has made.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit Christians are empowered to share in the divine love which is operative everywhere. They seek the transformation of groups and communities, and of national and international relationships, in favour of human dignity, freedom, justice and peace. Thus all Christian reflection on creation, salvation and the coming of the kingdom of God implies and demands participation in politics, by individual Christians and Christian communities.

However, the Christian community must face honestly its historical record. It is clear that the power of sin remains ever present in the church as in creation as a while. It infects all relationships and social structures, distorting perception and breeding corruption, oppression, arrogance and unbridled selfishness. No political programme, therefore, can be equated with the coming kingdom of God.

3. In the light of this shared faith, the statement which follows explores how Biblical perspectives and judgements interact with our understandings of politics. To prepare the ground for such a discussion this statement first explores the social and political contexts in which Christian judgements must be forged.

4. Politics, like religion, engages our passions. The strength of our feelings and the depth of our commitments in politics are affected by the issues and opportunities of the moment. Beneath the arguments and crises of this week or this year, however, there lie many longer term concerns which give a particular tone to political debate in each generation. Our context also is important. While we are aware of the global dimensions of our existence, we reflect in the first instance on the political issues which confront us in Western Europe. We know that our story is different from that of other industrialised nations like the USA and Japan; and different again from the context and the agenda facing economically poor nations.

5. It is probable that the themes in the following list will, in some form or other, claim our energy, emotions, crusading zeal and intellectual resources up to and beyond AD 2000. And we must make allowance for unpredictable new issues which may emerge in the following years. Each item on this list can be developed at great length; it is simply introduced here, in the briefest possible way, to remain us of the context in which we explore political ideologies in the 1990s, and to stimulate our imaginations.

6. This is not an exhaustive list; nor are the items in order of priority.

THE ENVIRONMENT – Is there sufficient political will world-wide to save the planet? Can exploitative and polluting attitudes be changed?

ENERGY – What happens when the oil runs out? Is there a future for nuclear energy? Who will pay for research into renewable sources of energy (e.g. wind power and wave power)?

RICH AND POOR NATIONS – What will be the shape of future trading patterns? What is the future of aid? What will be the effects of population growth?

SECURITY – Will Britain play a constrictive part in an enhanced role for the UN? Can new political arrangements be negotiated which offer security, peace and justice for regions of the world divided by conflict over many generations? Is there a future for control of arms sales and for disarmament?

THE PACE OF CHANGE – What secure institutions and values can we rely on to give us courage to face rapid change? Why does change threaten us?

EUROPE – Can new political and economic structures be devised to enable closer relationships between East and West? Will the tension between international and national political structures be resolved? How will citizenship be defined to prevent racism, especially with regard to migrant workers?

FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS – Can human rights be guaranteed within a secure legal framework? How do we create a multicultural, multi-religious society, free of racism, in which women and men work together in mutual respect? What are the political consequences of the new understanding of the place of women in the world, and of the revival of religious fundamentalism? Who decides the rights of the unborn human?

THE NEW INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION – Is the penetration of information technology and microtechnology into every facet of life a bonus or a threat? Who controls broadcasting, and on what criteria? Who can challenge the power multinational companies and networks?

EDUCATION AND HEALTH – What aims and values will shape their development? How will they be paid for?

POVERTY – How can the poor make their voice heard where decisions are made which affect them? Can the growth of homelessness and hopelessness be reversed?

QUALITY OF LIFE – In city and countryside: can we construct an integrated transport system which minimises pollution? What response can be made to vandalism and violence, and their root causes? What are the implications of biotechnology and genetic engineering?

CONSTITUTIONAL DEBATE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM – Is constitutional reform a desirable and viable option? Where does sovereignty reside? Can open government replace secrecy?

LOCAL CULTURES – In neighbourhood, county, region and nation: how is local identity preserved and cherished when impersonal procedures and systems make for uniformity and dullness?

Chapter 2 IDEOLOGY: SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE

7. The Division of Social Responsibility occasional paper, Sects and Parties, provides a critical examination of ideology; reference should be made to this paper for a fuller exposition of what can only be summarised in the following paragraphs.

8. Ideology may be defined as a pervasive set of ideas and principles by which we seek to understand social life in its entirety, how it works and how it changes, discerning its meaning and purpose.

9. Another view of ideology is of a comprehensive array of ideas, values, political and economic arrangements and actions by which we seek to entrench existing

power structures; or, of course, to displace existing power structures with different ones. Ideology is an all-embracing vision which justifies the way things go, and which is presented in such a manner that men and women in general are persuaded that they go well – for us all. Ideology, then, is not a neutral survey and an objective theory; it is a highly committed overview of political and economic arrangements. So great is the commitment, that no price is too great to pay – even war – to defend it.

10. **Liberal** culture has become normative in European and North American society. Its essence is the assertion and defence of the rights of individuals over and against the state. Freedom of association is of key importance. In its wake come values such as freedom of thought and expression, freedom before the law, freedom to ‘publish and be damned’, freedom to own property and to acquire wealth, knowledge and all other tools we judge we need to pursue what we believe to be in our interests. Any number of ideas, values and attitudes are permissible, provided they do not coerce others. Ideas are tested by their ability to persuade. The end-product of this explosion of points of view is pluralism.

