

THE USE OF METHODIST PREMISES BY OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES (1997)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Liturgy often speaks volumes about the beliefs of those who use it. The contemporary Methodist hymn-writer, Fred Pratt Green, has a verse in one of his hymns which describes the way Methodists have come to value their places of worship. The hymn has found ready acceptance among the Methodist people:

Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
(from *Hymns and Psalms* 653)

Another piece of hymnody describes the process by which buildings become significant to Christians:

Here holy thought and hymn and prayer
Have winged the spirit's powers,
And made these walls divinely fair,
Thy temple, Lord, and ours.
(quoted by Gordon Wakefield in *Epworth Review*, May 1982)

A service recently prepared by the Faith and Order Committee contains these words for use as a new church building is dedicated:

Let the door(s) of this church be open!
May the love of Christ dwell within this house
and may all who enter here find peace.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

After consultation with the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths, the Property Division brought to the 1994 Conference a report which was adopted as a reply to Memorial M129 which concerned the use of Methodist premises by other faith communities. The Conference, as well as adopting the report, expressed the judgement “that there should be a careful reconsideration of the principle governing the use of Methodist premises by persons of other faiths, including the question of non-Christian worship”, and directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths, “to report to the Conference of 1995 on the issues involved, other than any legal issues . . .”

As a result, the Faith and Order Committee and the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths set up a joint Working Party, which has produced this report. The Conference *Agenda* in 1995 and 1996 explained why there had been delays in the production of the report. The report as it now follows is substantially that of the Working Party, as amended after discussion in meetings of the two Committees.

The 1994 report to the Conference referred to the last time the question had arisen, between 1970 and 1972. In a reply to the Conference in 1972 on the use of Trust Premises, the Faith and Order Committee stated that there, “is evidence that minority religious groups recently arrived in Britain have difficulty in obtaining premises for their worship” (Conference *Agenda* 1972 p.281). Five ‘opinions and recommendations’ were brought to Conference.

The first four did not require a change in the 1932 Model Deed and were accepted by Conference. They were as follows:

- 1) Local Churches should take the initiative to establish ‘dialogue’ with the representatives of other faiths’.
- 2) Adherents of other faiths should be allowed the use of Methodist premises for their secular and social activities.
- 3) Such occasions may be permitted even when an incidental religious rite is involved, as for example, the saying of grace at a meal, a brief blessing attached to a wedding reception following a religious wedding elsewhere (but not a full religious wedding service), or an act of individual prayer demanded at a particular hour. [*occasions already legally permissible*]
- 4) Christians should take opportunities where it is permitted for the sympathetic observation of other faiths, with a view to deeper understanding, and should gladly accept whatever experience and communion with God arises in such relationships. Those Christians who

are called to make a deep study of another faith would best do so by sympathetic observation of its worship in its regular services. Christians should scrupulously avoid those forms of inter-faith worship which compromise the distinctive faiths of the participants and should ensure that Christian witness is not distorted or muted; nor should they encourage occasions in which those of different faiths do in turn what is characteristic of their own religion, but in the present climate of opinion with its tendencies to syncretism should stress the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

The fifth recommendation was as follows:

The Committee is of the opinion that to give permission to non-Christian communities as an expression of Christian love and the desire to improve relations to hold their worship in Methodist premises does not of itself imply any denial of the uniqueness and finality of Christ or any judgement on the truth of other religions. It therefore recommends that when a non-Christian community seeks permission to use Methodist premises for its worship because no building is immediately available for its use the Superintendent, Minister and Trustees should be given discretion to grant permission as a temporary measure if they are satisfied that the worship will not offend the Christian conscience and that such permission will have the goodwill of the local congregation.

This fifth recommendation would have required legal changes and was not adopted.

As the Methodist joint Working Party was meeting, a Church of England Report, *Communities and Buildings*, was also being prepared by the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Board of Mission. It was submitted to the General Synod in 1996 and dealt with two issues: the sale of church buildings to other faith communities and the use of church premises by people of other faiths.

