

## **GUIDELINES FOR INTER-FAITH MARRIAGES (2000)**

The guidelines below are for ministers and other people authorized to conduct marriages and subject to the discipline of the Methodist Church who are asked to officiate at a Christian marriage service where one partner belongs to a world faith other than Christianity. They replace the guidelines given on page E3 of *The Methodist Service Book* of 1975 and should be read in conjunction with *CPD Book VI Part 9 B.11*. They presume knowledge of the following Methodist Conference documents which encourage respect and co-operation between faiths: *Relations with People of Other Faiths*, 1983 (*Agenda* p.57f.); *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs*, 1994 (*Agenda* p.589-596; available from Methodist Publishing House as *'Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths'*, 1997, Ref. PA662); *Called to Love and Praise* 3.2.9 - 3.2.16, (1999 *Agenda* p.186-189). For the sake of brevity, the term 'minister' is used throughout to denote ministers and others authorized to conduct marriages.

### **INTRODUCTION**

1. All faiths cherish marriage and most would agree that seeking God's blessing on a marriage is vital. In Britain's pluralist society, there are more and more opportunities for marriage between people of different faiths. There are some who would see this as a cause for celebration, for it can betoken the meeting of faiths at a very deep social level, that of the life of the family.
2. Several options are open for a couple from different faith backgrounds when they are planning the marriage ceremony. Some will decide to supplement a ceremony in the Register Office with informal prayers in the home. This gives maximum flexibility to the couple to invite religious leaders, friends and family members from both faith communities to offer prayers for the blessing and protection of the marriage. Others opt for two formal ceremonies, to reflect the two faiths within the marriage. It is also possible that the couple will decide to have one ceremony only and will choose either the Christian marriage service or a ceremony in accordance with the practices of the other faith.
3. If the couple choose to be married according to the practice of the other faith concerned and the participation of a Christian minister is invited, the principles given in Paragraph 12 can be applied. To refuse such an invitation when it is acceptable to the persons to be married and their families could be inimical to the good relations between the two communities that the occasion requires.

### **THE NEED FOR PASTORAL CARE**

4. Within all faith communities in Britain, marriage outside the faith is a difficult and sometimes controversial subject. Fears can arise that the person concerned will be lost to his or her faith or that the whole community of faith will be weakened as a result of such a marriage. This can result in tension within the faith community, anguish for the parents and pain for the couple to be married. In some instances, prohibitions are in force, as when a woman is

prohibited from marrying outside the faith. A person who seeks to marry someone of another faith can, therefore, feel abandoned by his or her community or family

and deprived of pastoral advice, an experience intensified when the person is breaking tradition, custom or law.

5. Pastoral care of the couple both before and after the marriage service is, therefore, essential. It is particularly important that the couple should be encouraged to talk to each other both about their respective faiths, so that respect for the faith of the other can develop, and also about what becoming an 'inter-faith family' involves; for example, the necessity of reaching decisions about the religious education of children or the funeral rites to be followed when a family member dies. Care should be taken by the minister that any advice given does justice to and does not misrepresent the faith to which the partner who is not a Christian adheres.

6. Pastoral care of the couple will be enhanced if local links of friendship can be developed between the two religious communities concerned. This can help the marriage to be accepted in both communities and open up opportunities for hospitality, ongoing support for the couple and trust-building between faiths.

## **THE MARRIAGE SERVICE**

### **Conscience**

7. No minister should be required to officiate at a marriage service if it is against his or her conscience. However, it should be remembered that hesitancy or refusal on the part of the minister could convey condemnation of the other faith, reinforce the couple's sense of isolation and hinder good community relations. A minister who is prevented by conscience from officiating should ensure that the couple is referred to a colleague not so prevented.

### **Preparation**

8. It is important that the partner who belongs to another faith should be happy not only to take part in the Christian service but also to accept the Christian understanding of marriage as outlined in the Marriage Service. The minister, for example, should look for evidence in the couple of mutual respect and love, life-long commitment, faithfulness and the wish to grow together through life in friendship, wisdom and holiness.

### **Legal**

9. Note should be taken of the requirements laid down by law, as given in *The Methodist Worship Book*.

### **Liturgical**

10. '*The Methodist Marriage Service*' and '*Blessing of a Marriage Service*' each form a coherent and carefully-worded whole. However, it is possible within Methodism to add to or omit from the liturgy, as long as, in the Marriage Service, the words of declaration and the words of contract required by law remain. Therefore, in order to affirm respect for the beliefs and commitment of the partner from another faith, a prayer, hymns and/or readings from the other faith can be included. This could extend to an appropriate symbolic action from the other faith tradition. Consultation with the couple concerned is essential in this process. Nothing should be included without the consent of both parties and care should be taken that the additions are consonant with the Christian faith as a whole and the Christian concept of marriage.

11. Omissions from the liturgy should be minimal but examples might be phrases which one partner could not say in good conscience, for example the trinitarian formulations in Section 14 of the Marriage Service and Section 10 of the Blessing of Marriage Service. It might be acceptable to replace these with 'in the name of God' which could be said by both partners with good conscience.

12. The participation of a priest or religious leader from another faith community in a Christian marriage service would not normally be expected. However, where such participation

- a. is requested by the couple;
- b. has the agreement of the other faith community; and
- c. will not change the fundamental Christian nature of the service

it should be welcomed. To debar a leader from another faith from making a contribution from that faith tradition, for instance, would imply a lack of openness and trust on the part of the Christian community which could be very hurtful to the other partner and his or her faith community and hinder the good relations between the two communities that the occasion requires. However, discernment should be used to ensure that any involvement by a person from another faith enhances the service for the couple to be married and is acceptable to all the parties concerned.

#### **Further Help**

13. Further help, practical or pastoral, or referral to local contacts or specialist resource people, can be gained from the Connexional Secretary for Inter-Faith Relations at Methodist Church House.

#### **RESOLUTIONS**

The Conference adopts the Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages.