

Methodist Church in Britain

Inter Faith Relations in the 21st century



Conference Statement & Motions supporting Inter Faith Relations

1982

The 1982 Conference **instructed the setting up of the Inter Divisional Connexional Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths**, however, support for Inter Faith Relations in Conference motions had been present before that time. For example, the Faith and Order report: Use of Church Premises adopted by the 1972 Methodist Conference states:

1. Local churches should take the initiative to establish 'dialogue' with the representatives of other faiths.
2. Adherents of other faiths should to be allowed the use of Methodist premises for their secular and social activities.
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.

(Paragraph numbering that of the Faith and Order paper)

1983

The 1983 Conference **adopted** Section A '**Relations with People of Other Faiths**, of the Faith and Order Report (emphasis mine). The Report 'commended to the study of the Methodist people' the 1981 British Council of Churches (BCC) booklet: 'Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain'.

The BCC booklet included four principles of dialogue:

- i. Dialogue begins when people meet with each other
- ii. Dialogue depends on mutual understanding and mutual trust
- iii. Dialogue makes it possible to share in community service
- iv. Dialogue becomes the means of authentic witness.

The Report's 'brief response' to the BCC booklet included the statement: 'We [i.e. the Faith and Order Committee] understand dialogue to be a proper part of the total mission we are called to.....This will involve us entering into conversations with our neighbours of other faiths' and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves means that we do not monopolise the conversation but allow him to express his himself....There must be respect for the integrity and contribution of the other partner as well as freedom to witness to what rings true for ourselves.'

1985

The 1985 conference **adopted** the Faith and Order **Report on Multi Faith Worship**. Of particular significance is that, in adopting the Report, Conference added the statement: 'The Conference encourages the Methodist people to engage in multi-faith dialogue with their neighbours as the first steps towards mutual understanding, tolerance and love': (Agenda 1985, pages 635-637)

The Report stated that Multi-Faith worship has tended to take one of three forms:

- i. Services from one Faith with guest participants from other Faiths.
- ii. Inter-Faith services in which each Faith group contributes from its own tradition what seems to be appropriate to the occasion;
- iii. Inter-Faith services with an agreed common order.

In the first case, all participants can offer testimony to their own convictions and religious experience; in the second case, all the participants are free to respond as they feel able to what is offered by the others; and in the third case, Christians need never agree to any common order which compromises their faith. The Faith and Order statement did not contain any recommendations, although it commended the BCC publication: 'Can We Pray Together: Guidelines for Worship in a Multi-Faith society'.

1994

Report to the Methodist Conference on the Decade of Evangelism; Section 5 **Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs**

5.1 This section reproduces the Code of Conduct of the Inter Faith Network for the UK

The final paragraph of section 5.1 states: 'We have a great deal to learn from one another which can enrich us without undermining our own identities. Together, listening and responding with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences but build on shared hopes and values.'

*The Conference **endorsed** the document in section 5.1 'Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs' published by the Inter Faith Network for the UK. (Emphasis mine)*

5.2 Principles for Dialogue and Evangelism: a Methodist reflection on the IFN's Code of Conduct.

This stated eight principles, with commentary, that were offered to the Methodist people and to local church, circuit, district and Connexional offers, the hope that they will be adopted and implemented in appropriate ways.'

These principles are:

1. 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.
2. Meeting with people of other faiths is essential for building relationships of trust through mutual understanding.
3. Opportunity must be given to Methodists to learn about the beliefs and practices of people of other faiths.
4. Methodists engaged in working among people of other faiths should be encouraged in their work, and assured of the Methodist Church's warm support for what they do.
5. The faiths of humankind are diverse and do not all aim at the same goals.
6. Methodists must be encouraged to share the stories of their faith
7. The story of Jesus is the Church's greatest gift, to explore and to share, it is usually Jesus, not the churches, who fascinate others.
8. Methodists need to affirm a variety of vocations within the body of Christ, which affect relationships with people of other faiths.

*The Conference **adopt[ed]** 'the report on Evangelism and People of Other Faiths (Section 5 including 5.1 and 5.2), **commends it** to the circuits and churches for discussion and action, and **directs the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths to keep the issues it raises before the Church**' (emphasis mine)*

*NB: The Conference **received** sections 1-4 of the Decade of Evangelism Report (emphasis mine).*

1997

The 1997 Faith and Order Report: **The Use of Church Premises by Other Faith Communities** states: 'The years since 1972 have also seen a growth... 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 distinctiveness between faiths.'

In its conclusion the Report states:

'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 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 individuals taking part. Such encounter can be a source of harmony and 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.'

1999

Methodist Conference statement: 'Called to Love and Praise'

3.2.1 'In this mission, the Church's vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom. This involves both evangelism and social action, and, in our day especially, engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths.'

3.2.16 '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.'

'Called to Love and Praise' was **adopted as a statement by the 1999 Methodist Conference**. It is available in pdf format on the Inter Faith Relations pages of the Methodist Church website.

2001

Methodist Council Report: Appendix C: Development Plan 2001-2004

1.3 Service: Developing Community: The Team

Point 12 states: 'Encourages Churches to work at inter-faith and denominational relationships'.

2004

Inter-Faith Relations: Exploring Principles and Practice Guidelines for the Methodist People.

Note: This was a final report on work done to implement the Conference's reply to Memorial 63 of 2001 from the Birmingham Synod that requested 'guidance' for the Methodist people and churches on the theology and practice of relationships with people and communities of other faiths.

Included in its response Conference affirmed that 'these guidelines remain relevant and important'. The guidelines referred to were the Inter Faith Network Code of Conduct and the eight Methodist Principles for Dialogue and Evangelism based on the Code of Conduct. These were included in the Report to the 1994 Conference on the Decade of Evangelism, Section 5 'Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths. (See above)

The Conference **received** the Report and **commended** 'Faith Meeting Faith' to Districts, Circuits, local churches and individuals and groups within them as a valuable resource in continuing exploration of the theology and practice of inter-faith relations.

'Faith Meeting Faith' consists of questions with different possible responses and ways forward. Its overall aim is to 'provoke thought, discussion and action, recognising that Christians come to inter-faith relations with different experiences and different approaches. From January 2010 it has been available in pdf format on the Inter Faith Relations pages of the MC website. It is also available in printed format.