

THE TORONTO 'BLESSING' (1996)

The Conference of 1995 adopted the following as Notice of Motion No. 8:

Conference welcomes every genuine work of the Holy Spirit, holding to the words of Scripture: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything". (1 Thess 5:19-20) (sic) Conference acknowledges that there are Ministers and lay members who testify to an experience of the Holy Spirit known as the 'Toronto Blessing'.

Conference therefore directs the Faith and Order Committee to set up a working party to present a report on the 'Toronto Blessing' to the Conference of 1996, and invites Ministers and members to write to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee to express their views.

1. Origins of the 'Toronto Blessing'

- 1.1 The phenomenon known as the 'Toronto Blessing' was first evidenced at a meeting of the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship. The Association of Vineyard Churches is a network of 'new churches' under the international leadership of John Wimber. It states that it "is committed to an evangelical theology, to equipping every church member for works of service and to encouraging biblical renewal across the whole Church." During 1992 and 1993 the Fellowship had been prompted to seek a fresh anointing from God for its work.
- 1.2 On 20th January 1994, the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship began a four-night series of meetings. The senior pastor, John Arnott, and the leadership team were overwhelmed when on the first night, following the speaker's address, the whole congregation responded to an invitation to receive prayer. What followed was understood by them as a powerful move of the Holy Spirit and was characterised by physical manifestations including falling to the ground and 'resting in the Spirit'; shaking, trembling and jerking; laughter, weeping and wailing; apparent drunkenness; intense physical activity such as running or jumping on the spot; animal sounds; the receiving and proclaiming of alleged prophetic insights; visions; and a range of other mystical experiences. Although the manifestations are by no means new in pentecostal/charismatic contexts they have been witnessed in a more intense, frequent and widespread form in this Movement. Dubbed the 'Toronto Blessing' by the secular press, it is perhaps unfortunate that the title has stuck, because of the undue focus on a particular place, and because it begs the question of whether or not it is indeed a 'Blessing'. The preferred designation in some circles is 'Times of Refreshing', an allusion to Acts 3:19f. However, the term 'Toronto Blessing' is used in this Report because it has gained common currency and no other name for the phenomenon commands universal acceptance.
- 1.3 Since January 1994 the Toronto Fellowship has continued to hold nightly meetings. Some 300,000 people have been on 'pilgrimage to Toronto' of

whom 10% have been from Britain. Many of the 'pilgrims' have been Ministers and their spouses who often testify to having felt tired, dry, and frustrated with Church life. Initial testimonies on their return point to personal spiritual refreshment and a renewed love for Jesus Christ and his Church. Some discover that when they begin praying in their home congregations similar phenomena to those experienced in Toronto are repeated. The manifestations are not everywhere the same – rather there seems to be a cluster of related incidences under the 'Toronto' banner. A number of British churches have become particularly noted as centres for the 'Toronto Blessing', among them Holy Trinity, Brompton, Queens Road Baptist Church, Wimbledon and the Sunderland Christian Centre, but overall it remains an experience of a minority of Christians.

- 1.4 The 'Toronto Blessing' has not been without controversy. Although its leaders have been at pains to point out that it is the resulting fruit of the Holy Spirit that is of prime importance it is the manifestations that have caused concern. As might be expected there has been trenchant criticism from those who have never been able to accept the claims and teachings of pentecostals and charismatics. However concern has also been expressed by a number of senior figures from within pentecostal and charismatic circles who have sought to adopt a Gamaliel-style approach (Acts 5:34-39), waiting and seeing 'if this is of God'. It is apparent that to some extent, the manifestations are, with time, becoming less frequent and less pronounced than at first.
- 1.5 In December 1995 the Toronto Airport Fellowship agreed to part company with the Association of Vineyard Churches which had felt it necessary to question the teaching and administration of the 'Blessing' in Toronto and stating that it could not accept attempts to give "theological justification or biblical proof-texting for . . . exotic practices that are extra-biblical." Whilst the concern expressed is about the Toronto Fellowship's handling of the manifestations (and the authority of the local vis-à-vis global leadership) rather than a judgement on the 'Toronto Blessing' as a whole, it certainly underlines the fact that there are serious theological and pastoral issues that cannot be brushed aside as of no consequence.

2. The working party

- 2.1 Responding to an invitation in the 'Methodist Recorder' and the Conference 'Bulletin', nearly 300 submissions were received, including a number of audio and video tapes, books and other published material, as well as personal testimony and reflections. All members of the working party were able to read these submissions. A more detailed analysis of the submissions is given in section 3 of this Report.
- 2.2 The working party, of 18 members, was constituted so as to bring together a wide cross-section of experience and opinion about the 'Toronto Blessing', as well as expertise in such fields as sociology, psychology, and history. In addition to the written submissions, contributions by the members of the working party themselves, and impressions gained from visits to various churches affected by the

'Blessing', many of the numerous published sources of information and opinion were consulted.