11. **Classical Liberalism** is an ideology which challenges all authoritarian and non-democratic forms of government. Democratically elected government is necessary, and in plural societies some form of vigorous and fair competition for power is essential in political institutions, e.g. through proportional representation. Even democratic government must be constrained by a constitution which protects the rights of individual citizens from state intervention. A constitution also defines the general principles within which individuals and coalitions pursue their interests and negotiate conflicts of interest at every level of social organisation. Education enables citizens in pluralist societies to exercise their rights and contribute their skills and imagination to the construction of a progressive social order. Free trade is the key to economic progress. Liberalism generally resists the development of state institutions for these reasons:

However well-intentioned, they become interest groups; they generate professions, managerial groups and trade unions which peddle their own interests at the expense of the general prosperity;

They create dependencies in the recipients of state money which seriously inhibit the self-confidence and inventiveness of individuals; and

There is no limit to the resources they will absorb, so that eventually they cripple the economy.

12. Classical liberalism had to be adapted to meet the realities of industrial Britain, which had created widespread prosperity and yet held a large minority in serious poverty. It became clear that state intervention is necessary to remove various forms of disadvantage, though liberals have always been cautious about the power which state institutions accrue to themselves.

13. Such modified liberalism, sometimes known as “social liberalism” or “left liberalism”, has been a significant component in the development of **social democracy**. Within a prevailing liberal culture, social democracy aims to bring together in a coherent and mutually beneficial system the powerful institutions which

have been found to be integral to the management of modern, developed societies: free markets, democratic institutions and the enabling state. The interactions between these elements are of crucial importance. Free markets create wealth, and offer society the wide range of affordable choice that results from competitive activity. The enabling state helps individuals to acquire skills, to stay healthy, to take their place in a rapidly changing market, and to feel that they belong to one another. Democratic institutions make possible the political consent that is necessary if people are to participate confidently in the community and to tolerate the high levels of taxation that the enabling state requires; those institutions also help us to manage the conflict that arises through differing views as to how we belong to one another. (These concepts are further developed in chapter 3.)

14. Social Democracy is the form of liberal ideology most deeply entrenched in continental Europe. Among the concerns that it raises is the extraordinary concentration of power that it proposes in order to achieve its ends. The question that continually arises is the one that essentially defines modern liberalism: to what extent can a free society embrace the powerful public institutions that modern society seems inevitably to create? Much of the current debate within the European Union engages with this important issue.

15. Other streams of ideology have contributed to social democracy in Europe. Among them is **democratic socialism** which challenges the view of state intervention advocated by classical liberalism. It holds that more or less unbridled competition in the market destroys what it believes to be fundamental human values: mutuality in society, co-operation and justice. In pursuit of these values, socialism promotes the interests of social groups which are relatively powerless in society, especially the working class; and encourages social change towards greater equality through the disciplined collective action of disadvantaged groups under the guidance of the socialist party. A democratically elected socialist government uses state investment to reform social relations and to sustain a standard of living which gives dignity to all. In crucial areas of national life the state may take ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

16. Social democrats and classical liberals insist that socialism approaches the question of redistribution of power with little regard for the concentration of power that is entailed. Excessively powerful institutions operate inefficiently and breed corruption. Socialists and social democrats are also engaged in controversy about the relationship between equality and the vision of freedom which is at the heart of the liberal culture. In modern society liberalism, democratic socialism and social democracy interact with one another in vigorous mutual criticism, and struggle against one another to sway popular opinion and win power.

17. In the struggle to become widely entrenched in our culture, liberal ideologies must overcome deep-seated prejudices like sexism, racism and ageism. Pre-liberal institutional arrangements (e.g. structures of government which arose from the need to control a world empire) have to be removed or revised; all necessary action has to be taken to prevent subversion of liberal values and institutions – terrorism, for example, or a totalitarian coup d'état on behalf of a privileged elite or sectarian group.

18. Although liberalism, in its many varieties is dominant and normative in our culture, it is by no means the only ideology which is advocated. Alternative ideologies co-exist with liberalism and are debated with as much passion.

- (a) **Conservatism** appeals to tradition and time-honoured patterns of social organisation and authority. It is held firmly by those who have a vested interest in resisting change, but it also thrives on an often justified fear of change. Human personality is deeply flawed, and the destructive consequences of our imperfect social arrangements can be contained only with difficulty; change is perceived by some to threaten the release of unbridled greed and aggression. In addition, in our fast-changing world, conservatism continues to shape people's deepest feelings. Much change in the world, especially as it affects the least powerful, disregards the real content of people's lives, and disdains their views as prejudice. Progressive programmes continually founder on the rock of a widespread fear of change. Conservatism is essentially distinct from liberalism, but it might be claimed to belong within the liberal fold by accident, as it were. As the traditions of a people become more and more embodied in liberal institutions, so conservative sentiments endorse a present state of affairs that is unassailably liberal. It is, of course, possible to imagine a conservatism that is so radical that it repudiates liberalism as the cause of all modern ills. The connection between liberalism and conservatism is not necessary and unbreakable.
- (b) **Marxism** in the form of totalitarian communist regimes has been totally discredited in Eastern Europe. Marxism began by portraying liberalism as a necessary stage on the way to a classless society. It claimed to highlight the basic contradictions to which liberalism was said to be prone, of advocating freedom for all while simultaneously enslaving the less powerful and less wealthy in the market, over which they had little or no control. The force of Marxism's political and economic analysis cannot be disregarded; but liberalism itself is capable of a more effective self-criticism than Marxist historical determinism can supply.
- (c) **'Green' Ideology** aims to structure organisations, attitudes and goals so that the interests of the non-human environment figure alongside human interests. It is constructed on the assumption that ultimately human life can continue only as human beings and organisations live interdependently within a thriving environment.
- (d) **Nationalism** There is widespread anxiety at the resurgence of nationalism, both in Europe and elsewhere. Nationalist sentiment is so comprehensive as to be considered an ideology in its own right. It is useful to distinguish here between **ethnic nationalism** and **civic nationalism**. In its ethnic guise, nationalism can entail an appeal to an imagined traditional past, or a hoped for progressive future. It may be totalitarian in its political forms, or it may adopt a populist manipulation of democratic institutions. Often a strong basis of its appeal is religious. When ethnic nationalism appeals to "blood and soil", it is often deeply threatening to our common humanity.

Nationalism in its civic form, however, can enable communities with shared characteristics to function more cohesively and freely, and so contribute towards the common good. Such nationalism is shaped by its perception that any nation is but one among many, and that its special qualities are distinctive rather than superior.

19. Political parties in the main, however, are coalitions which hold together in a manageable way fairly wide ranges of commitment and conviction drawn from liberal ideologies. The strength of each coalition and its attraction to voters are related to its ability to win power in democratic elections, to keep hold of power and to serve the interests of its supporters. Each political party based on liberal ideologies inevitably provides a framework for vigorous internal debate, and shifting balances of power; and each party presents itself to the electorate in its most appealing light, in the course of which it does not always resist the allure of deceit and rhetoric.

Chapter 3 PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: HOW THE WORLD WORKS

20. Modern society in its Western European form is the product of many forces. Most recent of these has been the formation of the **European Union**, the polity to which the United Kingdom now belongs. The societies of the Union are characterised by three principal notions – those of the **free market, democratic politics** and the **enabling state**. These features are of course embodied in the societies of other West European states, and increasing in the aspirations of Eastern Europe. But it must be emphasised that these forms are fundamental to the nature of the Union, to which Britain is now firmly bound. In the following paragraphs we sketch in a positive manner a simple outline of these significant ideas; then come a range of critical comments.

22. The first important notion is the **free market**. Men and women have bought and sold in markets for millennia; but since the 17th and 18th centuries we have come to a formal understanding of how trade operates in a free market. Over the generations increasing numbers of free individuals have been enabled to participate in the market. In the market scarce resources are distributed by buyers and sellers stringing a bargain through a price mechanism. Sellers need as many customers as possible, with wealth to spend; buyers can choose what they judge to be the best on offer. Competition and co-operation have become in the market place the engine of an amazing prosperity – though not necessarily for all. Capitalism has fostered entrepreneurship, enterprise and wealth-creation. The free market, utilising human inventiveness, skill and commitment, is the ground of the technology, research, creature-comforts, means of travel, health and longevity which have transformed the lives of advanced industrial societies beyond what their ancestors could have dreamed of.

23. At the heart of this social revolution lie opportunities for most people to pursue what they judge to be in their own interests. Social progress and practical achievements have developed at a rapid pace. Self-interest, however, has negative aspects; so self-interest has to be constrained within some agreed and enforceable boundaries which inhibit oppression, cruelty, subversion and breach of trust.

24. The second notion is **democracy**, i.e. government by the people, direct or representative. Democratic processes and democratic institutions vary greatly from nation to nation in Western Europe. Debates continue about the most appropriate forms of representation in different institutions; and about the most effective ways in which those who govern may be held accountable to those who elect them. The things which unite all forms of democracy are: government which is accountable, participatory and open; government by freely elected representatives, not by people claiming political power because of heredity, wealth, gender, race or precedent; and a common allegiance to traditions of law which refrain abuses of power, treat all equally and embody minimum procedures of accountability.

25. The third notion is what may be called **the enabling state**. Left to itself the free market, like other systems of production and economic management, creates gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth in society. So it is said to be in the interests of the common good to provide, through the state, resources which enable everyone freely to play a creative part in society; indeed to ensure that all who wish to do so participate as fully as possible in the operation of the free market.

26. Hence in European countries government expenditure is directed to social investment: an education service, a health service, welfare institutions, retraining programmes, a public housing policy and the like. State investment also pays for certain shared goods which the free market cannot in principle provide, e.g. clean air.

27. Public expenditure on social purposes has in the past been seen largely as a safety net of the poor. The resulting social system is usually referred to in Britain as the Welfare State. In modern Britain, however, such expenditure reaches into every area of society, and total around 40 percent of national income. The benefits of such public expenditure are by no means restricted to the poor; indeed many studies have shown that the more prosperous benefit much more in proportion from spending on health, education and housing. The system is no longer targeted on the welfare of the poor; it seeks to enable all to enjoy a fuller life, and it works rather better for the better off. A new situation requires new language; hence the term enabling state.