The present report seeks to reflect on contemporary Experience, the historical Tradition of the Church, and the Bible, and seeks to use the power of Reason to derive its conclusion. It attempts to define two theological principles which are invariable and to offer some provisional guidelines, recognising that these may change in the light of further experience. **The conclusion is that no theological imperative exists at present which should impel the Methodist Church to seek to alter the Deed of Union in order to allow formal (see section 3.2) acts of worship on its premises by other faith communities.**

3. CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

The Working Party has canvassed the views and experience of members of other faith communities and has also invited responses from within Methodism. As a result, three major elements in contemporary experience are now identified: the changes in the multi-faith experience of British society since 1972; the distinction made by all faiths between formal and informal religious acts; and the perspectives of Christians in other parts of the world.

The Working Party believes that experience leads to the conclusion that the rather loosely-defined view formulated by the Conference in 1972 remains a viable, though still provisional, position.

3.1 Developments in Britain

By 1972, churches had increasingly encouraged the use of premises by community groups, many of which had no religious foundation, especially in areas of social and economic deprivation: when use was requested by other faith communities, there was unease which led to debate. There were then, and there remain now, Christians who believed that generosity and hospitality towards those of other faiths – expressions of the commitment to love – demanded an open door. Other Christians believed, and continue to believe, that it is unhelpful to the proclamation of the gospel to create or maintain confusion about the distinctiveness of different approaches to God.

In the intervening period, most of the other faith communities have become established elements in a multi-faith society and have either acquired or built premises of their own – which, incidentally, they have seen as important signs of permanence and acceptance. Those whose faiths derived from the Asian Sub-Continent were and remain very critical of the secularisation of British society and indeed of the secularism which undergirds the attitude of many modern Christians to their places of worship. For many of them, a Temple is permanently a House of God. Requests for use of Methodist or other Christian premises now seem to arise from upwardly-mobile groups or from schisms within such other faith communities. The first has led to some requests in suburban areas which are not ‘deprived’ or which have only recently become religiously plural. The second raises questions about the propriety of becoming involved in the disputes of other communities.

The years since 1972 have also seen a growth (still seen as inadequate by many) in inter-faith dialogue. Such dialogue has led to a greater awareness of, and a greater respect for the sensitivities of each community. It has also led to a growing shared realisation that it is unhelpful to blur or to ignore the distinctions between faiths.

3.2 Informal and Formal Meetings among People of Faith

The Working Party has confirmed that there is broad agreement among all the major faith communities that, however difficult to justify theologically, there is a distinction to be made between private acts of prayer or the saying, for example, of grace at a meal, and the more formal community gathering for the purpose of worship; there is agreement also that being hospitable may imply the former but not the latter.

There are a number of different ways of expressing this distinction. It is possible to speak of ‘religious’ as opposed to ‘secular’ events. This is, however, an inaccurate description of gatherings in any faith community. Just as within Christian circles it would be wrong to suggest that, for example, a church-based sewing club, meeting in the church hall, was a ‘secular’ occasion, so it would be wrong to use that language in other faiths. Nor is the use of the word ‘cultural’ entirely acceptable in this context. The celebration following a wedding ceremony may not contain more than brief prayers, but

for many in other faith communities it would properly be seen as an extension of, and still a part of, the religious framework. It would not simply be a social and cultural event. Such illustrations are plentiful.

The Working Party wishes to make use of the less explicit terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ as a more accurate and less tendentious way of describing a shared view across religious communities. (This usage was adopted by the recent Church of England report, *Communities and Buildings*.) If we consider the following statements offered to the Working Party, they amount to the beginning of such a shared view:

A Hindu woman: “Hindus would be happy that Christians should pray in the temple, but not that they should follow Christian worship in the temple.”

A Muslim man: “My own opinion is that the specific place where the worshippers congregate should be for the sole use of the particular group, and there is no resentment to that practice from any group.”

A Sikh woman: “Worship should be restricted to that particular faith”.