- 2.3 Mindful of the debate in the Conference itself, and of the controversy surrounding the whole issue, the working party considered that the most helpful approach to the subject would be to offer a brief overview of the phenomenon, followed by a summary of the varied views submitted to us, and then an outline of some of the tools and insights that could be brought to bear upon the situation, so as to assist Methodists in making an appropriate, helpful response, especially in local pastoral situations. However, we recognise that a short Report such as this cannot do more than introduce the issues. Parallel work to this Report is being undertaken in the Church of England, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, and within the Evangelical Alliance.
- 2.4 The attention of the Conference is drawn to the 1974 Report on 'The Charismatic Movement' (Agenda 1974, pp 267-71), much of which applies to the current situation. It is beyond the brief of this Report to engage in a comprehensive reassessment of the matters dealt with in the 1974 Report, but nevertheless some of what is said now may well be applicable more widely to charismatic phenomena.
- 2.5 The 1974 Report welcomed "the renewed emphasis upon the individual and corporate experience of the Holy Spirit, including those aspects of experience high-lighted by the Charismatic Movement, so long as they are not held to be universally obligatory, exclusive of or superior to other Christian insights" and urged "that all Methodists, whatever their experience of the Holy Spirit, show tolerance in seeking to understand the claims and experiences of others." The Report commented on certain aspects of the Movement which "require further clarification or safeguards against abuse", but "as guidelines to be noted, not rules to be obeyed, "and expressed the hope "to avoid the splitting of societies over this issue, or the creating of a 'second-class Christian' outlook *in either direction* (sic)." The Report warned, "whilst it is true . . . that Christianity is greatly impoverished when the rational element is stressed at the expense of the emotional and the volitional; it is equally important to guard against any danger of irrationality, with the consequent devaluing of the mind in Christian experience, since for many Christians reason is the supreme tool for discerning the Spirit. Such safeguards are particularly necessary in a Movement in which the extraordinary and the unusual receive emphasis."
- 2.6 The experience of the working party has been that sustained and honest sharing of spiritual experiences from a variety of perspectives and inclinations has led to a deeper appreciation of the riches of God and the benefits of breadth in Christian fellowship. Such experiences are very much in the class meeting tradition and we covet them for all members of our Church.

3. Digest of the written submissions

- 3.1 Nearly 300 letters and other items such as dissertations, books, magazines, video and audio tapes were received in response to the Conference invitation. The range and depth of the experiences described and the careful reflections based upon them, made it a privilege to read the submissions. The members of the working party are all very grateful to those who took time and trouble to write in.
- 3.2 A broad analysis of the submissions and the views expressed within them shows that 26.4% of the letters were from Ministers, of whom approximately 82% were broadly supportive of the 'Blessing', and 18% non-supportive; 73.6% of the letters were from lay people, of whom approximately 65% were broadly supportive, and 35% non-supportive. It should, however, be borne in mind that this is not a **representative** sample, being only an analysis of the views of those who chose to write in. Also, in many cases people could see both positive and negative features in the 'Toronto Blessing', so this breakdown is an oversimplification of the many shades of opinion. Nevertheless, it does give in our view a fair overall impression of the balance of opinion.
- 3.3 It is not always clear from the submissions whether the writers are referring to 'Toronto Blessing' phenomena with strange vocal manifestations, or Toronto-like experiences as witnessed during the last 20-30 years within the Charismatic Movement (weeping, laughter, resting in the Spirit, etc.). Whilst some confirm that their first experience of the 'Blessing' was during private prayer time, the majority appear to be writing after attending a praise fellowship, such as at Holy Trinity Brompton, Sunderland Christian Centre, etc., Easter People or Spring Harvest. Also mentioned are the Alpha Groups and the Dunamis Conference. When the 'Blessing' is received it is frequently said to result in a new awareness of the love of Christ and a new sense of empowerment for Christian work, although there is a small proportion of negative experiences.
- 3.4 Many of those who wrote in criticism of the 'Toronto Blessing' had not observed it for themselves and wrote as a consequence of hearsay, TV, video and press coverage. Some considered that it was demonic, whilst others attributed the manifestations to hypnosis, or drew attention to its alleged association with the controversial ministry of Rodney Howard-Browne.
- 3.5 Many, whether broadly approving or disapproving, wrote of the need for sustained teaching of leaders and helpers, and a greater pastoral care of those who had experienced the 'Blessing', and especially of those who were not sure what, if anything, had happened to them.
- 3.6 The question of the relationship of the manifestations to biblical teaching on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit was raised in many submissions, as was the link with the ministry of the Wesleys and the subsequent history of the Methodist Church.

3.7 Some representative quotations from the submissions:

- * I have been surprised at the absence of hysteria and the almost lack of emotion. (Minister)
- * The excitement, emotion and general lack of control and self-discipline caused us a great deal of concern. (Church Stewards)
- * One elderly Local Preacher confessed before asking for prayer, "I'm not sure that I have ever really loved God or known his personal love for me." . . . In the next three weeks she experienced in a very personal way God's love for her. (Minister)
- * It was stated that this was the way the church was going and if you didn't agree you might as well leave. There was a lot of heartache. (Couple)
- * I found myself overcome with sobbing, . . . as before my eyes passed many occasions in life when I had badly needed to cry but circumstances made it impossible. I had a training in Clinical Theology . . . the Holy Spirit brings inner release which would normally take months in counselling. (Lay person)
- * We are learning to minister to one another. One minute you are receiving ministry, the next you are offering it. This must have some insight to offer on the priesthood of all believers. (Minister)
- * I saw a gentle flowing river – the river then getting faster, culminating in an extremely powerful waterfall. (Lay person)
- * The outer manifestations must not detract from the inner ones. (Church Meeting)
- * By its very nature this phenomenon is probably beyond analysis. Just as there is a difference between 1st-hand and 2nd-hand evidence, there is a risk that observation alone is insufficient to form a proper assessment. Care is needed lest any judgements are unduly dismissive or negative. (Lay person)