28. There is a great deal of political discussion as to the division of function between the state as purchaser of goods and services, and the subsidiary agencies as providers of goods and services. The idea of the Enabling State does not imply a view on this important debate; it merely suggests that the simple notion of the state as a source of welfare is outdated.

Reflections on the way society works

29. The three different components of the European political / economic ensemble are each given different weight and are blended together in different ways in each separate nation. Many in Europe aim for the close integration of free markets, democratic institutions and the enabling state. The principal aim of government expenditure is social cohesion and the obvious advantages of seeking this goal in prosperous economies allows taxation of the better off to be perceived positively. In other countries, however, state expenditure is considered more as an item on its own. Its control becomes a major concern. Its relation to other social goals becomes problematic: disproportionately heavy burdens of taxation may be imposed on the

poorer sections of the community; and the application of state expenditure may be as much, if not more, to the advantage of the prosperous as to the cohesion of the whole community. Different historical backgrounds in the various nations partly explain these contrasting approaches to government expenditure. The UK, for example, remains nostalgic for the imperial aspirations of the 19th century, and places enormous pride in its island separateness from the rest of the continent. Its political and economic institutions have been resistant to change. In contrast many Western European nations have moved rapidly in the period of post-war reconstruction towards the evolution of the European Community.

30. There is a complex relationship between rich countries who have developed democratic, free market and state enabling institutions and the poor countries of the world. Some Western prosperity derives from the exploitation of relatively cheap resources of materials and labour in the poor parts of the world. This has aggravated the gap in living standards between the rich and the poor. But it is also true that the persistent grinding poverty of the non-industrialised nations is explicable by the maintenance of cultural, social and political systems in developing nations which have the effect of constricting wealth creation.

31. Because the threefold ensemble carries so much promise of prosperity and freedom, and individuals invest so much in it in pursuit of their interests, its imperfections in practice are easily disguised. For example:

- (a) Self-interest is dressed up as high moral principle; and information is withheld, censored or distorted in the interests of the powerful and the decision-makers.

On the other hand, it is an advantage of a relatively open society that critical investigation is permitted which can expose deceit.

- (b) Powerful vested interests, e.g. monopolies and transnational corporations, often distort the free market without society as a whole becoming aware of their activities. No economic system in the industrialised world has avoided the harsh reality of a significant minority who remain excluded from the general prosperity and who are held in poverty by a consoling welfare safety net.
- (c) No representative system of democracy is so effective that it does not leave some groups relatively voiceless and powerless. Political groups, although voted into power, invite little serious participation by the electorate; however, they are able skilfully to suggest otherwise. In consequence many people are alienated from decision-making processes and this, when linked to an experience of relative poverty, generates feelings of uselessness. Reform of such blemishes will be firmly resisted by those who achieve power through whatever system is current. Even the threat of violence seems unable to stimulate change. Shortcomings are easily kept from public view and alternatives systems of representation are portrayed inaccurately.

- (d) The enabling state is serviced by a burgeoning number of professions. Sometimes professions formed around a particular set of skills (e.g. education or health care) have been required to exercise executive power or have claimed it for themselves. This has caused difficulties in the efficient administration of state institutions. The allocation of executive tasks to professional managers may improve the situation, but will not in itself solve all the problems. For all professions and their attendant bureaucracies, though guided by altruistic ideas, manage resources and generate policies in their own interests as well as, or even at the expense of, their clients' interests. Some professions maintain such esteem in the public imagination that their claims for large sums of money are almost beyond challenge and criticism.

32. Political and economic institutions are in a constant state of flux. The context in which they operate is changing (see Chapter 1); and internal review and criticism of particular aspects of the threefold ensemble create change. How are these changes managed and in whose interests?

Chapter 4 CIVIL SOCIETY: HOW THE WORLD CHANGES

33. A basic distinction which profoundly affects our lives is the distinction between the state and the area of free choice in which the state plays no part. In the latter we choose our associates, the way we spend our time, the objectives we pursue and the costs we are willing to pay to obtain what we want. This distinction was traditionally identified as the difference between the **State** and **Civil Society**.

34. Such a simple picture no longer holds true. Central government now influences almost every area of our lives. Health, education, housing, social services and social security, museums and many arts productions are mediated through state-funded contractors to central government for the provision of standardised services. The relationship between government and business is becoming more complex. The rules for business in the European Community increasingly forbid any kind of subsidy to manufacturing industry. But most European governments foster industrial growth as a high priority for national policy; this support takes the form of social investment in training and education, research, transport and regional development.

35. With the influence of central government so pervasive, a huge proportion of the population now has a direct interest in the institutions of what we can call the 'corporate state'. The British economy has to be taxed at a rate of nearly 40 percent, largely to maintain a complex network of social provision, in spite of Government commitment to reduced public expenditure. (In some European nations, where the aim of state expenditure is more overtly social cohesion, the wealth generated by the market is taxed at an even higher rate).

36. It is extremely important that, as citizens, we consciously stand back from the incorporation into the state of all significant social activity. We have to put on one side our interest in the corporate state (through employment, for example) to discuss with others how society might be run. The most fruitful contexts for such debates are the groups and communities whose indebtedness to the state is relatively low.

