

## **FREEMASONRY (1996)**

### **Preamble**

At the 1993 Conference a number of Memorials were received requesting the Conference 'to reconsider the recommendations made in the 1985 report on Freemasonry, in the light of the changed practices of that Order and in view of the discrimination felt by some Freemasons who are Methodists'. Another Memorial requested the Conference 'not to reconsider the recommendations made in the 1985 report on Freemasonry'. The Conference referred all these Memorials to the Faith and Order Committee for report in 1994.

The Faith and Order Committee reported that it had not received from the circuits sending memorials, after an invitation to do so, evidence of changed masonic practice and of discrimination against Freemasons. It had, however, received (1) a submission from the Association of Methodist Freemasons, 'A Review of Information about the Effects of the 1985 Conference Report about Freemasonry'; (2) leaflets, videos and evidence of changed practices from the United Grand Lodge of England; (3) over 350 letters from individual Freemasons, mostly Methodist, expressing their dismay at the recommendations of the 1985 report and claiming that Freemasonry and church membership were compatible and indeed mutually supportive.

The Committee reported that the evidence submitted left no room for doubt that, though discrimination against Methodist Freemasons has not been widespread, a number of cases have occurred. Any such discrimination was deplorable, unworthy of the Church, and entirely unjustified. Nothing in the 1985 report supported such attitudes and behaviour. On the grounds of discrimination the Committee could not recommend a review of the report. On the issue of inaccuracies in the report, alleged by some correspondents, the Committee recognised that some statements in the 1985 report were no longer accurate because of changes in Freemasonry practice. It recommended the Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to review the 1985 report in the light of the information which is now available. The Conference directed the Committee 'to reconsider the 1985 report . . . and to report to the Conference of 1996'.

The Committee offers to the Conference the following :

### **Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry (1996)**

- 1 The Conference of 1984 directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on Freemasonry in order that the Methodist people might be guided as to the advisability of membership. After consultation with Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons a report was presented and adopted by the 1985 Conference. A number of Memorials received in 1993 were referred to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report. In 1994 the Conference, on the recommendation of that committee, directed the Faith and Order Committee to reconsider the 1985 report 'Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry' and report to the Conference of 1996.

2The Committee gratefully acknowledges the help it has received from Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons. It has received many documents, including copies of reports on Freemasonry by other Churches.

3 Freemasonry describes itself as “one of the world’s oldest secular fraternal societies” and “concerned with moral and spiritual values”. In Basic, or ‘Craft’, Freemasonry there are three levels of membership, known as degrees, through which the member may progress. Almost all members progress through all three degrees. On reaching the third degree, the highest of the three, Freemasons may be invited to take up other forms of Freemasonry. One of these, known as the Royal Arch, is described as the completion of the third degree, though many Freemasons do not take it up. Other orders, some drawing their membership largely from particular groups, have independent governing bodies, but all draw their members from Craft Freemasonry. Many Freemasons do not extend their involvement in Freemasonry beyond the Craft degrees; though all are likely to know about the Royal Arch.

4 Membership of Freemasonry “is open to men of any race or religion” who have “a belief in a Supreme Being” and “are of good repute”. (Organisations of women Freemasons exist, but are not recognised by Grand Lodge and are not considered in this report.) Each Freemason is a member of a Lodge and is expected to attend its meetings. Part of the business of a Lodge is the teaching of the precepts of Freemasonry through ritual dramas, which include an initiation rite for the first degree and rites that mark the process of progression through the degrees. A legend loosely connected with both the biblical story of the building of King Solomon’s Temple and the early medieval craft of stonemasonry underlie all the rites.

5 The rituals of Freemasonry were originally passed on orally, and although printed versions are now available, there are differences of detail from place to place. In preparing this report the Committee has used printed copies of the most widely used versions of the rituals of Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry. These are found in two books, listed in the Appendix; copies of the books can be bought openly by non-Freemasons at Freemason’s Hall in London. The printed rituals contain many instances of words replaced by their initial letters or by abbreviations, for example “light” appears as “l” and “Obligation” as “obl”; other words are omitted and replaced by rows of dots. Many of the hidden words are numbered among the secrets of Freemasonry which Freemasons are sworn to keep secret, and are supplied in Freemasonry by oral tradition. Texts of the rituals up to the revisions of the late 1980s were published by Walton Hannah in the books listed in the Appendix, the accuracy of which has not been challenged and has been publicly attested by some Freemasons.

6 Freemasonry follows three great principles: brotherly love, including tolerance and respect for the opinions of others; relief, including the practice of charity to the community as a whole; and truth, including striving for high moral standards. It is beyond question that Freemasonry encourages high moral standards, and that masonic charitable giving is generous and includes masonic and non-masonic charities.