4. Insights from Christian doctrine and Scripture

4.1 *The doctrine of the Holy Spirit*

- 4.1.1 The Holy Spirit is the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to and in all that is. God creates all things in the power of the Spirit, sustains the universe, and will bring all things to fulfilment in the Spirit. The arena for the Spirit's work is all space and time.
- 4.1.2 The Holy Spirit is God communicating to all that is, sharing the Being of the Trinity with all life. The Holy Spirit opens humanity to God, reveals God to us, speaks through prophets and preachers, is the dynamic who gives us the Scriptures and mediates the Word of God through them. All true knowledge of God's world, human life, God's nature and will and work is mediated through the Spirit.
- 4.1.3 Jesus comes to us in the power of the Spirit, as the Man of the Spirit, as God the Son. His ministry, teaching and work were in the truth and grace of the Spirit. He was raised from death and is present to all space and time in the Spirit's power. For Christians, the Spirit of God is now

supremely recognized as the Spirit of Christ (Acts 16:7; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11).

- 4.1.4 All confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour is the work of the Spirit. Thus through the Spirit the Church comes to be, the Scriptures are written and are given their authority, the faith is clarified and confessed, the Church is kept in the way of Christ crucified and risen, her servants are called and commissioned. The Spirit mediates the Lord's grace and makes Christ present through the gospel sacraments and through the Church's worship, ministry and prayer. The Spirit is always promoting the Church's vitality, faithfulness and unity, her mission to the ends of the earth and her sanctification.
- 4.1.5 All our prayers are in the Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. The Spirit is God's saving and perfecting power who purifies them and gives them a potency we cannot understand. Thus one of the most everyday (and glorious) works of the Spirit is that which enables us to pray, without which our attempts would be mere gabble and pretension.
- 4.1.6 In the Spirit we are constantly being called to repent, to live 'in Christ', and are made new in the faith which too is a gift of the Spirit. In the Spirit we are always wrestling with evil and dying to sin, always being forgiven, strengthened in our belonging in the Church, being directed into the new way of love. We are given new callings and tasks, experiencing the gifts of the Spirit, pressing on together towards maturity in Christ and more intimate communion with him.
- 4.1.7 Whenever we are aware of God we are 'blessed' by the Spirit. This may be anywhere and in any circumstances – inside or outside the Church's life, as personal or communal experience, as dramatic emotional uplift or profound calm, with or without some sort of vision or voice or heightened sense. It may be unexpected and sudden, or expected and longed-for.
- 4.1.8 The Spirit is God's freedom to initiate the radically new, to turn the Church inside out, to let loose a new spiritual dynamic, to inaugurate reformation, renewal and revival in an unprecedented manner. The Spirit may bring to us a startling new awareness of God long lain dormant or never quite realised before. The Spirit is as free as the wind.

4.2 *Discerning the Spirit*

4.2.1 In a true work of the Holy Spirit:

- * Jesus is confessed as Lord, Saviour, Son of God (John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1ff).
- * The fruit of the Spirit are evident in love (1 Corinthians 13), **the** mark of Christian holiness, especially love for fellow Christians. Time must be allowed for this fruit to mature (John 13:34-35; Acts 5:33-39; Galatians 5:22-26; 1 John 4:7-12).
- * There is a building up of the Church with an increase of respect both for its leaders and its weaker members (Romans 14:1; 15:1; 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17).

- * There is an increase of wholeness. This wholeness may be evident in a greater degree of healing of, and integration of the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects of a person, and have to do with relationships, memories, guilt, grief and fear, etc. (Matthew 28:5-6; 10; Mark 6:56; John 10:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).
- * There is a greater practical concern shown for the poor, the disabled and all sufferers from social and political inequality and injustice (Luke 4:18-19; 10:25-37; James 1:27-2:26).
- * In order for the fruit referred to above to be evidenced there is an increased desire for the enabling sources of this growth – prayer, Bible-study, fellowship, the sacraments.
- * There is an increase of ability to distinguish between the true and the false: a discernment between true and false spirits, prophets, teachers and disciples. This is linked to an increased desire for sound doctrine and true teaching (John 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Titus 1:9-11; 2 John:9).

4.2.2 In the biblical tradition the experience of prophecy has always been accompanied by a recognition of the danger of false prophecy, and the need for discernment (see particularly 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-3). As a scriptural principle, inspiration and evaluation go hand in hand. In our profound frailty and sinfulness we are always subject to delusion, not least in our religious experience, where it can be the most dangerous. We so often want to manipulate God to suit our own ends, so we are only too prone to consider our imaginings as a special blessing in the Spirit. Therefore we must test all such experience and claims rigorously.

4.3 *The Blessing of God*

- 4.3.1 The sense of the Greek words most often translated as ‘blessing’ or ‘blessed’ (eulogein and makarios) in the Bible is simply ‘goodwill’ or ‘favour’, but the content of these takes different forms according to the life situation of those in need of God’s blessing. The blessing associated with the teaching and ministry of Jesus is defined in terms of the message and priorities of the Kingdom.
- 4.3.2 In the early books of the Old Testament, the blessing of God is linked chiefly with the question of survival of the people, and is consequently cast in primarily material terms (see Genesis 1:22; 12:2; Deuteronomy 33:11; 2 Samuel 6:11). By the time of the more settled societies in which the Wisdom literature appeared, a more spiritual sense of blessing is emphasised (Wisdom 3:13, 17-18; cf. Philippians 4:8). In the prophetic literature, blessing takes on an ethical dimension, with God’s righteousness its distinguishing feature, e.g. Isaiah 65:16-25; Zechariah 8:13-23; Malachi 3:6-10). These three emphases are all taken up in the common concept of ‘Shalom’.
- 4.3.3 The New Testament insists that this state of blessedness as Shalom has arrived in the coming of Jesus and will arrive fully at the end times (Mark 1:14f; Luke 4:18-21; 21:32-33). Jesus warns against any interpretation of

Shalom in terms of prosperity; in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) he pronounces blessed not the well off, but those who are 'with him', whether they are prosperous or not. His pronouncement of blessing is an invitation to his hearers to watch for and attune themselves to the coming Kingdom of God.

