

Theologies connected with the use of Church Buildings within the Methodist Church in Britain, drawing on documents accepted by the Methodist Conference or published by the Methodist Church

Introduction

‘Theology’ concerns itself with the nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This overview points out that, in connection with the use of church buildings by people and communities of other faiths, an exclusivist theology underpinned by legal opinions has triumphed over the inclusivist theology of some documents accepted by the Methodist Conference. My overview begins in 1969, when Britain was visibly becoming multi-religious.

1969/1970

A Memorial sent from the Birmingham District in 1969 requested that the Model Deed for Methodist Trust Premises should be re-examined to see whether it would be ‘desirable and possible to modify those clauses which at present preclude the offer of the Methodist Trust premises’ to ‘people of non-Christian faiths who may be unable to find any convenient place in which to worship’.¹ The question was referred to an ad hoc committee of the General Purposes and Policy Committee (GPPC).

The Model Deed of 1932 had a doctrinal standards clause, which referred to ‘the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation’.² An Opinion of Counsel was gained by the GPPC. This asserted that ‘minor religious acts at a non-Christian social gathering as saying a grace at a meal or opening or closing a meeting with a prayer of a blessing’ would not go against the Model Deed but that a full act of worship on Methodist Church Premises would and that this situation could only be changed by statute,

¹ Printed at the top of: ‘Use of Methodist Trust Premises’. General Purposes and Policy Committee Report. Representative Session Agenda for the Methodist Conference of 1970: 21-23. In 1971, both the Law and Polity Committee and the Faith and Order Committee reported to conference on the issue, the former concentrating on the legal aspects and the latter on the theological aspects but the Conference was not allowed to approve it.

² The Methodist Church Union Act of 1929 gave the power to the Uniting Conference of 1932 to adopt the Deed of Union. The Methodist Conference was given the power to amend the Deed, except for the doctrinal standards clause.

since the doctrinal standards clause was the only clause that could not be changed by the Methodist Conference. An exclusivist interpretation of the Doctrinal Standards Clause was, therefore, taken by Counsel. The reply to the Memorial affirmed the need for dialogue to increase ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘improved relationships’, and affirmed that people of other faiths should be allowed on Methodist premises for secular and social activities and that ‘an incidental religious rite’ could be permitted. However, the GPPC could not gain a majority vote on anything further and referred ‘the theological aspect’ of the report to ‘the Ecumenical Movement and the Faith and Order Committee’. At this point, therefore, the GPPC could not agree over theology but it did make a distinction between what was permissible and what was desirable.³ It is obvious that a minority voice wanted to make it possible for Methodist Trust premises to be made available, on a temporary basis, for other faiths to use them for ‘religious and educational purposes’.

1972

Following this, a report on whether people of other religions could pray or worship on Methodist Church Premises was brought to the Methodist Conference in 1972. The Committee that prepared it had to take into account: the written Opinion of Counsel gained by the Chapel Department on behalf of the GPPC for the 1970 Conference(see above); the responses to this of the Law and Polity Committee and the Faith and Order Committee in 1971. Five ‘opinions and recommendations’ were brought to the 1972 Methodist Conference:

- Local churches should take the initiative to establish ‘dialogue’ with the representatives of other faiths;
- Adherents of other faiths should be allowed the use of Methodist premises for their secular and social activities;
- 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 wedding service) or an act of individual prayer demanded at a particular hour;
- Christians should take the opportunity where it is permitted for the sympathetic observation of other faiths, with a view to deeper understanding, and should gladly

³ ‘Use of Methodist Trust Premises’. General Purposes and Policy Committee Report. Representative Session Agenda for the Methodist Conference of 1970. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House: 21-23.

accept whatever experience and communion with God arises in such relationships.....Christians should scrupulously avoid those forms of inter-faith worship which compromise the distinctive faith 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 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.⁴

The wording of the recommendations echoed those of the 1970 report in some cases. It is significant that the fourth recommendation accepted the theological principle that ‘communion with God’ could occur through sympathetic observation of the worship of other faiths. This together with the first three recommendations, were accepted by the Methodist Conference. The last was not, because it would have involved legal changes to the Deed of Union of 1932, which set out the basis for union between three formerly independent Methodist groupings.⁵ That the Methodist Church refused to go down this legal path had a theological underpinning, namely only a minority voice could affirm that allowing other faiths to worship on Methodist premises would not ‘imply any denial of the uniqueness or finality of Christ’. The majority believed that it would.