- 7 Among the demands made of the Freemason is “a respect for the laws of the country in which a man works and lives”. The Freemason’s “duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons”. Similarly, “The use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his own or anyone else’s business, professional or personal interests is condemned, and is contrary to the conditions on which he seeks admission to Freemasonry”.
- 8 Despite these official statements, the view is widely held by critics of Freemasonry that some Freemasons feel obliged to promote the interests of other Freemasons, other things being equal, as part of the duty of brotherly love. It is also alleged that this practice leads to unfair treatment of non-masons, and for some such allegations the Committee has been offered evidence which in the nature of the case cannot be tested. There is evidence that on occasions Freemasonry is made a ‘scapegoat’ by those who feel aggrieved about a decision which affects them. Christians will not be surprised to find that some people fail to live up to the high standards demanded of them. Abuse of standards of membership is not peculiar to Freemasons. No society can be condemned because of the conduct of some of its members. In fairness it should be reported that since 1986 seventeen enquiries have been made by the Local Authority Ombudsman into allegations of misuse of Freemasonry membership. In only one case was his report critical of Freemasons. This referred to a failure by councillors to declare a relationship through Freemasonry with an applicant in a planning application. Representatives of Grand Lodge have assured the Committee that each year a number of Freemasons have been expelled from their Lodges for using improper influence.
- 9 Freemasonry is criticised or condemned by some on the grounds that it exercises unfair discrimination. Membership is restricted to men. It has financial obligations which not every man can meet. It is sometimes alleged that there is discrimination against the disabled, but the Committee has been assured that some Lodges include handicapped members. It is also evident that some Lodges include men of different races and religions. It is now widely recognised that other institutions, including the Church, have been, innocently or culpably, discriminatory and must seek to eliminate such attitudes and practices. The Methodist Church has sought to eliminate unfair discrimination in its own life and encourages other institutions to do the same.
- 10 It is natural that those who meet together in a fraternal society will discuss matters of mutual interest. However, Lodges of people from the same profession or occupation or religious group will always be vulnerable to accusations of preference. In recent years such suspicions have been expressed concerning particular Lodges, e.g. those that appear to have as members a large number of policemen or members of the legal profession. The practice of preference must be condemned, as it is in clear statements on behalf of Grand Lodge when it occurs among Freemasons.
- 11 In a report such as this the Methodist Church must speak directly to those Lodges that bear a Methodist, or related, name; which are the Epworth Lodges in Manchester, Liverpool and London and Lodges for the old boys of Methodist schools, such as Kingswood. A Methodist Freemason made a personal enquiry of the Epworth Lodges and found that they now include only

a minority of Methodists. Nevertheless it has been alleged that some church business, including that relating to the stationing of ministers, has been discussed and decided informally at the time of Lodge meetings. The business of the Church must be settled in the duly elected committees of the Church, by those involved, and should not be decided, however informally, anywhere else.

- 12 Much negative feeling towards Freemasonry is engendered by what is perceived to be excessive secrecy practised by Freemasons. They prefer to speak of an “inclination to privacy, which may in some cases be taken too far”. Secrecy applies only to the passwords and the signs of recognition that are conveyed orally – the rites and rituals are published by the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter. Other aspects of Freemasonry are no more than private. Its constitutions and rules are available to the public. There is no secret about any of its aims and principles. All members are free to acknowledge their membership. Nevertheless, many people perceive in Freemasonry a culture of secrecy, passed on from one generation to another, as evidenced in the cryptic nature of the published rituals.
- 13 It is recognised that secrecy may sometimes be required of an organisation. This has been the case of the Church in periods of persecution. It is also the case that bonds between members of an organisation can be increased by a shared knowledge that marks one barrier between themselves and everyone else. However, the Christian community aims to be an open fellowship. It may fail and appear to others as sectarian. The Methodist Church has no published lists of church members but it is not difficult to find whether a person is a Methodist or not. There is no intention to keep the fact secret. Some Freemasons want it to be more frequently the case that there is openness about membership of the Craft. In all social groups confidentiality applies to some matters and, in relation to pastoral work, this has been the subject of a report to the Conference in 1993. However, secrecy seems to be more of the essence of Freemasonry than of most other institutions, including the Church.
- 14 The ‘secrets’ of Freemasonry are protected by the oaths (or what Freemasons normally refer to as obligations) sworn by members at different stages. Since 1985 the rites (Emulation Ritual 1991 and Aldersgate Royal Arch Ritual 1993) have been changed and no longer connect the oaths with ‘penalties’ - though reference is made to the penalties that were to be found in traditional masonic ritual for many years, including words of an extravagant and even blood-curdling nature. These changes have been made by edict of the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter, requiring each Lodge and Chapter to comply. We are informed that the changes have been implemented by every Lodge and Chapter. Note was made that one Lodge refused to accept the changes and was suspended until willingness to conform was accepted. It is generally the case that Grand Lodge chooses, in matters of ritual, to recommend rather than legislate and sees the ceremonies as the prerogative of each individual Lodge. However, on the matter of obligations and penalties Grand Lodge had the right to rule and did so.
- 15 Freemasons believe that the true penalty of breaking one’s oath is that of being known as a wilfully perjured individual. Some Christians regard the swearing of any oath as forbidden. For most, swearing an oath in, for example, a court of law is acceptable. Masonry has required oaths to be made “without

evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind". As people who are under obligation to be truthful they should only make oaths in the simplest terms. It is not satisfactory that obligations, even expressed in the simplest terms, should be associated in the rites with the previous tradition of extravagant and offensive language. Christians might look to baptismal, marriage and ordination services (and Methodists to the Covenant Service in particular) for standards in the proper use of solemn words and obligations.

- 16 It has been the case that the candidate was not supposed to know in advance the full content of the ritual to be followed or the oath he would be required to swear. While the candidate would doubtless trust those whom he knows who have been through the ritual before him, entry into rituals and obligations whose content and implications are unknown cannot be commended as a course of action for Christians. Formally it is clear that the nature of the rites can be known by reading the published books. It still may be the case that the earlier view is retained: that pre-knowledge lessens the impact of the ceremony on the candidate and he is encouraged not to seek prior knowledge. If Christians are not given pre-knowledge of what is involved in the rituals and the oaths that are to be taken, it would be proper for them to refuse to take part. A practice of denying or not encouraging full knowledge of the content is at variance with Methodist custom in that the wording, content and implications of all rituals are known in advance by all adult participants.
- 17 It is widely believed that Freemasons are bound by their oaths to an allegiance to one another. Some critics claim that this allegiance takes precedence over all other commitments. Freemasonry explicitly denies the claim: "a Freemason is encouraged to do his duty first to his God". Christians recognise a fundamental allegiance to God in Christ from which derives many other commitments, such as those to family, society, Church. Working out priorities is a relentless and sometimes difficult duty.
- 18 Freemasons are required to believe in a Supreme Being, sometimes called the Great Architect of the Universe. At various points in masonic rituals prayer is offered to this Being. Freemasons of different religions come into the Craft and are required to respect one another's religious beliefs, and this is reflected in the prayers offered. Prayer in Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry is never offered in the name of Jesus Christ. The concern of Freemasons to bring together men of different religious traditions and not offend their religious sensitivities is praiseworthy. Recent inter-faith dialogue suggests a variety of different approaches to this situation. For example, a strong case can be made for prayers taken from the religious traditions represented in a mixed-faith group which can be respected by all, so that in an undiluted form, each, in their turn, can offer prayer in the context of the group. Clearly for Christians there is a danger that inter-faith relations in Freemasonry are obtained at too low a cost, namely by ignoring real differences. Ruling out all reference to Christ when prayer is being made will be a problem for some Christians. They do not approach prayer as something that is addressed to an unspecified God. This may be uncomfortable or unacceptable to Christians who retain their membership of Freemasonry. Sensitivities will vary, as do opinions, within Methodism on these matters. The same problems may apply to men of other Faiths who are Freemasons.