- 4.3.4 In the biblical sense, blessing invites a response – God's generosity is returned in our worship and obedience. This reaches its climax in the ministry of Jesus, who blesses those who respond to him in their need. Supremely, in the cross, he blesses by bringing God's peace to estranged creation and also by offering a sacrificial response. We are blessed when our attitudes and actions follow the pattern of Jesus.
- 4.3.5 As Jesus teaches and exemplifies in his ministry, blessedness in the biblical sense is experienced by those whose attitudes and actions most closely imitate him. A life-giving, fruitful fellowship begins when, blessed by God in Christ, men and women bless God in reply by doing God's will and living in intimate companionship with God and one another. In asking whether or not the Toronto phenomenon is indeed a 'Blessing', we will therefore look for evidence of Shalom as it is shown to us in Jesus – spiritual and ethical fruit in the recipient, without undue emphasis on material or physiological 'blessings' (see section 4.2 above).

4.4 Biblical perspectives on the manifestations

- 4.4.1 In our Methodist tradition we try to maintain an appropriate relationship between Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Scriptural teaching is never considered in isolation, and we are aware that all reading of Scripture tends to be selective and influenced by the presuppositions from which we start. Nevertheless biblical perspectives are essential, and we outline the relevant ones here. Previous sections of the Report outlined experience and tradition; other comment will follow this attention to the Bible; our final comments will aim to formulate reasonable conclusions which derive from "the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures", which the Deed of Union states the Methodist Church acknowledges as "the supreme rule of faith and practice". Scripture is primary, but it is to be seen in lively partnership with the other authorities cited.
- 4.4.2 To say that "the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures" is "the supreme rule of faith and practice" still leaves open the question of **how** scripture is to be interpreted and related to different situations and problems. For example, there can be a process of "direct transference" when the application of scripture is direct, most obviously in the command, "Love your neighbour as yourself". But what, for example, of Paul's command that women should cover their heads in church, or the teaching of Jesus in Luke 14:33 that would-be disciples must forego all they have?
- 4.4.3 Therefore, our reaction to the 'Toronto Blessing' will to a large extent be governed by our approach to interpreting Scripture. Given this, what precedents might there be in scripture for the manifestations seen in the 'Toronto Blessing' and, in the light of our findings, what might we make of the various manifestations?

- 4.4.4 Take *Falling to the Ground, being Slain in the Spirit or Resting in the Spirit* for example. Clearly there are those who have fallen to the ground in Scripture (for example Abraham (Genesis 17:3), Daniel (Daniel 8:17-18), Peter, James and John (Matthew 17:6), Saul (Acts 9:3-4) and John (Revelation 1:17)) and have been changed by God in various ways through it. For some, these would be sufficient justification for today's experiences. However, there are at least three differences which should be noted. Those who 'fell' in Scripture generally fell face down, whereas those who fall today generally fall backwards; in Scripture they fell in awe and fear at the glory of the Lord, whereas that is not always the case today; in Scripture the falling was a spontaneous action – in contrast today carpets and catchers are often provided in advance, though of course this need not deny the validity of the experience.
- 4.4.5 Then there is the phenomenon of *Shaking or Trembling*. Trembling in the Bible can be seen as a natural spontaneous response to God's power, holiness, judgement, presence and word (see Exodus 19:16; Ezra 9:4; Daniel 10:11; Matthew 28:4; Luke 8:47; Acts 7:32). And all of us of course are to work out our salvation with 'fear and trembling' (Philippians 2:12-13). But is such 'trembling' always to be understood literally and is the stiff jerking witnessed during the Toronto experience the same as the biblical phenomenon?
- 4.4.6 *Weeping* is also common within the 'Toronto Blessing'. There are many references to tears in Scripture. For the most part these come as a natural and predictable reaction to human experience (see Genesis 27:38, Ruth 1:9; Psalm 137:1; Isaiah 25:8; Matthew 26:75; Luke 19:41; John 11:35; Acts 20:37; Philippians 3:18) and also occasionally as a response to God (see 2 Kings 20:2-3; Ezra 10:1; Joel 2:12; Luke 7:38). When such tears come during the 'Toronto Blessing' they may be seen as healthy and therapeutic, but if they are manipulated either by the person or by others, their significance must be treated with caution.
- 4.4.7 *Laughter* in Scripture is less common. Such instances as there are (e.g. Genesis 17:17, 21:6; Psalm 126:1-2) might be described as an expression of holy joy at the goodness of God. However Scripture also records the laughter of scorn and contempt (Nehemiah 2:19; Luke 6:25), reminds us that shallow or inappropriate laughter is not pleasing to God (James 4:9) and teaches that godly joy is far more than laughter, although laughter may be contained within it. But helpless laughter without adequate or appropriate cause is not found in Scripture, nor is the raucous laughter that is sometimes heard today during preaching which can detract from the hearing of the Word of God. Such behaviour finds no warrant in Scripture.
- 4.4.8 *Emitting animal noises*, e.g. growling and barking, is perhaps the most controversial of the manifestations. The texts which are sometimes cited as precedents for this fall into three categories. Firstly, two verses from the prophets (Amos 3:8; Micah 1:8) do indeed refer to the noises of animals, but in both cases they are images or similes. In the former, God's word is compared to the roar of a lion; the latter likens the prophet's lamentation to the sound of a mammal or a bird. Secondly, two verses in the Gospels (Mark 1:43; John 11:33) have an unusual Greek

