THE METHODIST CHURCH

Strategy for Methodist Church (Britain) engagement with European society beyond Britain and Ireland

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Methodist Church in Britain proclaims that God, through the Holy Spirit, is at the heart of all human life. God wants the best for all people, including those who live in Europe. Our Calling challenges us to work for the vision of peace and reconciliation, and the harmony and unity of all the peoples of Europe.

1.2 Methodist attitudes towards Europe can be epitomised in two recent letters to the Methodist Recorder (18.12.03 & 8.1.04). Both are referring to the European Union, in response to an article by the President of Conference. One suggests that the EU is a supranational body that costs us billions of pounds each year. It has nothing to do with the Gospel. The second, in response, suggests that as the EU has, at its heart, the promotion of peace through co-operation and common security and therefore has everything to do with Gospel.

1.3 Europe,¹ of course, is much bigger and more complex than the European Union even with enlargement from 15 states to 25. Through many and varied institutions and relationships, she struggles to understand and respond to the massive social, political, moral and spiritual / religious dilemmas and challenges posed both from within and without its territories. It is a diverse and evolving region, with multiple economic and religious parameters. In the final years of the 20th century Europe experienced some of the most profound changes in its history as revolutions swept through central and eastern Europe. Thousands of people were liberated from violent and oppressive regimes.² However the after shocks are still being felt. These same countries struggle to overcome poverty, face the menace of HIV/AIDS, cope with high levels of unemployment and find the challenge of developing democratic styles of leadership and patterns of accountability difficult. In western Europe there is a struggle to accept asylum seekers who find themselves confronted by racist attitudes and actions. Barriers are being raised particularly against some of the peoples’ of the accession countries to prevent their free movement. At the same time the historic churches of western Europe are experiencing serious decline in membership whilst many Diaspora churches,

¹ Europe includes all the countries of The Council of Europe
² World Council of Churches, Statement on Europe, August 2003
particularly from Africa and Asia, have taken root. We find it difficult to adopt more environmentally friendly ways of living though we have begun the journey.

1.4 In this context ever more demands are being made upon us, as a Methodist Church, to respond to the concerns, issues and problems that affect life in Europe. It is easy to be lost in the welter of requests and to be overwhelmed by the size of some of the issues before us. Also, it would be easy to ignore requests that come to us for representation and comment as we do not have the resources of people, time or finance to make an impact at every level and on every matter.

1.5 At the practical level we need to be realistic in terms of what we can do, can offer and can engage with.

1.6 In order to make an effective response we need a clear strategy. For a strategy to be effective there needs to be clarity of purpose, some agreed priorities, logical and understandable processes. The work should be undertaken with a small number of appropriate European institutions, as listed below. The whole approach to European work needs to be consistent with our approach to mission, as outlined in the 1996 Statement of Purpose of the Methodist Church that lies behind Our Calling.

1.7 Methodists hold an inclusive theology. The God of grace is present in all humankind. We are witnesses to the riches of God’s grace. We are called to share our insights and understandings with others as a part of enriching the whole. In Europe Methodism may be numerically small but our willingness to journey across the boundaries of culture, language and faith and to do so with confidence means we have a positive contribution to make to the development of European life with all its problems yet in all its fullness.

1.8 We would be behaving in a very insular and arrogant manner if we decided that engagement with European life is for others and not for us. We would be ignoring our Arminian theology, our commitment to a universal vision of life, our growing understanding of mission as partnership, dialogue and journey, and our response to the call of God to share the redeeming grace and forgiving love of Jesus Christ, if we choose not to engage. We have insights and approaches emerging out of our tradition, organisation and experience that can positively contribute to the development of European life. With others we are called to work for the goals of unity and peace among the nations and communities that make up the religious, social and cultural pluralism of
Europe. The Church, of course, struggles with the same issues as the wider European society. We fail to acknowledge and overcome the evil of racism. We fail to accept and affirm difference and diversity as God’s gift to both church and society. Yet this engagement should be a priority for the whole Church. We affirm the contribution of Black and Asian people, of women and men, of those who are different. The learning coming from this engagement is for our benefit as well as the benefit of those we work alongside. The Methodist Church in Britain, through our own hard and often painful experience, can contribute to the learning and development of European society.