- 19 What happens within a Lodge meeting is the responsibility of the Freemasons involved; what happens if Freemasons want to hold public Christian worship in a Methodist Church is determined by the requirements of S.O.928(3), which reads: 'If a Freemasons' Lodge requests that a service be held on Methodist premises, the trustees may at their discretion either withhold permission or grant permission on the following conditions:
- (i) the service shall be one of public Christian worship held in accordance with Methodist practice and complying with the Model Trusts;
  - (ii) the contents of the service shall first be seen and approved by the Superintendent;
  - (iii) it shall be conducted by a person appointed by the Superintendent.
- 20 Freemasonry maintains that it is in no way a religion offering salvation of any kind. It encourages men to do good and continue in their faith. However, Christians within Freemasonry will be aware of the temptation faced by people across the years to settle simply for a programme of morality. The pilgrimage of faith is a more subtle and deeper approach to the responsibilities of Christian living.
- 21 There are potential dangers in a society with a tradition of secrecy and private rituals. This has also been a problem in the Christian tradition and the Church has rejected the notion that salvation can be achieved by special knowledge. The exaltation rites for the Royal Arch include a dramatic enactment of the re-discovery of secrets claimed to have been lost. Such a rite has no meaning unless it is believed that the recovery of the lost knowledge is valuable to the one initiated. No explicit claim may be made that salvation comes through that knowledge. But a Freemason could be tempted to believe that he possesses something of value denied to the uninitiated. The Christian knows that the mysteries of life have been made an open secret through Christ and this is available to all.
- 22 There is a deep human need for ritual and some may find this met in a group practising special rituals. The rites of Freemasonry have such ambiguous features that they lead to misunderstanding and a variety of interpretations among both Freemasons and non-Freemasons. Either the rites are innocent play-acting or they have some degree of symbolic significance. If it is the former, Freemasons must accept that outside observers may not take their rites seriously. If it is the latter, their relationship to similar rituals of specifically religious groups may properly be considered. The 1985 report pointed to parallels in Christian symbolism of the restoration of light to a blindfolded candidate for the first degree and the symbolic death and rebirth of a candidate for the third degree. Such interpretations have been disputed. However, ritual has no purpose if it has no deep symbolic content.
- 23 The use of JAHBULON for the Supreme Being in the rituals of the Royal Arch degree has been a matter of considerable dispute. The 1985 report believed it to be intended that each of the three syllables be the name of a divinity in a particular religion and thus, when put together, the word formed an example of syncretism – an attempt to unite different religions in one, which Christians cannot accept. It was understood that some Christians who are Freemasons withdrew from any ceremonies in which the word was used.

Since 1985 the governing body of the Royal Arch has removed all references to the word from its rituals. This change is welcome as an avoidance of unnecessary offence, but more importantly because, as has been pointed out earlier, developments in inter-faith dialogue reveal more fruitful avenues for development than that of syncretism. Simply to use the word 'God', without recourse to any other title or metaphor, might be a more straightforward and acceptable practice for use in an inter-religious group.

- 24 It has been the tradition of Methodism not to set conditions on becoming or remaining members. The Deed of Union states: 'All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as full members of the Methodist Church' (Clause 8(a)). However, at every Conference resolutions are adopted that offer guidance to Methodists about what is involved for service in the life of the Church and the world; but this is guidance and not rule. The Deed of Union also states: 'It is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves of the two sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper. As membership of the Methodist Church also involves fellowship it is the duty of all members of the Methodist Church to seek to cultivate this in every possible way' (Clause 9). So if a person fails in the duty to cultivate fellowship – perhaps by sustained neglect (see Deed of Union, Clause 10) or by some 'breach of discipline' (S.O.021 (1)) – he or she may cease to be a full member of the Methodist Church. The Faith and Order Committee understands that there were those who interpreted the 1985 report to mean that Freemasons could no longer be members of the Methodist Church. This was, and is, not the case.
- 25 The present report, as its predecessor, offers guidance to Methodists on which they must make their own judgement. People are not excluded from Methodism except for the reasons stated. They may exclude themselves because they do not like a particular view being taken by the Conference and they take responsibility for their action. If Freemasons have been excluded from church membership, for that cause only, the fault should be rectified. If pressure has been placed on them this is improper and should not be condoned. There has been evidence of attempts to limit the ministry of Methodist local preachers who are Freemasons, by indicating their unacceptability in a particular church or churches, other than on the grounds of failing 'to preach nothing at variance with our doctrines' (S.O.568 (2)(ii)). A Superintendent, who has final responsibility for preaching within the circuit, is at fault if he or she gives way to such pressure. If an office holder has been excluded on the basis, only, of being a Freemason, this is unacceptable. In the 'Selection Criteria' for candidates for the ministry (adopted by the Conference of 1986), those responsible are not given conditions to determine the selection, but are encouraged to consider all things about the candidates that may indicate their suitability for recommendation to the Conference.
- 26 We have indicated elements in Freemasonry about which we have varying misgivings. We also recognise that many organisations could be written about with both similar and different misgivings. There are positive things to be said. Along with other organisations Freemasonry serves as a friendly society; in this country it offers male friendship; it expresses many sound and socially acceptable values; it engages in charitable work; it may enable upward social

mobility among its members. However, it has what may be described as a secrecy culture; greater, in the Committee's judgement, than comparable organisations. In modern society Freemasonry, with other organisations, is expected to be accountable to society in general; not least when its secrecy inhibits open consideration of how influence is used. The suspicion, widely held, that Freemasonry enables people to be promoted, win business or gain advantage generally can be removed only by greater openness. Similarly suspicions also arise relating to the religious aspect of Freemasonry which can be removed only as non-Freemasons examine the current rituals. Only then can these matters be debated openly and judgements made.