As the Church of England report notes, the use of a specific building is typical of formal gatherings for worship. Further, formal acts of worship often require not only the **absence** of symbols of other faiths, but the **presence** of the symbols of the worshipping community. The use of a Christian building for formal gatherings of Sikhs, for example, would require the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib, and for Hindus, the various *murti* (deities).

There are, of course, gatherings which may be hard to fit into either of the suggested categories, and these are not insignificant. For example, a Qur’anic school for Muslim children may not be a formal event, but it is, and is intended to be, an act of religious education and nurture which, as indicated by the principles stated later in this report, the Working Party would not believe appropriate within a Christian building.

It may be that this distinction between the formal and the informal throws light upon the undoubted view of many believers that even within one building there are parts which are ‘more holy’ than others. Methodists (as indicated below in section 4), reject much of the notion of holy buildings; nevertheless, they instinctively make similar distinctions.

The Working Party does not believe that it is possible to provide detailed rulings on these matters, but broadly considers that these elements in contemporary experience suggest that formal gatherings by other faith communities on Methodist premises are not appropriate.

3.3 The World Church

Since 1972, one of the most important developments within most religious traditions has been the growth of that zealous pursuit of a particular faith-group’s interests which is often called fundamentalism. This has had considerable influence on inter-faith relationships throughout the world. Events such as that at Ayodhya, India, in December 1992 (when members of a

resurgent Hindu sect deliberately destroyed a mosque) remind us of the powerful significance of places of worship. Christians facing religious discrimination in Pakistan, sometimes prevented from building churches, are understandably puzzled if Methodists in Britain invite Pakistani Muslims to use their premises for prayer. In parts of the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere, similar considerations apply. As noted earlier, Christians in the world church are also critical of the secularised attitude to church buildings which has developed in the West. The Working Party recognises that the world wide experience of Christians must be taken into account when considering the use of Methodist premises by other faith communities.

4. TRADITION

4.1 The elements from the tradition of the Church which the Working Party selected as most important were the development of the concept of holy space and the role of symbols. This section indicates that, although other churches have formalised the designation of sacred places, this thinking does not usually find a ready home within Methodism. Methodism has no formal theology of sacred places. Nevertheless, Methodists hold their buildings in high regard. Reference is also made to the recent Church of England report, *Communities and Buildings*.

4.2 Holy Places

In the early Christian era, there were many examples of the designation of holy or sacred places. This practice undoubtedly existed alongside a strand of thinking which distrusted cultic activity associated with sacred sites. It is not possible to paint a simple picture. What is undeniable is that over the centuries churches became for all practical purposes holy places, not only because worship took place within them, but because they were filled with symbols which provided a means of promoting and focusing that worship. Ceremonies or liturgies for the formal setting-aside of places and buildings date from early in the Christian era, and are of course still used by many churches. The 'defence' and/or repossession of such places and the objects they contained has of course been the focus of violence over centuries between Christians and members of other faith communities.

The Reformed tradition, springing from a challenge to many of the outward signs used by the Roman church to encourage the faithful, has from its earliest days emphasised a pragmatic approach to buildings for worship and has broadly rejected the notion of 'sacred' ground or the need for 'consecration' of sites, buildings or symbols, preferring the less defined notion of 'dedication'.

John Wesley believed that the gathering of God's people for worship was the crucial factor in establishing a place of worship and fellowship. The Methodist church has broadly maintained that position, always preferring to speak of a worshipping community rather than its buildings as the locus of God's activity.

None of these historical points should be taken to mean that Methodists have held their buildings, and particularly (where such distinction can be made) worship spaces within such buildings, in other than high regard. From

hymnody and liturgy, as noted in the Preface, comes the affirmation that places of worship become for the worshipping community significant symbols of encounter with God.

4.3 Churches as Symbol

Churches have always contained symbols and all Christians make use of symbols within their formal worship. Bread, wine and water have sanction directly from Jesus, and for many, candles, bells, crucifixes, icons, stained glass and so on have become highly significant. Most of the great historic churches have been built as places of beauty and have themselves been seen as an offering to God. Again, with only some exceptions, Methodism has tended to be much more pragmatic, seeing buildings mainly as ‘containers’ for whatever kinds of liturgy they are designed to accommodate – often, in earlier days, with the emphasis on the ability for the maximum number to see and hear the preacher.

Nevertheless, because of the encounters with God which have taken place within them, Methodists share with other Christians a sense of the importance and significance of their buildings. The Working Party believes that this extends to the whole premises, but is focused naturally on the building or area within which formal worship takes place and specific symbols may be present. It may be helpful therefore to speak of the building itself as a symbol of the continued existence of a worshipping community, even though theologically that existence is not dependent upon the bricks and mortar. This symbolism undoubtedly extends beyond that congregation. That is, any building used by a Christian community is a symbol to its neighbourhood of the presence of that community within it. The Working Party noted that such symbolism is not confined to Christian tradition, but is equally important in other faith communities. It is manifestly the case, for example, that the Swaminarayan Temple built recently in Neasden, north-west London, is intended to be a statement of the permanence and importance of that community and its faith.

Thus there is a need for considerable caution in relation to the housing of the formal worship of other faith communities, both for the sake of those for whom a particular building has become Christian and important, and for those within the neighbourhood for whom it is also a symbol of Christian faith.

4.4 The Church of England

The Working Party gratefully acknowledges the work represented by *Communities and Buildings*, which has been helpful to much of its thinking.

As the Board of Mission report makes clear, the Church of England has had a somewhat undefined view of the question of sacred or holy places, and has never authorised an official liturgy of consecration. Nevertheless, the report has to deal extensively with the questions raised by the sale or disposal of formally consecrated places. The Working Party commends the Church of England report for study by anyone seeking an extended treatment of some of the Biblical material, and of the questions raised by the change of use of buildings, or the sharing of those buildings with other faith communities.

On the specific issue addressed in the present report, *Communities and Buildings* sets out a very demanding set of guidelines which should be fulfilled before any hospitality is offered to those of other faiths for formal worship – though it is important to note that such use is not ruled out. These guidelines have helped the Working Party to formulate its own *principles and guidelines* for Methodism.

5. SCRIPTURE

5.1 Because, in the matter of the ‘sacredness’ of Church buildings, Methodist people have tended to be more pragmatic than systematic, they have been eclectic in their appeal to Scripture to support diverse theological positions and have focused that appeal mostly in their hymnody and liturgies. Within wider discussion of this matter, the Working Party has noted three principal strands of usage of Scripture, each with its own character, the three together reflecting the wide range of approaches to the Bible characteristic of Methodism. One strand ‘echoes’ in Christians’ present experience some of Scripture’s stories; another draws on a key element in Christian character, ‘hospitality’; the third strand appeals to a small group of passages which appear to be ‘anti-Temple’ and consequently, to give comfort to a studied indifference to buildings, if not to outright hostility towards them. The Working Party offers only brief comment on each strand, for it believes that appeal to Scripture offers no simple solution to the present problem.

5.2 Appropriating Scriptural Models of ‘Sacred Place’

First, the Working Party has identified a practical, often ill-defined, sense that, because a building has housed a community’s life in faith, then scriptural language about ancient places as a focus of God’s presence may properly be borrowed and adapted. Within the British Methodist tradition, this sense has sometimes expressed itself through ‘sacred’ place-names for buildings; churches’ names (Bethel, Zion, Salem, etc) may evoke scriptural stories of memorable encounters with God and say something clearly about the ways in which later communities wish to value their buildings. ‘Geographical’ names hardly evoke a like resonance, but experience shows that, whatever reason may dictate to the contrary, buildings tend to acquire a sense of the community’s story, particularly of its dealings with God:

These stones that have echoed their praises are holy,
And dear is the ground where their feet have once trod;
Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims,
And still they were seeking the City of God.

