

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2002 REPORT

Schools with a religious character

1. Three events in England in the summer of 2001 brought the issue of Schools with a Religious Character (commonly called 'faith schools') to prominence. Racial tensions in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford sparked violence, particularly amongst groups of young people. The Church of England published Lord Dearing's report proposing the promotion of a further 100 Church of England schools, and the Government's long-trailed support for faith schools was realised in the Education White Paper which encouraged the creation of, and eased the path for, new faith schools "where there is clear local agreement" and on the understanding that they should be "inclusive" and "serve the whole community". Meanwhile, the verbal and physical abuse of children and their parents walking to Holy Cross RC primary school in Belfast received widespread media coverage throughout September.

2. Calls began to be heard, particularly from the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, against state funding for faith schools, amid a growing number of allegations that such schools engender and encourage divisiveness and promote racial segregation.

3. Following the 11 September terrorist attacks in the USA such warnings intensified sharply. Some politicians and teacher unions expressed concerns, the Report into the Bradford riots stated that increasingly "religions and races" are being educated separately, and a number of leading articles in broadsheet newspapers attacked the White Paper proposals.

4. Equally vociferous support for faith schools was heard in other quarters, not least from the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, who told an audience of concerned headteachers that the most important issue was that "parents want them", and in a presentation to the General Synod questioned what kind of society we lived in if in 2002 we withdraw the right enjoyed for hundreds of years for parents to educate their children according to their religious beliefs. And there are many who realise that to suggest at this time that no further faith schools should be established would be seen as discrimination against minority faith groups most of which are just beginning to enter the state school system.

5. In October 2001, the Methodist Recorder published an article, "Faith Schools and Social Cohesion", written by the Connexional Education Officer, in which an attempt was made to 'summarise the Methodist contribution to church schooling in the state sector, past and present, to correct some of the misconceptions prevalent in much of the media coverage of the issue, and to encourage Methodist people to contribute to the debate from a position of informed understanding'. This attracted a few negative responses, and rather more appreciative ones, with some of the appreciation coming particularly from ecumenical colleagues.

6. Subsequently, the Connexional Education Officer took part in discussion on the issue in a range of forums, including a Local Government Association seminar, a conference sponsored by the British Humanist Association, a meeting of the Methodist Parliamentary Fellowship and a seminar for the North

East Church Leaders (Methodist/CE) Group. In fact, the public debate has been so widespread and so prolonged, and the demand for a Methodist voice to be heard so frequent, that it has involved an expenditure of time totally out of proportion to the importance of the faith school issue for the Methodist Church and for most Methodists.

7. The educational work of the Connexional Team, reflecting a report, *The Essence of Education*, adopted by the Methodist Conference in 1997, has a remit that covers education in its broadest sense; in every learning institution or forum; for every person regardless of ability, age, race or religion; for teachers, learners, policy-makers and administrators. But we cannot ignore the fact that for over 250 years the Methodist Church, both in the British Isles and overseas, has promoted schools, colleges and universities, many subsidised by the church, some within the state sector and some wholly or partly fee-paying.

8. Since the early twentieth century the Methodist Church in Britain has had a policy of committing its significant educational resources and interests predominantly to what are now known as community schools, and to further and higher education chaplaincy. Though a small number of Methodist state schools remain, over 900 of these schools have been closed or transferred to the maintained sector in the past 100 years. The 57 that remain are of two kinds; most have an historic foundation and over a century's service to education, some having been amalgamated with CE schools. A small number, all joint Methodist/CE, have been founded within the past fifteen years, mostly in areas of new housing development, and usually also as a base for ecumenical worship and a range of community activities. In most cases Methodist fund-raising, and grants from Methodist trusts, have helped in promoting the new schools or adaptations to older ones, and local Methodists continue to support 'their' schools both financially and in other ways.

9. The Connexional Education Officer is also aware that a number of Methodist churches and circuits support local CE and RC state schools, through governorships, leading Collective Worship, fundraising and other activities.

10. Of the 57 Methodist and Methodist/CE schools that remain only 16, being Voluntary Aided or Foundation, have the right to determine their own admissions' policies or their own Religious Education syllabus. Some of these schools reserve some places for the children of Christian parents, but all of them admit at least half their pupils from families of other faiths or none, and in many cases the children from non-Christian families comprise a large majority of the pupils. All teach multi-faith RE.

11. It is these two issues, plus the possibility that faith groups will use their schools for the purposes of proselytism, that concern most of those who resent the unique position that such schools have. But assurances have been given recently by the House of Bishops that the small number of CE schools with exclusive admissions' policies will be put under significant pressure to change, and there is already evidence that this is happening. In most Dioceses CE schools already largely follow the locally agreed syllabus with only minor adaptations to reflect the nature of the school. The Director of the Catholic Education Service is on record as fully in support of all RC schools teaching multi-faith Religious Education, and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has made it quite clear in the recent White

Paper that faith schools must be inclusive, teach the National Curriculum, and work in partnership with neighbouring Community schools.