2. Mission Focus

2.1 It would be easy to view much of the structure below as a bureaucratic exercise with no obvious mission outcome. Yet mission initiatives are developed through the building of good relationships based on mutuality and respect. For instance the development and success of the European Methodist Festival was due to relationships built through European Methodist Council. One of the outcomes is a greater sense of trust and confidence in each other and in God. The willingness of English speaking and German speaking people to deeply engage with other was a real highlight. Secondly, conversations in the Conference of European Churches enable a greater understanding to develop between the representatives of the various confessional bodies, particularly Protestant and Orthodox, that contribute to the building of a peaceful Europe in which there is tolerance and understanding between the different nations. At the same time these organisations provide opportunities for addressing some of the major issues affecting European society like racism and xenophobia, migration, poverty as well as the development of inter-faith relations.

3. STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS

3.1 The institutions that we engage with are:

European Methodist Council (EMC)
- The United Methodist Church Central Conferences of Germany, Northern Europe (including Russia), Central & Southern Europe and the autonomous Methodist churches of Italy (in union with the Waldensians), Ireland, Portugal, Spain (the Spanish Evangelical Church) and Britain
- Representatives from Britain are: Rev David Deeks (General Secretary), Mr Colin Ride (Europe Secretary), Mr Steve Hucklesby (International Affairs Secretary), Mrs Jill King, Revd Celia McDonald.
EMC Committees: Church & Society, Theological Commission, Fund for Mission in Europe (the Fund for World Mission contributes £45,000 2003/04 & proposes £55,000 for 2004/05)

EMC meets annually

European Methodist Youth Council (EMYC)

3.2 This brings together the heads of youth departments and young people (sometimes the two are synonymous). There are nine representatives from Britain including Mr Mike Seaton (Youth & Community), Ms Lizzie Jeans (Youth & Community, World Action), Ms Eva Walker (European Evangelism Enabler, Cliff College), Mr Chris Jones, (Training & Development Officer, London Region)

3.3 EMYC meets annually and organises such events as Swopshop, (for children’s workers) and CINA projects (Churches in Neighbourhood Action)

European Commission on Mission

3.4 Meeting of Methodist Mission Officers and representatives whose responsibilities lie outside Europe.

Conference of European Churches (CEC)

3.5 CEC brings together some 125 Protestant and Orthodox Churches including denominations from Great Britain & Ireland. It works through a Presidium, a Central Committee and a number of Commissions.

3.5i CEC Central Committee (2003 – 2009)

- Three Methodists were elected at the 12th Assembly to the Central Committee: Dr Mariella Mihaylova (Bulgaria), Revd Birgit Wolter (Italy), Mr Colin Ride (UK). The Central Committee has 40 members.
- There are five representatives from the UK & Ireland: Right Revd Richard Chartres, Bishop of London (Church of England), Dr Alison Elliot (Church of Scotland), Revd Dr Susan H Jones (Church in Wales), Ms Heather Morrow, (Presbyterian Church of Ireland), Mr Colin Ride (Methodist Church)

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3 UMC Annual & Central Conferences in membership are:
Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Serbia & FYR Macedonia, and the UMC Northern Europe including Russia

4 Churches from Britain & Ireland in membership as at December 2002: Baptist Union of Great Britain, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church in Wales, Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches, Lutheran Council of Great Britain, Methodist Church (GB), Scottish Episcopal Church, Shilo United Church of Christ, United Reformed Church, Congregational Federation (UK), Presbyterian Church of Wales, Church of Ireland, Methodist Church in Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
3.5ii 1st Central Committee, December 2003

- The following people were elected to the various CEC instruments:

  **The Presidium**
  Dr Mariella Mihaylova (United Methodist Church)
  Revd Dr Susan H Jones (Church in Wales)

  **Church & Society Commission**
  Mrs Anthea Cox (also elected to the Executive Committee)
  Dr Charles Reed (Church of England)
  Revd David Sinclair (Church of Scotland)

  **Churches in Dialogue**
  Revd Elena Stepanova (Russia)
  Ms Elizabeth Fisher (Church of England)

3.5iii CEC Church & Society Commission

- We are stakeholders in the Executive Officer appointment to C&S of the Revd Matthew Ross. £10,000 per annum for 3 years is contributed from the *Fund for World Mission*.

- We have made a number of nominations for the various work areas of the C&S Commission. Mr John Williams (Wales) has been selected to serve on the Peace, Security and Reconciliation working group.

Community of Protestant Churches (Leuenberg Fellowship)

3.6 We have a place on the Executive Committee (Revd Harvey Richardson has accepted nomination) and have a representative (Mr Keith Jenkins) on one of its current study groups: *the Shape and Organisation of Protestant Churches in a Changing Europe*. There is a second study group: *The Protestant Profile in the Missionary Task of the Churches in Europe*.