Among them are the churches; together with families, neighbourhood institutions and schools, voluntary groups, small businesses and trade unions, and local initiatives in community care and action.

37. It is now usual to describe this whole, complex human network as **civil society**. This whole range of social grouping lies outside the formal system of politics, but it is clearly of great importance in the political process, and to the achievement of real change.

38. This notion is quite central to what follows. A modern society is highly complex, and highly professionalised. It contains powerful groups engaged in business, politics and the social institutions of the enabling state. Over against these politically powerful institutions lies the general public, organised in a great variety of ways, tending to accept somewhat passively the direction of institutional power. The public at large can easily become the victims of conflict or collusion between these powerful bodies. There is now widespread discussion of the need of people to assert themselves over against these powerful public institutions, through the complex counterbalance to political power which is an essential feature of civil society.

39. How, then, do men and women contribute to change from within civil society?

- (a) We examine critically the operations of the free market, democratic institutions and the enabling state; we affirm their strengths and expose their weaknesses, seeking clearer pictures of the various vested interests which we find at work.
- (b) We help one another to dream dreams of what sort of society we should ideally like to come into being, capitalising on technical resources available and respecting the values we hold dear.
- (c) Through political parties and through specific-issue pressure groups, we promote particular policies aimed at the realisation of our dreams and visions and at their embodiment in the life of human communities.

40. To religious groups and institutions there is given the special responsibility of becoming persuasive about the distinctive claims of religious ethics. The reasons which give this task particular urgency are the following:

- (a) Men and women do not always act unselfishly in civil society. Private interest groups are as likely to be formed as morally serious religious groups or charitable enterprises. Everywhere hypocrisy is likely to be in evidence. To note one important example of ambiguity: the rapid growth of professionalisation during the last 200 years or so. Almost every transaction and activity in society can now be performed by appropriate professionals. But professions operate in considerable measure to further the interests and enhance the status of their members, over and against the public they claim to serve.
- (b) It has also become characteristic of much of our society to advocate the pursuit of individual happiness and pleasure as the chief good. Wealth

and advertising have nurtured this idea. People's actions are shaped by what stimulates good feelings in themselves and by what assists the immediate gratification of their own needs and desires. A richer life appears to be on offer, with men and women liberated from what are perceived to be artificial restrictions in the traditional patterns of behaviour. Nothing however is unambiguously good. Selfishness is hardly ever completely harmless to others; and some patterns of behaviour (e.g. drug-taking or sexual promiscuity) create social problems whose containment is costly and problematic.

41. In this context the church is called to witness to meanings, values and purposes beyond ourselves. A religious ethic identifies human good:

- (a) in the claim on us from others – which may find expression in faithfully fulfilling an obligation to another (perhaps within lifelong monogamous marriage), or in responding to a call to serve others;
- (b) in the claim on us from the past and the future, so that we feel an obligation to transmit a tradition, or continue a commitment entered into by others, or prepare programmes of action whose fruits will not mature in our own lifetime (e.g. years of patient research into an historical epoch, or the careful formulation of public policies to eliminate illiteracy);
- (c) in the claim on us from God, whose grace is experience within the rituals, structures and values of the community of faith; hence the chief end of humanity is to glorify God, to know God by whom we have been created.

42. These inter-related claims on us are clarified through the exercise of the personal qualities of imagination and sympathy. Imagination helps us to envisage ranges of meaning and experience which are different from what is familiar to us, i.e. it helps us to create choices. Sympathy shapes our imagination for the good of others; it assists our capacity to stay alongside others in loving attention.

43. In the Methodist tradition 'happiness' has been a familiar description of human good, but happiness is understood as holiness. In John Wesley's teaching holiness (or perfection, or entire sanctification) was essentially an individualistic concept, and this strand of thought has persisted through the generations since. Alongside it, however, there has grown up a corporate or social understanding. So sanctification is the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer and in the community of faith, transforming all attitudes and thoughts, words and actions until they become transparent of love.

44. The church, then, needs to become an arena for moral reflection on the way the corporate state operates – affirming and criticising what goes on. And it needs to recover its confidence in being able to affect the way society is run by large institutions and faceless bureaucracies. The renewal of churches and communities in these directions has been thoroughly researched in recent years in programmes of church and community development. The warm espousal of the principles of community work in churches, and financial support for education and further research

in this field, become priorities if churches are to facilitate creative change in the structures of the corporate state.

45. The conditions for an effective contribution to social change from civil society are these:

- (a) The church must affirm and co-operate with contemporary small-scale, neighbourhood institutions where local democracy, free political discussion and local decision-making can flourish; but at the same time remain vigilant and critical, on the look-out for self-interest and privilege masquerading as concern for the common good.
- (b) The church must encourage the process of empowerment of alienated and powerless groups in contemporary society. They need to be enabled to tell their own stories over and against the dominant culture, and to honour their indigenous customs and rituals. Empowerment needs enabling structures and resources. The results of empowerment of disenfranchised minorities can readily create misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts in civil society. Much of the criticism of the way society has been run may be directed against the church's historical social and political stances.
- (c) The church must give skilled and reliable support to many of its members who have their employment in the corporate state, often carrying heavy responsibilities for the application of corporate policy (e.g. business people and civil servants, health professionals and educators). Often there are tensions or ethical conflicts between what is spoken about in the congregation and the tasks which must be performed in daily work.
- (d) The commitment of individual Christians to work for social and political change should also be recognised as a fully legitimate form of Christian discipleship. Christians need to help one another to live with compromise and ambiguity; congregations need to be communities where feelings of confusion and anguish about daily work can be shared without others taking offence and without the fear of being judged harshly. And yet the Christian community must be a forum where ideals are clarified, integrity is enhanced and commitment is renewed.
- (e) The church must acknowledge that no discussion of political hopes and no commitment to social change can happen without **conflict**. There will be conflict within the church and between the church and other social groups and institutions. The church will sometimes find itself be called to support various groups of dispossessed and marginalised people, but recognises that such commitments will rarely win unanimous support from church members. The church must not flinch from its responsibility to engage in conflict. In practice, however, we fight shy of conflict: we are afraid of it, and we prefer to advocate ideals like reconciliation and conflict-resolution even where they are inappropriate or misleading.

- (f) Groups and communities in civil society need to be able to relate effectively to intermediate levels of government. This in turn requires local government to have real powers delegated to it.
- (g) Central government must be responsive to public pressure and legitimate criticism. This requires government to be open (rather than shrouded in secrecy) and representative of the diverse groups and interests which make up society as a whole; and in a dialogical (rather than a domineering) relationship with intermediate forms of government.

46. No one should underestimate the pressures which large-scale businesses, the professions, trades unions and entrenched political groups bring against the success of local initiatives in political action. And the church's encouragement is most feeble in those areas where it is most needed – in inner cities and declining rural communities. So the church's deployment of its limited human and financial resources, its imagination and sympathy need constant revision.

47. Left to itself the corporate state becomes a battle ground between competing powerful interests; and the assured losers are those who, because of their relatively powerless place in society, are unable to participate in the battles for power and self-interest. The inequalities in society, and the dependency of the weak, increase. We therefore underline how important it is for the church and small-scale groups and institutions to contribute to change and development in our political and economic culture.

Chapter 5 CHRISTIAN FAITH AND POLITICS

Theological diversity

48. The Bible is the principal authority to which all Christians have appealed in their desire to discern God's action in the world and to obey God's will. Over the centuries, out of wide-ranging debate in the church, many doctrinal statements have been formulated which attempted to crystallise the fundamental ideas of Christian believing. The developing doctrinal tradition has helped to give to the church its distinctive identity. Under the critical scrutiny of scripture, it continues to witness to the basic content of Christian thought, in every social and political system (e.g. paragraph 2).

49. The Bible and doctrinal theology were generated in pre-liberal societies, where conservative ideologies held sway. Christian theologians and church assemblies, for all their sincere struggle to encapsulate the truth of God, tended to be heavily influenced by the cultural contexts in which they worked and by the interests of church leaders. Sometimes churches defined themselves as being over and against the secular power, beacons of light in a dark world. In contrast, where the church held political influence, or sought it, Christian thinking was often used to justify the ideological concerns of those with power. In such situations, there were also other forces at work: the prophetic tradition frequently challenged abuses of power, flagrant injustice, cruelty and ungodly values in society's leaders. In other settings the church

pictured itself as leaven in the dough of political and economic activity: it attempted to embody glimpses of God's kingdom in the midst of the prevailing power structures, which the church largely adopted.

50. Since the birth of modern society, liberals in politics have often suspected that the church's vested interest is to revive traditional society and to reclaim its privileges and powers. Doubtless the political aims of the churches in different nations have been mixed and various. The overall historical movement, however, for reasons which vary from one nation to another, has been the marginalisation of the church's influence.

51. Within liberal societies Christians have found it difficult to agree on ways of doing theology which honour the Bible and the doctrinal tradition and which reveal God's truth to the modern world. A plurality of theological methods has emerged. These co-exist more or less happily in the world-wide Christian community and in many local congregations; and individual theologians often adopt a mixture of assumptions about how to do theology. The principal theological methods are as follows.

- (a) Most Christians and Christian communities are convinced that the principal objective of theology must be to maintain the authority of the Bible and of Christian doctrine, which are believed to contain as much of divine truth as is accessible to human beings. Bible and doctrine comprise a unique revelation of God's actions and intentions; they provide a searching critique of liberalism and present an abiding claim on the allegiance of individuals and societies. In the history of the church there are two clearly distinguished forms of this approach. On the one hand the Reformation churches insist that doctrine is always subject to scrutiny from the Bible; on the other hand there is the Catholic position which affirms Bible and doctrine to be complementary authorities in the formulation of Christian truth. But there is considerable overlap between these two positions. The Bible was written within a tradition of faith and life; interpretation of the Bible takes place within a tradition and contributes to the development of tradition.
- (b) Some regard the Bible and Christian doctrine to be a unique resource for responding creatively to legitimate new questions raised by modern society and contemporary knowledge. The Christian tradition safeguards true perspectives on a vision of God and of what it means to be human; but these perspectives are revealed in compelling ways in response to novel political, social and economic issues.
- (c) Some are convinced that the Bible and Christian doctrine provide a unique resource not for critical commentary on public issues but for the transformation of the interior life – both of individual believers and of the holy community of faith called out of the world. Those who hold this view see that the Christian tradition inspires individuals to live upright and compassionate lives in wider society, but they do not agree that the church's task is to comment on the political world.