verb whose literal meaning is to 'snort' (it is used, for example, of horses). That can hardly be its meaning in those verses and neither verse can be said to be a precedent for what is happening today. Finally, if Romans 8:23 and 27 are referring to audible noises during prayer (and that is not certain), the words used indicate human, not animal noises. Despite this lack of clear scriptural precedent, when such 'growling' has a beneficial effect, such as 'empowering', or 'releasing', it might perhaps be justified. However, serious questions remain about an experience which some may perceive as degrading or humiliating to God's people.

- 4.4.9 Other manifestations may cause us even more concern. *Behaving as though drunk* is difficult to justify on the grounds of Acts 2:13 or Ephesians 5:18 when a careful study of the verses and contexts indicates that 'spiritual drunkenness' is neither depicted nor an accurate description of what is taking place.
- 4.4.10 *Convulsions*, sometimes claimed as a sign of God's blessing, are in fact quite the opposite (Mark 1:25-26; 9:18). Jesus in his ministry delivered people from such things, he did not want them to glory in them. Whilst we are treading here in the area of the healing and deliverance ministry, which is beyond the scope of this Report, we do urge extreme caution, wide consultation and shared ministry in such matters.
- 4.4.11 In view of all this, whilst some of the manifestations in Scripture may be seen as God's action, and some as human reaction to the glory or power of God, the precedents for others are less clear. Therefore manifestations should not be used to gauge the rightness or effectiveness of any meeting or ministry. Some may be blessed without any manifestations: others may experience the manifestations without being blessed or blessing others. It also follows that the objective and external signs of the kingdom (Luke 4:18-19; 7:21-23; 9:1-2) should not be lost sight of in the desire for more and more subjective experiences.

4.5 *Conclusions from the biblical material*

- 4.5.1 It is important to be open-minded. Scripture bears witness time and again to a person's total reaction to God, who seeks a response from the heart as well as the mind, the body as well as the spirit. Such a response may have physical, as well as spiritual, moral and emotional effects. Scripture also shows that the Spirit does not always act in quiet, hidden or predictable ways, and often the human response to the Spirit's prompting is unusual. Whilst being wary of 'excess', we should not try to confine the activity of God within the socially, culturally and psychologically acceptable limits of our preferences. Every genuine response will be compatible with the character and activity of God as revealed in Christ.
- 4.5.2 The emphases of the New Testament should be noted. For example, visionary, ecstatic or mystical experiences may be experienced by most Christians at some time or other, but they usually come unexpectedly, and there is no suggestion that they should be actively sought. Paul was mightily indebted to the Damascus Road event, but is more reticent about later 'visions and revelations', as 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 shows. Amongst other New Testament writers, James, in his characteristically down-to-

earth way, describes true religion in moral and practical terms (James 1:22-27). Others stress that the Christian life is mainly characterised by suffering (for example, Hebrews 12:3-12; 1 Peter 4:12-19), a suffering which, as usual in the New Testament, is accompanied by joy (1 Peter 1:8).

- 4.5.3 There is no basis in Scripture for Christians claiming to be, or feeling superior to other Christians. They may differ in their views and convictions, they may feel it right sometimes to criticise each other, but 'spiritual one-upmanship' (1 Corinthians 12-14) has no scriptural foundation. Indeed, Paul's teaching indicates the opposite (Romans 12:10; Galatians 5:25; Philippians 2:3), and Jesus himself taught that self-righteousness – a very 'religious' sin – is one of the most terrible of all (Matthew 23; Luke 15:25-31; 18:9-14).
- 4.5.4 God always offers us the whole richness of the Spirit (hence Ephesians 1:3-14), but individuals and groups have had unexpected and often dramatic times of conversion and spiritual renewal from Pentecost onwards. Through baptism by water and the Spirit (Acts 2:37-41; Romans 6:2-4; 1 Peter 3:18-22; etc.) we are all initiated into the life which experiences the fruit of the Spirit (as outlined, for example, in Galatians 5:22-26). Some Christians also receive specific callings needing to be exercised on behalf of the Church (as listed in 1 Corinthians 12:27-30 or Ephesians 4:11-16) but the essence of all our development is growth in caring love (hence such crucial teaching as in Matthew 5:43-48; 25:31-46; Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13; James 2:8; 1 John 2:7-11; 4:7-21) and complete willingness to be used in whatever way Christ wills and the Spirit leads (hence Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:57-62; 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 and 12:10; Philippians 3:7-11).
- 4.5.5 The 'truth' by which we must live is always seen as the practice of love (for example 1 John 3:18-24). Our tradition in particular has emphasised the New Testament teaching on love. John Wesley taught us to grow into 'Scriptural holiness', which above all means living in 'perfect love' towards all.