In the years following 1972, the Methodist Church Division of Social Responsibility prepared a booklet entitled, ‘Shall we greet only our own family?’ which was designed ‘to guide

⁴ Re-printed in, *Use of Methodist Premises by People of Other Faiths: A Report to Conference 1997*, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998, pp. 4-5.

⁵ Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists and United Methodists.

Christians in their relationships with people of other Faiths'. With reference to church premises, it could go no further than what was agreed in 1972. However, it did encourage Methodists to share their premises with people of other faiths for social and secular purposes, adding that it would be 'very selfish' not to do so, given that some 'local communities' were 'desperate to find places to meet'.⁶ The theology that was presented in the booklet stressed the love of God for the whole world, the need for humility in the face of God's salvation through Jesus and the following attitude towards people of other faiths: 'We cannot approach others as though we were superiors, only as *humbly* grateful equals'.⁷ Exclusivist biblical passages such as John 14:6 were mentioned but readers were encouraged to hold these in balance with more inclusivist passages such as Acts 10: 34-35. (p. 17) and Acts 14: 17.⁸ Although it was nevertheless recognised that 'there is no one theological attitude to other Faiths that is acceptable to all Christians', the overall theology presented was inclusivist, drawing on the prologue of St John's gospel.⁹

The 1980s

The question of the use of church premises by people of other faiths did not come to the foreground at a national level in the Methodist Church in the 1980s. At the 1983 conference, the Faith and Order Committee 'commended for study' the British Council of Churches 1981 booklet, *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*, which assessed the 1979 WCC Guidelines, and gave a preliminary response, which was again theologically inclusivist. The response contained these words, 'But we can speak of a shared search for truth, in that the truth is greater than the members of any faith have grasped. Indeed, Christians may well find that they are shaken to the foundations by dialogue'.¹⁰ This was predicated on a statement about the nature of God – 'He is the Lord of nature, of history and of people of every nation, race and language...'

A further report that the Committee said it would prepare within 5 years did not come to the Methodist Conference. However, Martin Forward, Secretary of the Methodist Church's Inter-Divisional Committee for relations with People of Other Faiths, edited, *God of all faiths*:

⁶ Methodist Church Division of Social Responsibility. Date not given but definitely in 1970s. *Shall we greet only our own family?:* 22.

⁷ *Shall we greet only our own family?:* 17

⁸ *Shall we greet only our own family?:* 10.

⁹ *Shall we greet only our own family?:* 9-10.

¹⁰ The Methodist Church Conference Agendas: Representative and Ministerial Sessions. 1983. 20A Faith and Order Committee.

discerning God's presence in a multi-faith society.¹¹ It came out of the work of the Committee and contained contributions, amongst others, from Donald English, Ivy Gutridge, Kenneth Cracknell, Roy Pape and John C. Newton. The contributors came from different theological perspectives, including the evangelical. However, the theology underpinning the book was certainly not exclusivist in the narrow sense. Donald English, for instance, wrote, after asserting that Jesus was seen as unique by his followers, 'Yet, Jesus himself was constantly surprising people by the way in which he declared the most unlikely people to be acceptable, when those who expected to be praised by him often got strong criticism.'¹² A strong rejoinder to an exclusivist reading of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel is also given.¹³

By the end of the 1990s, therefore, the Methodist Church was largely endorsing an inclusivist attitude to other religions theologically whilst maintaining an exclusivist attitude to the use of church premises.

The 1990s

In 1990, the King's Lynn Circuit expressed their concern about 'the views being expressed about other faiths in some parts of the Methodist Church', namely inclusivist rather than exclusivist views, and urged the Methodist Church to be uncompromising in proclaiming the 'true Christian gospel'. A detailed reply was given in 1992. It was direct, stressing that 'any attitude towards people of other faiths which does not arise out of meeting, involvement, deep commitment and love is not an obviously Christian one'. It also appealed to the need to listen to the Other, as Jesus did to the Syro Phoenician woman, and to John Wesley, who, significantly for the topic of this paper, was reported as having 'favourably compared the atmosphere of a synagogue with that of some Christian places of worship'. The ethos of the message from Kings Lynn was, therefore, roundly challenged, although the reply stressed that inter faith dialogue 'by no means compromises Christians in the proclamation of their own faith'.¹⁴

¹¹ Martin Forward (ed.). 1989. *God of all faith: discerning God's presence in a multi-faith society*. London: The Methodist Church Home Mission Division.

¹² *God of all faith*: 85.

¹³ *God of all faith*: 48-51.

¹⁴ The Methodist Conference Agenda 1990. Response to Memorial 57 Christianity and Other Faiths: 274-277

In 1994, the Methodist Conference accepted a report jointly compiled by the Decade of Evangelism Committee and the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths. It aimed to give guidance on dialogue and evangelism in light of the Code of Conduct issued by the Inter Faith Network of the UK. Eight principles were outlined, which included, on the theological side: Our multi-ethnic society is a gift from God, an expression of the sort of society God wants us to establish, within which all human beings can flourish; The Story of Jesus is the Church's greatest gift to explore and to share - it is usually Jesus, not the churches, who fascinates others.¹⁵ The other principles stressed the importance of inter-faith encounter, learning about other faiths, sharing stories of faith and supporting a variety of vocations 'within the body of Christ'.¹⁶ The commentary on the first above-mentioned principle included:

We commend a theology of providence which believes that God has created the whole diverse human race and wants all human beings to live together in justice and peace whatever their belief or ethnic origin. This means, for example, the multi faith, multi ethnic character of Ireland and Bosnia is not a tragic mistake to which the only solution is 'ethnic cleansing': rather human sin has destroyed God's intention that human beings should live in harmony and mutual respect. Like other Christians, Methodists believe that it is only through the grace of God that people of different faiths and ethnic origins can do that.¹⁷

In the same year, a reply to a memorial from Swindon that asked for a revisiting of the question of whether Methodist church premises could be used by people of other faiths, was received by the Conference. It laid out the recommendations that had been accepted in 1972, and the one that had been rejected. It itemised three changes that affected any future decisions: the Methodist Church Act of 1976 which introduced 'a declaration of statutory "purposes" of the Methodist Church'; 'the replacement of the Model Deed by differently worded Model Trusts'; 'the introduction of a power for the Conference to amend the

¹⁵ Re-printed as: *Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths: The Inter Faith Network code of conduct and Principles for Dialogue and Evangelism: a Methodist reflection with Study Guide*.1997. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House: 4-8.

¹⁶ *Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths*: 8.

¹⁷*Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths*: 5.

doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church'.¹⁸ And it recommended that a theological report should be obtained before a further legal opinion, which was recognised as also necessary – eventually, stating, 'There is no point in asking the lawyers whether we can do something if in the event the Conference does not judge it right to do it, nor in asking the theologians whether they think we ought to do something which we already know we cannot'.¹⁹

The Faith and Order Committee was given this task, namely to assess whether any theological reasons existed to change the policy of the Methodist Church through legal statute, in consultation with the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths. By the time it submitted, a Statement of Purpose for the Methodist Church had been accepted by the Conference in 1996, which had stated that mission included, 'becoming friends with people of different cultures and faiths'.

The Faith and Order Committee report on church premises was accepted by the Methodist Conference in 1997. I use my description of it to be published in a forthcoming article:

'The Working Party decided that no reasons existed to change existing policy, the final report affirming two principles:

- *It is inappropriate for teachings contrary to Christian doctrine to be proclaimed on Methodist premises.*
- *It is inappropriate for Methodist premises to be used in any way which will negate (or cause confusion concerning) the distinctiveness of Christian doctrine.*²⁰

In effect, therefore, it was more conservative and exclusivist than the report of 1972. The distinction between 'informal' and 'formal' acts of worship was nevertheless retained. The 'informal' was permissible but the 'formal' was not. In other words, the report accepted that 'the rather loosely-defined view formulated by the Conference in 1972 remains a viable, though still provisional, position'.

Significantly, the report appealed to the specificity of sacred space. One member of the working party talked to people from other religions in his own locality in Greater London, and found that almost all of them recognised the formal/informal distinction and agreed that

¹⁸ Agenda of The Methodist Conference Leeds, Representative Session, 25th July 1994 at 3.00 pm. C1 Replies to Memorials and Suggestions: M129 Use of Church Premises by other Faith Communities: 427-430, here p. 429.

¹⁹ The Methodist Conference Agenda 1994: 429.