- (d) Some hold that it is not the Bible (even less the whole corpus of Bible and doctrine) but the ministry of Jesus, to which the Gospels bear witness, which uniquely sketches a blueprint for society, an ideal political culture (the kingdom of God). They feel an obligation to enact this vision of society in opposition not only to all liberal and other ideologies, but also in opposition to the institutional churches.
- (e) Some consider the Bible and Christian doctrine constitute historic resources whose treasures can be unlocked in the modern era by the use of critical tools of analysis. The Christian tradition becomes thereby a valuable gift for men and women to use in their struggle to make sense of themselves and of God. But it is not the only gift on offer. God the Creator also provides, through secular research and knowledge, regenerative perspectives on ourselves and our world. Thus human well-being is served by critical openness to human culture as well as to the Bible and Christian doctrine, and by the encouragement of dialogue between diverse structures of understanding and springs of action available in a plural society.

Conflict or Enrichment?

52. The grace of God, on whom faith depends from first to last, transcends all theological methods, theological ideas, ideological commitments and social policies. In Jesus Christ God calls men and women into the life of the kingdom, where interdependence and mutual edification enhance human well-being. In the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus develop the art of taking account of the interests of others beside their own interests, of exploring structures of understanding which are different from their own, and of working together in pursuit of projects which offer no short-term gain or immediate consummation. This is part of what it means to be incorporated into the body of Christ.

53. The church endeavours to create disciplines and procedures which facilitate dialogue between the varying theological traditions, an experience of mutuality, and a sense of being members one of another in a catholic community of faith. It does not simply hold the ring while the various vested interests battle against one another for power.

54. To be open to one another in such dialogue is not to remove theological conflict on political issues and political judgements. Diversity of interpretation remains an integral part of the experience of the Christian community.

55. So even themes like 'justice', 'peace' and 'freedom', which impregnate the scriptures and the church's worship, are not singular in meaning. They admit of many interpretations. Different ways of doing theology (paragraph 51) will infuse the various interpretations with different nuances from the Christian tradition. But interpretation is also coloured by our passionate involvement in ideological debate, by our need to justify our interests. Is justice, for example, the appropriate reward for individual effort, enterprise and behaviour; or is it a description of a social order where access to opportunities, basic resources for living and human rights are roughly the same for everyone?

A critical perspective

56. When, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the universal grace of God touches our lives and we are brought to faith, we are incorporated into a community of believers which offers God unceasing praise and thanks for God's grace in creation and salvation. In the church we are called to be open in love and serve to one another and to the whole of God's creation. Thus the Christian community becomes involved in the exercise of political responsibility and supports in prayer those who exercise political authority, as it prays for all people according to their need. However, walking in the way of the cross means that the faithfulness to the Christian vision will frequently provoke conflict with political powers; and that Christians will bring to all political and social issues a keen critical perspective.

57. Our Christian vision, however, is flawed. Even when sincerely trying to do good, we are sinners. For sin and death continue to corrupt our lives – sometimes catastrophically – even though in Christ their stranglehold has been decisively broken. But God's mercy is limitless: God forgives us and gives us the Spirit so that we may grow in holiness. Thus God encourages us to be lovingly self-critical and lovingly critical of the church before we contribute to wider society insights which are both affirmative and critical. And as a further expression of God's generosity to us, the Holy Spirit inspires in our imaginations new visions of how human beings may live well together which are not constricted by current political interests and social structures.

58. Much of our critical energy will be devoted to challenging systems which are prejudiced in favour of certain groups of people – on the basis of, say, race, gender, social class, wealth, education, or health. While we acknowledge that the first claim on a government's resources will be directed to the welfare of its own citizens, we believe that the church has the responsibility of bringing to its government's attention the sometimes desperate needs of other countries.

We also note that one of the most sensitive and difficult issues for governments, which easily exposes them to charges of injustice and inhumanity, concerns the control of their borders and decisions relating to immigration and emigration.

59. Particular attention must be given to understanding the following: the deception inherent in all ideologies; political programmes which win their way by falsely claiming a partnership between political power and religious values; and aspects of public policies which unwittingly or deliberately oppress the poor and vulnerable, blame them or encourage indifference to their plight. The Christian vision is inclusive of all God's creation; it attempts to call all things by their proper name; and aspires to build communities characterised by mutual respect, interdependence and a struggle for the common good.

Church and world

60. In putting our vision into practice, Christians reveal further divisions among themselves. These divisions have remained unresolved over many generations. For example, many hold that participation in political life is the prerogative of individual

Christians; while others insist that the Christian community, as a body and an institution, is called to a corporate witness in the political and social realm.