Churches' Commission on Migrants in Europe (CCME)

3.7 Normally we work through Mr Naboth Muchopa, Methodist Racial Justice Secretary.

Methodist European Reference Group (MERG) (in Britain)

3.8 A group of staff and volunteer members meeting around a European agenda and acting as a support group to the Europe Secretary. It includes the five EMC members from Britain.
Ecumenical partners in Britain and Ireland

3.9 Church of England, United Reformed Church, Baptist Union, Salvation Army, Church in Wales, Church of Scotland, Church of Ireland and Methodist Churches in Britain and Ireland are all members of CEC.

European Parliament & other political and social institutions

3.10 We have direct contact with the small number of Methodist Members of the European Parliament. We work on political and social matters through CECs good offices. The Revd Matthew Ross is responsible for Peace & Security issues.

4. SUPPORT

4.1 The World Church Office, through the Fund for World Mission supports, two Europe-related British Methodist programmes and two other organisations in Britain who have a European focus namely:

4.2

♦ European Evangelism Enabler, Cliff College

♦ MAYC Community Education for the Young European (a volunteer exchange programme using European Voluntary Service, a part of the EU Youth Programme)

These two programmes are primarily about evangelism and service. The role of EEE is to help students develop cross-cultural understandings of mission and culturally appropriate styles of evangelism in theory and practice. CEYE organises placements and supports young adults (18-25 years) as they spend between 6 and 12 months in Germany / Britain. It’s European partner is Internationaler Diakonischer Jugendsatz, based in the Methodist Youth Department in Hamburg.

4.3

♦ Keston Institute, Oxford (publishers of Religion, State & Society & other material focussing on eastern Europe & Euroasia)

♦ Forum 18 (from September 2004) (providers of a daily E-mail service on religious rights in Europe)
These two organisations provide important up to date information about religious life in Russia and the former states of the USSR.

5. **B I-LATERAL RELATIONSHIPS**

5.1 We have bi-lateral relationships with other Methodist Churches in Europe through their Central and Annual Conferences. These are conducted through the sending, receiving and supporting of mission personnel; visits from the Area Secretary for Europe; establishing congregational relationships which cross the boundaries of culture and language. These involve sharing of ideas and resources (including finance through Special Grants and general Europe budget, and personnel), the development of new mission initiatives, praying together, attending each other’s Conferences and working together in the various European structures. Work with children and young people should receive particular attention as from these will develop future leaders and opinion makers.

5.2 There are mission partners in Germany, Italy, Russia and Bulgaria. There are new opportunities for mission partners in Austria, Poland and Portugal. There is one German mission partner in Britain coming through the World Church in Britain Partnership programme. We give financial support to Nationals in Mission Appointments in Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Portugal, Ukraine, Italy, Belgium, Latvia, Estonia and the Slovak Republic.


6.1 Recognising that the strategy needs to have a clear mission focus (see 2.1 above) we need to ensure that we have a coherent way of engaging with all these institutions. This means that:

- We know why we engage with each,
- What are the potential benefits to us and
- What are the contributions we make.

6.2 We need a core group through which these relationships can be managed and issues dealt with and work agendas formed.

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5 From September 2004
6 From September 2004
7 From September 2004
6.3 People should know why they attend any particular group and what is the contribution they are expected to make.

6.4 A structure needs to be in place to ensure that the Methodist Church in Britain can gain for its own development the learning acquired from this involvement.

7. PROPOSAL FOR A STRATEGY

7.1 The Methodist Church in Britain’s policy is one of positive engagement with a limited number of European institutions. The reason is that through this engagement we are able to ensure:

- that this is an appropriate way of living out Our Calling.
- that we receive insight and develop learning that can be shared within the British Methodist Connexion
- that mission is relationship and dialogical and is developed through partnership and sharing
- that Methodist views and concerns are heard

7.2 The strategy is worked out through sharing in the work of the institutions and structures outlined above and through the large network of informal relationships that exists across Europe.

7.3 The Core Group to manage the strategy is a redefined European Reference Group (MERG). It will include in its membership:
- Staff with European interests,
- EMC members,
- Ecumenical partners,
- Others with experience and knowledge as required including British & Irish Methodist members of CEC Commissions.
- The Chair will be the Revd Harvey Richardson, Chair of the London South-East District

7.4 MERG will:
- Have oversight of the Methodist Church in Britain strategy for engagement in European life
Propose nominations for the various councils, committees & commissions working at a European level

Ensure the co-ordination of the Connexional Team input

Disseminate European information as appropriate

Contribute to the development of new mission initiatives

Give support to the Europe Secretary who is responsible for the management of the strategy, and its associated workload

The responsible Officer will be the Europe Secretary

Circulate its minutes to appropriate staff for information and comment, and agenda items to WCAG as necessary

Account to the Joint Secretaries Group