(from *Hymns and Psalms* 660)

In various ways, at diverse times, in life’s greater and lesser moments, we and our forebears have encountered God. Consequently, Christians tend to take up scriptural stories of special encounters and use them analogously within the liturgies and hymnodies of their communities. For example, the stories of Bethel and of Solomon’s Temple are echoed and reworked in *Hymns and Psalms* 494 and 531; Paul’s reminder to the Corinthians that they are God’s Temple informs the ending of *Hymns and Psalms* 494. For their own purposes

in their own less splendid, but, to them, no less holy, buildings, countless preachers have reworked Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, and *Hymns and Psalms* 659 offers them a sung version for stone-layings. Derek Farrow's Christian reworking of Solomon's prayer, intermingled with other allusions, probably crystallises this specific Methodist view of 'the sacred' as it takes up its echoes of Scripture. Christian scriptures provide the language and models for the Church's continuing story . . . '*It is like this.*'

5.3 Hearing the Imperative of 'Hospitality'

Second, as we have said earlier, there is a strong appeal to Scripture by many who wish to urge 'hospitality' as a good reason for welcoming people of other faiths to use Methodist premises.

Attention should naturally be drawn first to Jesus' command for love of one's neighbour (Luke 10:25-37; see also Mark 12:31, quoting Leviticus 19:18). In the familiar passage from Luke, the lawyer's dispassionate question, 'Who is my neighbour?' is turned back on him: 'Which one of these acted like a neighbour . . . ? You go, then, and do the same.' And, though difficulties of interpretation exist, Jesus' dramatic narrative of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 provides further powerful illustration of the way in which 'neighbourly' care must be expressed in attention to practical needs.

The principle of hospitality as such is variously enjoined elsewhere in Scripture. Although a number of passages relating to hospitality in the New Testament probably refer specifically to hospitality towards journeying fellow Christians (for example, I Timothy 3:2, I Peter 4:9), others appear to have a broader reference; for example:

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to *strangers*. (Romans 12:13)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to *strangers*, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

It is probable that there is here a reflection of a principle like that of Deuteronomy 10:19 with its demand to care for the 'resident alien'.

Because the hearing, reading and study of Scripture has traditionally shaped the Methodist people's perception of 'scriptural holiness', hospitality stands squarely in any account of Christian character, and this, in the contemporary world, must surely include relationships with those of other faiths.

5.4 Buildings: Legitimate or Not?

Third, the Working Party has considered an argument centred on a common reading of Stephen's speech (see Acts 6:8 – 8:1). It is sometimes urged that in this narrative Stephen represents a tradition which draws both on Israel's prophetic tradition – understood to be generally critical of cultic religion and of shrines, particularly of the Jerusalem Temple – and also draws on a reading of gospel traditions of Jesus' alleged attitude to ritual and Temple.

There is little evidence to suggest that the gospel writers thought Jesus to be opposed to the Temple; indeed, Luke-Acts gives a strong indication of its

writer's positive attitude to it. For example, the post-resurrection Christian community both prayed and taught there.

Because Stephen's speech is a focal point for those who are indifferent to buildings, and who reckon Methodists as descendants from the Hellenists, it is important simply to note that there are other ways than this of reading Stephen's speech and of following Luke's argument from Scripture. It may certainly be argued that the passage has more to do with the issue of the reception or the rejection of Christ than with any 'anti-building' theology.

The writer to the Hebrews sees the new covenant mediated through Christ as being without the cultic institutions of the old, but it is doubtful how far this can be pressed as an argument against the propriety of distinct buildings for liturgical use within the historical development of Christian worship.

5.5 Reflection on Scripture in Relation to the Working Party's Remit

Reflection on the three ways in which the Working Party has seen Scripture being used does not suggest that there is good reason to alter the Conference's earlier decision.

By appropriating Scripture's stories, later Christians, including Methodists, have taken up in varying measure something of the earlier senses of 'the holy' and consequently recognised in their buildings a special, symbolic character.

In relation to such buildings, while the Working Party is conscious of the unconditional demands of hospitality in personal and group relations, we recognise that the Christian buildings' special character helps to mark out how the Biblical demand for 'hospitality' may be understood. The Working Party wishes to affirm the Christian virtue of hospitality. Hospitality comprises kindness and welcome to the stranger, and generosity, love and growing trust should flourish even where distinctions among faiths remain. In our judgement, however, the word 'hospitality' should not be pressed to mean that Christian churches, themselves symbols of Christian presence, should be available to other faith communities for their sacred purposes.