²⁰ 1998. *The Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee: Use of Methodist Premises by People of Other Faiths: A Report to Conference 1997*. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House: 14.

places of worship should be restricted to one faith. This 'contemporary experience' contributed to a statement within the report that 'formal gatherings by other faith communities on Methodist premises are not appropriate'. A later part of the report examined 'Churches as Symbol' and declared, '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 on bricks and mortar'. To affirm this 'specialness', the report explained, did not denigrate the worship of people of other faiths but, again, made it inappropriate for that worship to take place in Christian space. A principle of hospitality towards other faiths was encouraged but with an insistence that the special character of Christian buildings helped to mark out how hospitality should be understood

When the Methodist Committee for Relationships with Other Faiths, of which I was the Secretary, suggested, on seeing a draft, that an exception should be made if another religious community experienced a hate attack on their place of worship and asked for the temporary use of Methodist premises whilst repairs were carried out, for instance an anti-semitic attack on a synagogue, the suggestion was turned down by the Faith and Order Committee. Even within this context, an exclusivism that drew a non-negotiable spatial line between Christian worship and the formal worship of other faiths was enforced.²¹

In arguing this, the report identified three relevant scriptural strands: scriptural models of 'Sacred Place'; Hearing the Imperative of Hospitality; Buildings: legitimate or not?

Late 1990s

Two reports to the Methodist Conference, which took a more liberal approach to Christian specificity, were accepted by the Methodist Conference at the end of the decade. The first became a Conference Statement, entitled, *Called to Love and Praise*. It examined the experience, theological identity and role of Methodists. Section II was entitled 'That the World May Believe'. Its first focus was the importance of ecumenical understanding. It then turned to evangelism, declaring 'An authentically Christian evangelism reflects the nature of God. It will be vulnerable, patient and loving' (paragraph 3.2.2). Relationships with people of

²¹ Elizabeth J Harris, 2016. 'Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism: A Spatial Perspective'. In Elizabeth J Harris, Paul Hedges and Shantikumar Hettiariachchi (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Perspectives*. Leiden: Brill.

other faiths came next. Drawing on scripture and a WCC document, it affirmed a classically inclusivist position: ‘Christians, therefore, may gladly affirm of other faiths that “where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, and love and holiness in their living, this, like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit”.’ (paragraph 3.2.11). It also declared that through inter-faith cooperation for justice and peace, ‘Christians can come to a deeper understanding of God, the Christian faith, and of what it means to be the Church, and at the same time contribute to God’s eternal purpose of bringing all things into unity in Christ’ (parag 3.2.12). It went on to affirm that praying with people of other faiths ‘can be a way of enabling people of different faiths to come to a deeper understanding of one another’ (parag. 3.2.13), and cited some of John Wesley’s positive appraisals of other faiths. It ended:

Christians of all traditions are at the beginning of a long period of growing dialogue with people of other faiths. To refuse opportunities for such dialogue would be a denial of both tolerance and Christian love. To predict, at this point in time, the outcome of such dialogue would be presumptuous or faithless. Christians may enter such dialogues in the faith that God will give them deeper insight into the truth of Christ. People of other faiths can hardly be said to belong to the Church. But the Church has to be understood in a way which does not deny the signs of God in their midst (parag 3.2.16).²²

In 2000, new ‘Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages’ were adopted by the Methodist Conference for the use of those conducting Christian marriage services where one partner was from another faith. It had a conscience clause but ministers were discouraged from using it because it could, ‘convey condemnation of the other faith, reinforce the couple’s sense of isolation and hinder good community relations’. The Guidelines permitted the inclusion of ‘a prayer, hymns and/or readings from the other faith’ and ‘an appropriate symbolic action from the other faith tradition’, as long as the words of declaration and the words of contract remained and both partners accepted the Christian understanding of marriage as outlined in the Marriage Service and that what was inserted did not go against this. The participation of a ‘priest or religious leader’ from the other faith community was also permitted if requested by

²² The complete text of the Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, is available on the website of the Methodist Church in Britain.

the couple and if the participation would not change the ‘fundamental Christian nature of the service’.²³

By the new millennium, therefore, the Methodist Church had further endorsed a theology of religions that was inclusivist, had affirmed the possibility of inter-faith prayer and permitted the participation of a leader of another faith in a Christian marriage service.