- 27 It is recognised that there are many loyal and sincere Methodists who are Freemasons, whose commitment to Christ is unquestionable and who see no incompatibility in their membership of the Methodist Church and of Freemasonry. The Faith and Order Committee has received testimony from Methodists who state that they see their membership of both Methodism and Freemasonry as not only compatible but mutually enhancing. There will be Methodists who find this difficult to accept, but the testimony needs to be heard. But the Committee urges all Methodists who are already Freemasons, or considering membership, to study this report and consider carefully the questions raised here. As the Church is always in need of reformation so are all institutions made up of fallible people. The Committee welcomes signs of greater openness among Freemasons and changes of practice have already met some of the points made in the previous report. Methodists who choose to remain Freemasons should exercise their influence within the Lodges to foster change in the ways that have been suggested. It would be helpful if they were confident enough about their Freemasonry to be open about their being Freemasons, particularly within the fellowship of the Methodist Church. Such Freemasons would need to be assured of the loving concern Methodism aims to give to all its members, but also recognise that there are those who are deeply opposed to Freemasonry. Our hope is that differences could be expressed in informed and charitable debate of the issues involved.
- 28 Its consideration of Freemasonry has led the Faith and Order Committee to recognise that Methodism needs to care more fully for men within its fellowship, whilst preserving a culture of inclusiveness. Similarly the Committee has seen how responsive to rituals men can be and this leads it to ask whether Methodism involves both men and women adequately in the Church's worship.
- 29 The recommendation of the 1985 report relating to the use of Methodist premises by Freemasons is now a Standing Order (928) and needs no longer to be part of this report.
- 30 In the period following the 1985 report there was sufficient evidence of how easily religious people allow charitableness to be the victim of conviction and how easy it is to bruise people who see things differently from themselves. Methodists must be self-critical concerning all the accusations they make of others. Right belief is important. So also is right loving. The good faith of others must not easily be denied. The inclusive quality of our fellowship must be carefully guarded.

31 The 1985 report gave guidance to the Methodist people ‘that Methodists should not become Freemasons’. The reconsideration of that report, required by the 1994 Conference, was to be based on the charges of inaccuracies in the report and changed practices in Freemasonry since 1985. Having engaged in such a reconsideration, we arrive at the following conclusions:

(1) Whereas several changes of note have been made to the nature of Freemasonry since our previous report in 1985, many of them most welcome, this report makes clear that the fundamental convictions of the 1985 report remain.

(2) We urge Freemasons who are Methodists to give careful consideration to this report and the points where we have expressed unease. These include our concerns:

- (a) about the secrecy culture that pervades Freemasonry, only to a limited extent eased by recent changes;
- (b) about the ambiguity in those rituals that have echoes of specific religious imagery and the use of prayers, while denying any religious status to them;
- (c) about references to God that aim to avoid offence to people of varied beliefs but end up with too great an element of ambiguity;
- (d) about the strong emphasis on doing good that can lead to men believing that this is all their Creator requires of them.

We have indicated that being a Freemason does not disqualify a person from membership, or the holding of office, within the Methodist Church. Nevertheless, in the light of this report, Methodist Freemasons must take responsibility for the judgements they make about the compatibility of membership of both bodies.

(3) We urge Methodists who are considering becoming Freemasons to give careful thought to our hesitations about the wisdom of joining such a society.

(4) We recognise positive changes that have taken place within Freemasonry in recent years, but encourage the United Lodge to become ever more open to scrutiny, so that trust may have the chance to grow and causes of suspicion be diminished. In addition, there remain some doctrinal issues, such as the nature of God, salvation, prayer, religion and rituals, that have not been satisfactorily resolved.

(5) We urge Methodists who wish to continue as Freemasons to give serious consideration to the following:

- (a) They should be aware that some fellow Freemasons might hold interpretations of masonic practice that are incompatible with belonging to the Methodist Church.
- (b) They should be aware that some Methodists might hold interpretations of masonic practice that they see as incompatible with belonging to the Methodist Church.

- (c) They should support those aspects of Freemasonry which endorse their Christian discipleship.
- (d) They should resist any tendency to turn Freemasonry into a religion.
- (e) They should, with their fellow Methodists, seek to prevent their allegiance to Freemasonry from becoming a cause of division within their local church.
- (f) They should be open about their membership of Freemasonry.
- (g) Members of 'Methodist' Lodges should take to heart particularly the conclusions reached in paragraph 11.

#### **RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts the Report.

*(Agenda 1996, pp.179-188)*