

USE OF TRUST PREMISES (1972)

There is evidence that minority religious groups recently arrived in this country have difficulty in obtaining premises for their worship. They often at first use private houses, but these may prove too small; and any publicity given to worship in homes may involve them in difficulties with planning authorities. There are also sudden emergencies as in an actual case where their place of worship was accidentally destroyed by fire. The Churches often possess premises which they let for social purposes. In some cases minority religious groups have hired such premises and then cannot understand if they are not allowed to use them for acts of worship. These minority communities need emotional security, and to dig roots, and their worship is of primary importance in giving them cohesion and a sense of belonging. The Churches should give a lead in establishing good relations between these groups and the rest of the community. There is no doubt about the desirability of dialogue with them and friendship towards them. As human beings they have a right to freedom of worship, and Christians should help them to exercise their rights. Must this stop short of permitting worship in Methodist premises?

Some Christians see no great difficulty in this question. They can point to a number of biblical texts which take it for granted that there was some knowledge and service of God outside of the Jewish Christian tradition. They emphasise the continuity between the various faiths of the world, which they see as all species of the genus 'religion' even though some religions are better than others. Some Christians would add that Christ is present 'incognito' in other faiths; and if their worship is not explicitly Christian, it is nevertheless to be encouraged.

Other Christians find the problem more difficult. They believe the weight of biblical evidence to be heavily against the 'inclusive' position outlined above, and stress the discontinuity between that to which Christians bear witness and all human forms of religion; God has said something in Christ which is a judgement on all religion (including much 'Christianity'): Christ calls men to repentance in order to redeem them. Buildings erected to bear witness to Christ are part of the Christian proclamation. Witness to Christ can best be borne in friendly human relations leading to natural dialogue, rather than by appearing to approve the worship of other faiths. What justification is there for continuing missionary work overseas amongst those of other faiths if at home we take steps which seem to rest on the assumption that there will be no proselytisation? We must also consider Christians, both overseas and among immigrants here, who left other faiths at great personal cost. A group of immigrant Christians, admittedly fairly conservative in its outlook, has indeed expressed its disapproval.

Other Christians, while largely holding the theological principles just outlined, point out that the obligation to show a gracious Christian charity is itself a theological principle, rooted in the very nature of God. Thus two theological principles come into conflict. In their judgement the principle of charity should prevail.

The majority of the committee took the view that in certain circumstances it should be made permissible to allow the use of our premises for such worship. This would not imply any denial of the uniqueness and finality of Christ nor any judgement as to the truth of other religions. While some do not attach any 'mystique' to buildings, it was generally felt that normally only the ancillary premises would be used by adherents of other faiths, but as in some premises there is no clear distinction, this was not written into the recommendation.

Permission should be given only when no other building is immediately available and should be temporary. Such communities will normally wish to have premises of their own as soon as possible, and thus the problem may solve itself in a decade or so. The Committee also considered the suggestion that such permission should be confined to certain types of religion, e.g. to monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, or Sikhism, or to religions which avoid the worship of idols. It was, however, found difficult to draw up precise definitions; so it is suggested that the responsibility be given to the Superintendent Minister and the Trustees to ensure that there will be no overt attack on the Christian Religion and that the worship will not either in word or act be offensive to the Christian conscience. Nothing should be done without the goodwill of the local congregation, which can be ascertained through the Leaders' Meeting or the Society or in any other way.

If the Conference accepts this recommendation it will not, however, become operative, as it would be contrary to the provisions of the Model Deed, as interpreted by Counsel (Representative Agenda 1970, p.21), to which the Law and Polity Committee did not demur: the alteration would need an Act of Parliament. It is not for the Faith and Order Committee to say what should be done when what is held by the Law and Polity Committee to be legally possible is less than what is held by the Faith and Order Committee to be theologically desirable, but it asks the Conference to refer that conflict to the General Purposes Committee.

The Faith and Order Committee gives to this Conference this summary of its discussion, in the hope of showing how it reached its conclusions. The Conference is invited to endorse what follows:

(Clauses 1-4 summarise the views which the Committee previously expressed and which still stand: Clause 5 contains the view here expressed for the first time, to which this discussion led.)

Opinions and Recommendations on the use of Trust Premises

- (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. (These occasions are listed separately, as they are already legally permissible and the Faith and Order Committee has already expressed its approval of them. If paragraph 5 is accepted and the worship described in it eventually becomes legally permissible, the distinctions drawn in this paragraph will not be necessary).
- (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 neither distorted nor 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 distinctiveness of the Christian faith.

(Agenda 1972, pp. 281-4)

The Conference adopted the report in the above form, having removed its final paragraph which read as follows:

- (5) 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 judgment 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.

The Conference of 1997 adopted *The Use of Methodist Premises by Other Faith Communities* (see Volume 2, pp. 439-450).