5. Further perspectives

5.1 *An historical perspective on revival*

- 5.1.1 It is always risky to draw historical parallels, because each age and generation has its own characteristics, but the kind of physical experiences associated with the 'Toronto Blessing' seem similar to numerous instances in the history of the Church, not least within Methodism.
- 5.1.2 Reference is often made by those writing about the 'Toronto Blessing' to the American revival of the 1730's, which is described by Jonathan Edwards in ways that appear very similar to those associated with the 'Toronto Blessing'. But that phase did not last very long.
- 5.1.3 There was a great revival at Cambuslang in Scotland in 1742, with which George Whitefield was involved. The evidence is that the physical phenomena soon ended but the renewal went on. The short-lived nature of the phenomena accompanying revival underlined for John Wesley the

view that such movements would be a 'rope of sand' unless people used the normal means of grace – the Bible, prayer, the Lord's Supper, 'Christian Conference' and fasting, and what he called 'prudential means of grace'. For him these included preaching services, love feasts, Watchnight, Covenant, band meetings, class meetings. Of these, clearly the class meeting was vital and the key means of both evangelism and nurture.

- 5.1.4 During Methodist history after the death of Wesley there have been several occasions when physical phenomena have occurred, e.g. the Yorkshire revival of 1792-94 in Halifax and Leeds, camp meetings in the USA and Britain, and during the ministry of James Caughey.
- 5.1.5 The history of the Quakers is also of interest: George Fox's preaching was accompanied often by violent physical manifestations, hence probably the name. But within twenty years the style had changed to the silent waiting upon the Spirit which has characterised Quaker worship for 300 years.
- 5.1.6 It should be noted that the above manifestations were evident during times of revival. Most observers of the 'Toronto Blessing' describe it as 'refreshing' or 'renewal', and not as revival, though there is a growing belief in some circles that it may be the precursor of a greater and imminent outpouring of the Spirit which may come to be recognised as revival.
- 5.1.7 We must also note the cultural setting of many of these occurrences. Many studies point to the influence of the surrounding cultural norms, such as the Age of Reason, Romanticism, Modernism, Post-Modernism. The historian as such does not attribute this or that phenomenon to God (or not), but must leave that to others.

5.2 *A sociological perspective*

- 5.2.1 Interest and involvement in the 'Toronto Blessing' has taken much time, energy and money on the part of the churches concerned. From a sociological point of view this can be seen in terms of, although not be reduced to, the workings of the religious 'marketplace'. The 'Blessing' could be seen, amongst other things, as a means for the churches involved to safeguard their share of a religious market which is, at least in North America and in Europe, relatively static. One of the attractions of charismatic churches has been their offer of a direct, unmediated and unpredictable encounter with God. It has always been the case that, from time to time, as that encounter becomes familiar and predictable, fresh excitement and innovation becomes necessary. The novelty of the 'Toronto Blessing' has been a means both of retaining members and of adjusting to shifts in (religious) consumer preferences. For many church leaders the 'Blessing' has provided an opportunity to resolve a religious mid-life crisis, radically to re-evaluate the course of their ministries and to rediscover their charismatic roots. Leaders may hope to reverse the tendency of all organisations (the Church not excepted) to lose their dynamism and to become staid, bureaucratic and conformed to modern society (the so-called 'routinization of charisma'). This may be a vain hope – ironically, the 'Blessing' also depends a great deal on modern

communications technology and reflects the pragmatic 'functional rationality' that dominates Western societies: 'if it works, trust it!' One particular risk, identified by Margaret Poloma, a sociologist from within the movement, is that the charisma of the 'Blessing' will be 'reined in' and held in check in order to please the conservative elements within the Christian community.

- 5.2.2 The form taken by the 'Blessing' (for instance, spiritual drunkenness) fits with changing attitudes to bodily inhibition in our late capitalist society where more ascetic 'work ethic' attitudes have been supplanted. The 'Blessing' also fits within the context of modern relativism in being a form of religious experience which needs little or no verbalization. This helps to overcome the difficulties faced by evangelicals (in common with all other Christians) in making their gospel intelligible to more than a minority in contemporary society, or even in finding it totally plausible themselves.
- 5.2.3 First contact with the 'Blessing' is often on an experimental, 'let's check it out' basis, sometimes through a visit to a local 'epicentre' or, if finances permit, a pilgrimage to Toronto. Pilgrims speak of receiving an intense 'jump start' awareness of the Spirit's activity and often experience profound personal change in a short time span. The church leadership has tried to shift the focus on the part of pilgrims from the (often bizarre) physical phenomena to processes of interior transformation and redirection, and to ensure that meetings are Christ-centred.
- 5.2.4 One of the most salient features of the 'Blessing' is that it is increasingly framed in global terms. Processes of globalization are binding the population of the world into a single society. This is reflected in the 'Toronto Blessing Movement' and in, for instance, its thorough-going use of mass communications technology. Trends toward both homogenization and diversity within the 'Movement' are apparent – as globalization theorists would predict. The fact that it was a Canadian, rather than US, city that gave its name to the 'Blessing' may well have increased its appeal, at least to Britons suspicious of US cultural dominance. The homogenising tendencies of the 'Movement' may divert churches from exploring and appropriating other more indigenous Christian traditions (for instance, Celtic Christianity); this is especially true of churches that do not form part of older-established denominations. In the 'global village' people have easier access to more people and more places, but their contacts are more superficial and ephemeral. Sociologists of religion can reliably predict that the phenomena, if not the fruit, of the 'Toronto Blessing' will eventually be replaced by the next charismatic focus.