12. For many, the single most important factor in ensuring that all our children and young people are educated in such a way is to encourage minority faith groups to bring their schools into the state sector. Only then are the governors and teachers accountable to the state, through the national system of inspection.

13. But there are also fourteen British Methodist independent schools; none is now a charge upon the Church, but originally the Conference paid for them, and even supplied the pupils with pocket money!

14. Opinion amongst Methodists varies widely on the issue of the promotion of schools with a religious character, particularly in the independent sector. In March 1997 the Board of Management for Methodist Residential Schools issued a statement setting out the case for the retention of its schools at the end of the twentieth century. Much of its argument applies equally to the promotion of state schools, and it is worth quoting from it extensively:-

From the earliest times the Christian mission has involved a deep commitment to education. There have been two reasons — first the life in Christ is one which develops all human talent and creative power as fully as possible and offers it back to him in service and praise; knowledge is prized because all truth and wisdom originate in God. To feed the mind and imagination and spirit in as many rich ways as possible is a fundamental Christian duty. Second, Christian faith involves knowing the Christian story, and hence preferably being able to read the Bible for oneself. Ideally the Christian must be able to read, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures, which is an enormous educational project. It is akin to that developed by Judaism, in which the rabbis' task was to train boys in reading and expounding the scriptures so as to be able to participate fully in the synagogue liturgy.

Often Protestants have stressed the second reason most, and so their missionaries sought to teach converts to read and to make the Bible available in the vernacular. In the process they were also teaching them to enjoy their own and other cultures more fully. Therefore one can hardly imagine a Christian missionary strategy that does not involve a stress upon education.

The relationships between the plethora of Christian educational institutions and the central church organisations have varied greatly from place to place and time to time. In some instances the Church selected the brightest pupils and educated them at its own expense; in some it charged minimal fees and subsidised the work; in some it charged what seemed fit and used the profits to sustain other work. In some cases it restricted educational work to the children of Christian families, in others it was offered to any who could pay, and sometimes to those of other faiths. In some cases there has been an explicit evangelistic purpose to the schools; in others this has been muted. A similar variety is discernable today in the many Methodist schools and colleges all over the world.

Thus education has been offered as an inherently valuable experience to its recipients, but sometimes also as a means of evangelism. It may nurture young people's skills and abilities so that they enjoy life more and are able to serve society more fully; it may also be seen as a means of ensuring better

Christian leaders for the future ChurchÉ

É It could well be argued that if we were starting from scratch today we would not set up our boarding schools, or as many as we have, or in the present locations. But we are heirs to a specific tradition and they are part of our heritage. Since the Christian mission is so pronouncedly pro-education there would need to be extremely cogent and compelling reasons for any major change in policy towards them. The following factors are relevant:

Although general educational standards have risen in state schools during the last 30 years or so, state provision is nevertheless very patchy. Understandably some parents are dissatisfied with local schools in some areas, and often there is in practice little choiceÉ

Some parents, especially committed Christians, feel unease at the general ethos of state education. It is set within a context which is increasingly secularised and in which all religions are marginalised. This unease often expresses itself in relation to the moral values being inculcated, which are increasingly seen as human constructs, relative and subjective — one chooses one's own values. Christians believe morality to be deeper and more fundamental, originating in God's willÉ

Some — but fewer — parents want boarding education because they are living overseas, or are constantly on the move, or feel that it encourages self-reliance and greater enthusiasm for knowledge. Christians may go further, holding that it can also give the experience of life in a Christian communityÉ

É But it is sometimes argued that by their continuance we are blessing the independent sector and impairing the dream of a fully comprehensive state system, since independent schools attract about 8% of the nation's children, including many of the brightest and best motivated. But problems arise with regard to the dream. Is it realistic, or merely a dream? Even more problematic is any Christian commitment to such a system operating with the assumptions prevalent within post-modernism...The Methodist Church ought to have very serious reservations about the desirability of such a dream, let alone its practicalityÉ

We should recognise that the nation's youth is less and less in touch with mainstream churches such as our own, so that local Methodist churches find it increasingly difficult to provide effective youth work. It is very healthy for our mission in modern society to be able to sustain such a fruitful means of contact as our schools provide.

A frequent comment upon our schools is that they only cater for the children of affluent parentsÉ Does not our mission involve a special concern to be alongside the poor? Indeed, and the resources of the church should always be deployed towards that end wherever practicable. But that is not the issue here: instead we find ourselves faced with constant requests from more affluent people for us to educate their children at their expense and within the long tradition of our schools. It has never been a Christian policy to refuse help to the rich, nor could it be, since they too are children of the one Father whose mercy embraces them as much as it embraces anyone else. Thus the Methodist Church does not and should not refrain from planting churches in the wealthier suburbs or from meeting social needs there.