61. Individual Christians display a great variety of gifts and ministries, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Some are very enthusiastic about political involvement; others are not at all keen. We believe, however, that in the church it is desirable for all members to share in a general awareness of the political issues of the day. And everyone in the church may express political opinions and is entitled to be listened to with respect. Those who are called to a fuller participation in politics will inevitably find themselves involved with groups like political parties, trade unions, professional associations and pressure groups. In every case Christians have to learn to live with ambiguity and compromise. In whatever role and institution they make their contribution (e.g. local councillor, party activist, or concerned member of an environmental group), they will encourage open, critical and moral discussion. They will seek integrity of life (even while living with ambiguity), trying to apply principles like truthfulness, respect for others and justice.

62. When the church as a body makes public statements on public issues, through resolutions at Synods, Divisional Boards and the Conference, it should observe the following criteria:

- (a) The church must be self-critical before it presumes to be critical of others. It must be particularly alert to the possibility of self-interest masquerading as high moral principle.
- (b) Church statements must demonstrate a competence and a comprehensiveness regarding the subject under discussion which will be recognised and respected by all serious commentators. To achieve this goal the church must be willing to seek out and to use resources both within and beyond its membership.
- (c) Where a church statement is seeking to address a context in which people are victimised and marginalised, those responsible for it should consult wherever possible in a direct way with such people and give full and serious consideration to their views.
- (d) Church statements must endeavour to represent the diversity of conviction and insight in the Christian community as a whole. Considered judgements should arise from open debate in the representative councils of the church. In so doing, the Church must not shrink from what Donald Soper has famously described as “the fellowship of controversy”.
- (e) Church statements must demonstrate an indebtedness to our traditions of faith – though there will be a number of ways in which this can be achieved (paragraphs 51-55). As a consequence, attention will be given primarily to the ends of social organisation and political action. This does not exclude critical discussion of particular means and policies which may be proposed; but it places such a discussion in a theological framework. Furthermore the church must be willing to

identify the limits of acceptable political ideology, beyond which Christian sympathy must be withdrawn because our understanding of God is contradicted (e.g. apartheid, or the National Front). In practice a pluralist church in a liberal society has difficulty in drawing such boundaries.

- (f) Church statements should normally be addressed to the principal political parties as well as to government ministers, members of Parliament, members of the European Parliament and local political leaders, as appropriate.

63. Another division in Christian understanding is the following. Some see a sharp distinction between what God does in the community of faith itself and what God is doing in the world at large. They assert that the church is a unique community, a foretaste of the kingdom of God, which is clearly and visibly different from the rest of the world, where Jesus Christ is not acknowledged as Lord and Saviour. Church politics are therefore claimed to be different from the messier politics of the world; church politics should be an exemplary challenge to secular politics.

64. In contrast, others in the community of faith are inspired by a vision of God at work in every part of creation. They gladly acknowledge the distinctiveness of their faith, but they insist that there is no discernible difference between politics in the church and in wider society. Political action seeks no privilege for or deference to the church, but works for the common good.

65. Many in the church want to affirm both sides of these divisions. All recognise that these divisions pose legitimate issues for continuing debate in the church. However it is probable that the inevitability of conflict often inhibits debate within congregations on political and theological matters. A special responsibility rests on ministers and local preachers to facilitate and encourage open and vigorous discussion in the church. We therefore strongly recommend that the training of preachers should include, as a core topic, exploration of clear and appropriate guidelines for preaching and leading prayers on controversial political issues.

Chapter 6 A CONTINUING TASK

66. The church has a significant, though complicated, contribution to make to political change within our democratic and liberal culture. The Methodist Church brings resources such as these: a vision which is constantly renewed in worship and presented as persuasively as possible in society – a vision of God at work in the world and a vision of what it means to be human; a community of men and women being transformed by God's grace so that the Christian ethic flourishes and challenges self-interest – in the church and in wider society – with the claims of others, particularly the disadvantaged and weak; and a forum for open political debate which is not strangled by the vested interests of the principal political parties.

67. We appeal to all members of the church to play a part in political controversy. None should feel in advance that their views cannot influence debate, or that their convictions are unworthy of a hearing. It is a crucial part of the church's task to

enable those who feel that they have minority opinions to find a voice. Conflict, diversity of judgement and passionate opposition to sincerely held points of view will doubtless emerge. But it is fundamental to the church's fellowship that polarities should be held together in a dialogue of listening and speaking, in mutual respect, love and prayer.

68. Detailed attention must be given to the particular issues of the day – as, for instance, in paragraph 6 above. Such issues will provoke a plurality of Christian perspectives in the church, which need to be debated. It must be emphasised yet again that this Statement does not exist to select the range of views that Christians should espouse. The task attempted here has been to describe the theological and ideological framework within which our diverse convictions lie.

69. There is, however, a Christian political vocation that follows from this discussion and which many Christians have long practised. From the variety of opinions and interests within the Christian community there will emerge a range of individual commitments, and a number of shared aims. These commitments and aims should evoke a threefold response.

- First, the church needs to be pastorally committed to the political calling of its people, through the whole gamut of legitimate political conviction.
- Second, Christians must be encouraged to proclaim their convictions boldly.
- Third, they must be prepared to act confidently in the pursuit of those convictions.

It is that whole range of commitment which is cherished in the Methodist tradition, and in whose service this Statement is offered.