Mention must also be made of another conference report, *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, which was written by the Faith and Order Committee to clarify how scripture could be used to work through issues of human sexuality. Received by the Methodist Conference in 1998, it outlined seven approaches to the Bible without judging which were acceptable. The 2001 conference took this further in a report entitled *The Nature of Authority*. This formally endorsed the seven approaches as ‘different ways in which Methodists do in fact use the Bible today’, in effect recognising that different interpretations of scripture will exist alongside each other in the Methodist Church.

The Twenty First Century

In the first decade of the twenty first century, three significant study resources on inter-faith relations were prepared by the Methodist Church:

1. *The Life We Share* – a resource with a CD of interviews with people of other faiths and Bible Studies, compiled and published jointly with USPG.
2. *Faith Meeting Faith: Ways Forward in Inter-Faith Relations*. 2004. This was a study resource for individuals and groups prepared by the Committee for Inter Faith Relations and the Faith and Order Committee. It encouraged study of 30 frequently asked questions on inter faith relations, which included some theological ones, for instance, ‘Do people of different faiths worship the same God?’ and ‘Is there one truth? If so, why does God say different things to different people?’ In connection with each question, points to consider were given. One point in connection with the first question above was, ‘Many people of other faiths claim that they do worship the one true God. Such claims are to be respected, even whilst Christian insights are to upheld and offered as part of inter-faith encounter’.²⁴

²³ Methodist Conference Agenda 2000: 168-170.

²⁴ *Faith Meeting Faith: Ways Forward in Inter-Faith Relations*. 2004. London: The Methodist Church: p. 23.

3. *May I call you friend? Sharing our faith with people of other faiths*. 2006. This was a resource prepared by what was then the Methodist Inter Faith Relations Reference Group and the Methodist Evangelism Strategy Group and gave six case studies for discussion. It did not endorse one theological position but encouraged sensitive inter-faith relations.

None of these was formally accepted as Methodist Church policy through the annual conference. They attempted to work with the recognised theological and experiential diversity within the Methodist Church, by encouraging discussion and the building of positive inter-faith relationships.

The issue of the use of church premises re-emerged in 2005, when the London North West Synod sent a request to the annual conference that the Methodist Church, in the light of developments such as the ‘growing number of requests from other faith communities to use Methodist premises for meditation, prayer or worship, as well as for social and community purposes’ should explore, ‘how and in what circumstances other faiths may be granted permission to use our premises for meditation, prayer or worship’.²⁵

Before the 2005 conference, the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP), most probably in light of this request, asked for a further legal opinion on the question: ‘Can the Methodist Property which is held upon the Model Trusts contained in the Methodist Church Act 1976 be used by, or leased to, people of other Faiths (i.e. non-Christian) for their religious purposes?’ The question did not distinguish between the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal’ and neither did the reply. The answer Counsel gave threw this previously-endorsed distinction into question, by arguing that, because of Clause 4 of the Deed of Union (doctrinal standards clause) and the fact that Section 4a of the 1976 Methodist Church Act stated that the purpose of the Methodist Church was the ‘advancement of the Christian faith in accordance with the doctrinal standards and the discipline of the Methodist Church’,²⁶ it would not be in accordance with the Church’s Charitable Trusts for people of other faiths to use Methodist premises for their religious purposes, since this would, in effect, involve the advancement of a non-Christian religion. If the Methodist Church wished for change it would

²⁵ Memorial 42 (2005) from the London North West Synod. At the Synod, 144 members voted for the memorial and 55 voted against.

²⁶ Methodist Church Act 1976. 1977. London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office: 7.

have to radically revise its doctrinal standards and practice. Key to Counsel's findings was paragraph 11:

Accordingly, in my Opinion, although the Conference has power to alter the doctrinal standards of the Church and restate Methodist practice in different terms, nothing less than such a fundamental alteration and restatement would permit model trust property to be used for formal worship, or other overtly religious purposes, by people of other, non-Christian faiths.²⁷

A 6 member working group was appointed to write the report in response to the 2005 memorial. The representative from the TMCP on the group argued that legislative change might not be necessary if the Methodist Conference was presented with a theology which would allow 'the advancement of the Christian religion' to include showing a hospitality to people of other faiths that could extend to them worshipping on Methodist premises.