5.3 *A psychodynamic perspective*

- 5.3.1 Some psychiatrists have seen the 'Toronto Blessing' as an instance of what is known as 'dissociation'. By this is meant a process or reaction in which different elements of the mind, normally experienced or expressed simultaneously, become split off and separated from one another. In dissociation people can think, feel or do certain things which seem 'out

of character' and can be experienced as 'not me' (e.g. 'this is of God'), when in fact they are generated by a split-off part of the self.

- 5.3.2 Dissociation is frequently seen in ecstatic religion (and phenomena externally similar to the 'Toronto Blessing' are by no means confined to Christianity, for example the darwish or whirling dervishes phenomena in Muslim cultures) and in situations of extreme distress and emotional 'release' following accidents or disaster. It is the basis of hypnotic suggestion. Preconditions for dissociation include expectation, example and emotional arousal, but people vary as to their ability to experience it.
- 5.3.3 We should not shrink from recognising that preparation and raising of expectations have featured largely in the 'Toronto Blessing' and other charismatic phenomena. There is therefore probably a substantial *human* component in the Toronto phenomenon which could be 'explained' without having to invoke the *divine* at all.
- 5.3.4 This raises the important question of whether it is a good or bad thing and whether it should be encouraged. God may use humanly-derived events for good purposes, but we can also pervert/frustrate God's purposes by human (worldly) interference. We must be alert to the dangers of manipulation by the misguided or malign, and beware of any tendency to see the phenomena as ends in themselves. But if, as seems likely, there has in some cases been genuine growth and a closer walk with Christ as a result of the 'Toronto Blessing' then we can be thankful that God is able to bring good out of all situations, especially where the intention (as it undoubtedly mostly is) is sincere.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 There is a significant number of Ministers and lay people who testify to the benefits of the 'Toronto Blessing', although few Methodist congregations have wholeheartedly embraced it. Many Methodists who have experienced the 'Blessing' have done so outside our own churches, or in special meetings and services separate from the regular programme of worship. Where it has affected Methodism, the manifestations are usually more 'restrained' than in some other settings.
- 6.2 The feature of the 'Toronto Blessing' which distinguishes it from other pentecostal/charismatic/signs-and-wonders ministries is the nature, widespread occurrence, frequency, intensity and duration of such common visible and audible phenomena as laughing, shaking, jumping, jerking, falling to the floor, roaring and barking. Christian history has few instances of outbreaks of phenomena on such a scale. The nature of modern communications (especially electronic media), and the ease of international travel, have undoubtedly accelerated the spread of this phenomenon.
- 6.3 The 'Toronto Blessing' phenomenon has revealed a deep need for 'attentive listening' to the hurts and longings of many people. In an age of increasing alienation and dis-ease, this experience has enabled many people to feel a renewed sense of the love and presence of God, and to

receive relevant, personally-focussed prayer. These needs are a challenge to the spiritual and pastoral life of our churches.

- 6.4 We see a need for far more help in the areas of spirituality, doctrine and biblical interpretation and application than we are currently giving. The lack of these things leaves people ill-equipped to understand and make sense of intense real or alleged experiences of the Spirit.
- 6.5 Whilst wanting to rejoice in every genuine move of the Holy Spirit we must be sure to test every movement that makes such strong claims for itself. Among the tests to be applied is that of time. Whilst it is natural to ask whether or not this (or any other phenomenon) is 'of God', at this, still relatively early stage, any answer must be a matter of faith. It is more helpful to ask whether or not God uses experiences such as are found in the 'Toronto Blessing', and our Methodist tradition provides ample criteria by which the activity of God may be discerned through its fruit in human lives. We have indicated above (paragraph 4.2.1) the sort of checks and balances which all Church life needs. However, we have seen that the 'Toronto Blessing' is an experience in which many people's awareness of God, and of their relationship to God, is heightened, and through which God ministers to them. In that way it can be a 'blessing'.
- 6.6 Whilst some of the manifestations of the 'Toronto Blessing' and the practices associated with it are consistent with Scriptural teaching and practice, some are not. On the other hand, as we have already affirmed, God is present in the Holy Spirit in all that is, and may enrich every experience with blessing.
- 6.7 It is undeniable that some people have been deeply disturbed by their experiences of the 'Toronto Blessing', and this has in some cases been exacerbated by insensitive responses from enthusiasts. Others are disappointed that they have not, it seems, received gifts that they have earnestly sought. There is a vital pastoral work to be done in helping all people, whether their experience has been positive or otherwise, to be assured that their integrity and faith are not being questioned nor are they unwelcome in the Methodist Church.
- 6.8 The quality of leadership/ministry/teaching experienced has a great deal to do with the forming of opinions. God has taken the risk of choosing to work through fallible human beings, so inevitably there will be faults, flaws and abuses of power. Being realistic therefore, in any movement of God through people there will always be the risk of:
 - * Pride, manipulation, control, power-seeking, & exhibitionism.
 - * Seeking religious experiences/manifestations for a 'feel good factor'.
 - * The opinion that 'this' is 'the answer', or 'the way for all people'.
 - * Self-righteousness, or conversely feelings of spiritual inadequacy
 - * A diverse range of interpretations in terms of the 'spiritual forces' at work, such as the Holy Spirit, the human spirit or possibly evil agencies.