While God is not contained by church buildings, they remain signals of a gospel that 'God is' and is 'for us'; that gospel is expressed through Christian symbols and Christian discipleship. To affirm the 'specialness' of such buildings in no sense denigrates the faith and worship of others.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Working Party has had a limited brief to reconsider the theological principles governing the use of Methodist premises by people of other faiths, prior to any consideration by the Conference of necessary legal changes which might be required. Its recommendations are necessarily limited to that brief. Yet, in expressing the conclusion that no change is required in the present position with regard to the use of Methodist premises by those of other faith communities, the Working Party wishes to emphasise its total support for widespread and serious efforts, at every level of the church's life, to increase understanding between Methodists and those of other faiths. Nothing in what

follows should be understood to be inimical to friendly, respectful and open relationships on all sides. The Working Party strongly re-affirms the Principles on Dialogue and Evangelism adopted by the 1994 Methodist Conference, and commends friendship-building and appropriate joint action. Inter-faith encounter can enrich both the communities and the individuals taking part. Such encounter can be a source of harmony and a positive aid towards the elimination of prejudice and tension.

The conclusions reached should neither be seen as an adverse judgement upon the validity of non-Christian ways of worship, nor as a denial of the spiritual riches found within other faiths. Rather the Working Party believes that in upholding the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition of worship and life, it is also affirming a positive awareness of the importance of each faith to its own followers.

6.2 The theological principles which the Working Party affirms as an invariable basis for Methodists in contemplating the use of Methodist premises by those of other faiths can be briefly and simply stated. (They can, we believe, be seen as requirements of the Deed of Union and the 1976 Methodist Church Act.)

1. **It is inappropriate for teachings contrary to Christian doctrine to be proclaimed on Methodist premises.**
2. **It is inappropriate for Methodist premises to be used in any way which will negate (or cause confusion concerning) the distinctiveness of Christian doctrine.**

6.3 The Working Party has concluded that the previous guidelines adopted by the Conference in 1972, although they can be seen as imprecise, represent a proper attempt to maintain an important distinction. Those acts of hospitality in which those of other faiths may be welcomed to use Methodist premises for what this report has described as informal events are rightly seen as a part of the process of building good relationships. Where local congregations wish to extend such hospitality they are, as the guidelines below indicate, encouraged to do so. Likewise the Working Party strongly commends joint events organised by inter-faith groups or councils at which the mutual sharing of beliefs and their meaning can be explored.

Nevertheless, through consultation with those of other faiths, and through examination of contemporary experience in the light both of the tradition of the Church and the insights of Scripture, the Working Party is convinced that the application of the two principles stated above leads to the conclusion that the use of Methodist premises for the purposes of formal acts of worship in other faith traditions is inappropriate.

6.4 Guidelines

The Working Party offers some simple guidelines which it believes may usefully be applied in local situations.

- 1 Any decision to invite or allow the use of Methodist premises for informal events by other faith communities should be preceded by careful discussion.

- 2 Such discussion should seek to establish firm support for such a proposal, so that the welcome is genuinely that of the whole Methodist community. It is generally unwise to provoke serious dispute within one faith community in order to invite another faith group to use its premises.
- 3 Consideration should also be given in such circumstances to the likely perceptions in the neighbourhood of the meaning of such invitations, and this is particularly important in relation to Christians whose experience in other parts of the world may be very different from that which obtains in much of Britain.
- 4 Where, in the light of all these considerations, a local congregation decides to move forward to welcoming the use of its premises, it will be sensible not to allow the use of areas which are normally used for Christian public worship.
- 5 The responsibility for allowing the use of trust premises rests with the Managing Trustees. The requirements of the Model Trusts (see especially 13 and 14) and of Standing Orders (see especially 920-929) must be observed.
- 6 All agreements to allow the use of trust premises by other faith communities should be subject to at least annual review.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Report.

(Agenda 1997, pp.236-248)