In line with this argument, the working group, in its draft reports, utilised theological concepts such as the universal grace of God and the Bible's emphasis on radical hospitality to argue that the opening up of church premises to people of other faiths for their religious purposes was just as much the 'advancement' of the Christian religion as drawing a non-negotiable spatial line between Christian worship and all other worship. It wrote this, for instance:

2.6. The Opinion of Counsel is that allowing people of other faiths to worship corporately or privately on church premises is not compatible with our existing charitable purpose. The supposition behind this seems to be that Christianity must compete with all other religions for its advancement. For Christianity to advance, other religions must shrink. There are other ways, however, of looking at the advancement of the Christian religion. Christianity is advanced when there is an increased understanding within society of the self-giving love of God that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. If we give the message to people of other faiths that they cannot pray to God on our premises, they may gain a very different understanding of the God we worship. Christianity may also be advanced if the fruits of the Holy Spirit as seen, for example, in Galatians 5. 22-23 (love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness etc) are encouraged and practised. Since many faiths speak of these qualities, can we speak

²⁷ Harris. 2011. 'Hospitality as a Sign of God's Grace': 278.

of an advancement of the Reign of God if people revering these qualities pray on Methodist premises?

2.10. In the light of this, the working party would highlight the selectivity of the church welcoming the unchurched, the atheists and the agnostics, who have little cause to respect the sanctity of the space that is being offered them, whilst at the same time denying the opportunity to pray and worship to those who would recognise the extreme generosity of such hospitality as a sign of God's grace. It could easily be interpreted as a lack of confidence – we can only mission in confidence to those who have not yet known anything of religion. But we are not called to offer religion, we are called to offer the gospel and God's grace – to all and for all. Our confidence in God's grace is demonstrated by the diversity of people to whom we are willing to be the means of God's grace. One question that the Methodist Church must consider, therefore, when examining the question of hospitality to people of other faiths or those whose teachings are known to be different from its own is – 'How do we respond to requests from such people as co-workers with God such that God's grace abounds?'²⁸

The first draft report, therefore, argued that refusing to show hospitality to people of other faiths in this way did an injustice to a God of grace and love. It did not communicate to people of other faiths a positive or accurate picture of the God Christians worship. It also challenged the model that placed different faiths in competition with each other.

Appealing to the fact of theological diversity within the Methodist Church, the Working Party's recommendation was that any decision on allowing other faith communities to worship formally on Methodist Church premises should be a local decision and that diversity should be recognised. It also set out four options and sought to explain the consequences of each: to leave things as they are; to change the doctrinal standards clause of the Deed of Union (Clause 4); to recognise that the meaning of Clause 4 is interpreted in diverse ways and, therefore, that the purposes of the Methodist Church as stated in the 1976 Act are interpreted in diverse ways; to change the Methodist Church Act of 1976 through an Act of Parliament.

²⁸ The first report of the working party is available on the website of the Methodist Church in Britain under 'Use of Church Premises by People of other Faiths': www.methodistchurch.org.uk

The Methodist Council debated the first draft in January 2007 and sent it back to the working party for revision, asking it, for instance, to do more work on the four options and to define ‘other faiths’.²⁹ The Working Party revised the report. It stressed, for instance, that the biblical imperative to be hospitable was dependent on what we believed, not on what others believed, and questioned further the market-place model that seemed to inform Counsel’s Opinion – that the Christian faith could only advance if other faiths declined. It also said much more about the four options.

A revised report was sent to the two committees concerned, Law and Polity, and Faith and Order, in March 2007. The Faith and Order Committee concluded that too many issues remained unresolved for the report to go forward to the Methodist Conference of 2007 but, generally speaking, endorsed the report. It envisaged a further re-write and submission in 2008. The Law and Polity Committee sought Counsel’s Opinion again.

Counsel’s Opinion in 2007 was even more conservative than it had been in 2005: only recourse to Parliament would allow changes to what was currently possible. Section 4 (a) of The Methodist Church Act 1976 concerning ‘the advancement of the Christian faith’ was again cited. This Opinion was brought to the Methodist Conference in a holding report and nothing further was done. This is the situation today, in 2016. Legal opinion has prevented further theological debate.

Elizabeth J Harris July 2016

²⁹ I am grateful to Revd Peter Sulston, my line manager within the Methodist Church, for sending me his notes from the meeting of the Methodist Council. I was not present and Peter had presented our report.