- 6.9 Many people may feel drawn to travel to Toronto itself or other ‘centres’ of the ‘Blessing’. Such pilgrimages may well be a source of inspiration that can be informative and helpful to individuals and their home church. In some ways Toronto may stand in the tradition of Christian pilgrimage to such places as Jerusalem, Lourdes, Taize and Iona. However, it is essential to examine one’s motives for such a journey very carefully, and to be prepared to apply the insights of our tradition (as outlined particularly in section 4 of this Report) in careful appraisal of what one finds.
- 6.10 The ‘Toronto Blessing’ is frequently referred to by analogy with the ‘times of refreshing’ of Acts 3:19f. Such a description draws attention to the fact that this is primarily a movement in which ‘saints are blessed’, rather than ‘sinners converted’. There are numerous reports of individual and corporate growth in terms of Christian Spirituality and a greater overt expression of love between Christians (especially husbands and wives). Also on record is the increased involvement of laity in ministry; for example in prayer and counselling, a desire to forward evangelism and hints of developments in social outreach. Among the fruit of this phenomenon may thus be Christian renewal, but there is little evidence as yet that we are witnessing ‘revival’, although some would see it as a prelude to that. Certainly Methodists would not want to identify themselves with any of the millenarian movements that are particularly prevalent at this time, and which tend to seize on any alleged ‘evidence’ to support their expectations. Within the life of our Churches there are many and various movements through which renewal is being found, whether individually or corporately. We may be enriched by them all, but a sense of proportion is essential. This accords with the approach of Wesley, the ‘reasonable enthusiast’.
- 6.11 Where churches have lost a sense of purpose, where their worship is emotionally-inhibited and over-cerebral, where ‘tradition’ is used to excuse unwillingness to change, where church life is tedious and attractive mostly to the elderly and very young, it is not surprising that features of charismatic experience such as are found in the ‘Toronto Blessing’ are highly attractive. Its holistic spirituality, the ‘holy anarchy’ of its less-inhibited worship, the sense of excitement, participation, novelty and unpredictability in its experience of God’s activity all combine to attract large and relatively young congregations. Charismatic experience is, however, at its most healthy when it forms part of the life and witness of broad churches and where appropriate checks and balances exist. Just as the balance in the Church can sometimes tip so much towards order and tradition that the Spirit is stifled and change becomes impossible, similarly, too much charismatic disinhibition and spontaneity can lead to spiritual anarchy and superficiality.
- 6.12 The Kingdom of God is an inclusive community, in which all people are called to share. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called to witness in its corporate life to the inclusiveness of that Kingdom, and individuals are invited to join with others of diverse backgrounds in mutual love, praise and service. Participating in the life of the Kingdom, as members of Christ’s Church, we have much to learn from God and from each other. The experience of the ‘Toronto Blessing’ is one of the ways in

which we may together discover more of God. Taken as a whole, the 'Toronto Blessing Movement' has many lessons for the worship, mission and prayer life of the Church at the end of the 20th century.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 We invite the Methodist people to explore the issues outlined in this Report without fear, but with open and prayerful minds, sharing their experiences and perceptions in an atmosphere of honesty and Christian love.
- 7.2 We affirm and encourage those who have been blessed by their experience of the 'Toronto Blessing'; at the same time, we ask that special care be given to those for whom it has been a cause of distress, division or disappointment for whatever reason.
- 7.3 We urge all those with responsibility for pastoral care to take seriously the phenomenon of the 'Toronto Blessing', and to seek informed guidance on appropriate ways to handle people's experiences. In particular, care needs to be taken to distinguish between external manifestations, which may indeed be disturbing, and the possibility that there is an inner catharsis whose lasting effects are beneficial and to be welcomed.
- 7.4 There is urgent need for a much more deliberate teaching and preaching programme on the doctrine and work of the Holy Spirit.
- 7.5 The renewed emphasis on prayer ministry is to be welcomed. Opportunities should be provided in all our churches for attentive listening to the spiritual hunger felt by many people, supported by relevant, personally-focussed prayer and by intercession.
- 7.6 To encourage fruitful developments and minimise the potential hazards which result from human sinfulness the following checks and balances are important:
 - * Balance in church life in terms of:
 - proclamation and preaching of the Word;
 - celebration of the Sacraments;
 - styles of worship;
 - a recognition that Christians are Trinitarian in matters of faith & worship;
 - allowing the Spirit of God to use all the above means and others to make God's will and purpose known.
 - * Accountability/Supervision/Submission:
 - a godly use of authority and discernment in church leadership at all levels and a willingness to deal lovingly and firmly with what is deemed inappropriate.
 - * A willingness to:
 - listen to different points of view and tradition;
 - learn from each other;

admit that none of us possesses the whole truth revealed in Christ Jesus.

7.7 We recommend further study of the following Conference Reports, which have already addressed many of the issues touched upon in this Report:

- * The Charismatic Movement (1974)
- * Christian Initiation (1987)
- * 'Let the People Worship' (1988)
- * 'Called to Love and Praise' (1995)

7.8 We reaffirm the conclusions of the 1974 Report, summarised in paragraph 2.5 above. It is vital that charismatic and non-charismatic Christians should increasingly appreciate each others' strengths, as well as weaknesses. They need to meet each other not as members of two opposing parties, but as fellow pilgrims who enrich each other. Non-charismatics, for instance, could do with understanding the attractions of charismatic worship. It would be helpful to observe or experience the 'Toronto Blessing' phenomena for oneself before passing judgement. Charismatics and non-charismatics need to 'speak the truth in love' to each other, as fellow pilgrims on fundamentally the same road.

RESOLUTION

The Conference receives the Report and commends it for study.

(Agenda 1996, pp.161-179)