We are a catholic church in the sense that we wish to serve all strata of society. We want to help the more privileged to appreciate the gifts of the poor and hear the call to promote a more just and reconciled social order. We want our schools to be part of our Church's involvement with the whole of society and its well-being.

(Our Involvement in Independent Education — Rev Dr Richard G Jones; Chairman of the Board of Management for Methodist Residential Schools; 1997)

15. In simple terms, there are two main positions amongst Methodist people — that which sees the Methodist Church's mission being exercised **only** 'out in the world where ordinary people are', and that which **also** recognises overtly Methodist institutions as mission locations. Those who take the first position would commit all our educational resources to the maintained sector and refuse to accept state subsidies for our schools and colleges. Those who take the second would share the resources amongst all children and young people, in whatever institution they are educated, accepting, where appropriate, state assistance in much the same way as we do for our work amongst the homeless, refugees and the economically disadvantaged. They would argue that partnerships between church and state demonstrate Methodist commitment to society as a whole, and they recognise that the state funding given to Voluntary Aided schools would be required for the education of the children in them, even if the schools were given up to complete state control. This is not money 'taken out of the system', but simply used in a different way, and with church resources added to it.

16. The Methodist Church holds strongly to a policy of inclusion for all its schools. They welcome pupils of any race or colour, and of any faith or none. Many of the state schools are located in areas of social deprivation where education is a key factor in ensuring an improved standard of living for the next generation; all have some children entitled to free school meals. Many have children whose families are homeless, refugees or asylum seekers; many have significant numbers of children with special educational needs. In all these ways they reflect the communities they serve, and they aim to offer the best they can for their pupils and their families. In this above all they resemble every other school in the country.

17. Consequently, in both our independent and our state schools, the children of Christian parents make up a very small, and sometimes negligible, proportion of the schools' rolls. We have long abandoned the position, which in any case was never very prevalent, of setting up Methodist schools for the nurture of Methodist children in the faith of their parents. In Britain today such a position is only common in the Roman Catholic tradition and amongst some Muslim groups. But many Catholic schools also attract children of other faiths, and the Muslim schools in the state sector all have inclusive admissions' policies.

18. At the same time, hundreds of Methodists give time and resources to supporting maintained schools and colleges, many of them professionally as teachers, ancillary staff or administrators, others voluntarily through governorships, fundraising or classroom assistance. And dozens of Methodist churches manage pre-schools, breakfast and homework clubs or offer their premises for curricular activities, concerts and award ceremonies. Free Churches' Council research five years ago suggested that over 70% of our churches have a relationship with their local school, and the same proportion of

ministers regularly visits one or more schools to lead Collective Worship, teach Religious Education or Personal and Social Education, or to act as chaplain or counsellor to students and staff.

19. Increasingly, Circuits and Districts are encouraging lay people to share this work, either through the specific remit of a Lay Worker, or by training and supporting lay volunteers for school activities, or by actively promoting a vocation to teach. Beside all this, our own schools and colleges represent a very small proportion of our Methodist educational work.

20. In the early stages of the debate about faith schools a plethora of misconceptions distorted the arguments, at the same time distracting attention from wider educational issues, not least the fact that if parents had confidence that all state schools offered equally high quality education, the arguments about faith schools would disappear. In particular, the suggestion that faith schools are a significant factor in heightening racial tension in England, or in promoting religious and racial segregation was seriously flawed.

21. Firstly, it is important to separate issues of religion, race and colour. Many of the major world faiths attract adherents in various countries and of various races and colours; this is reflected in the adherents of those faiths resident in England and amongst our school population. Even if faith schools admitted only pupils of one particular faith, which is rarely the case, they would still be multi-racial if the local community is a multi-racial one. Christian schools are sometimes referred to by their detractors as 'white enclaves'; this is not only untrue, but seriously offends black and Asian Christians whose children often comprise the largest numbers in our urban Christian schools.

22. Secondly, there are areas in many of our cities where one ethnic and/or religious group makes up the majority of the population. In such areas all the schools, whether they are faith schools or not, will reflect that local situation and the pupil population will be predominantly of one ethnic background and/or of one faith. There are already far more non-faith schools with a single-faith population than there are religious schools of one faith. No one appears to be suggesting that non-faith community and foundation schools in such areas contribute to racial tension, and there is no evidence to suggest that faith schools in such areas do so either.

23. Thirdly, the overall picture suggests that relatively few parents choose a school for their children on the basis of their faith. Other parents choose faith schools for a variety of other reasons; accessibility, reputation, specialist facilities, atmosphere, A Level subject choice. Many parents with a firm religious stance deliberately choose not to send their children to faith schools. This is unlikely to vary as a small number of additional faith schools are created. At the present time the Catholic Church is the only faith provider that endeavours to educate each child of the faith in a faith school. Some of the most recently-established faith schools have attracted a single-faith pupil population, but primarily because they are situated in single-faith communities not because their admissions policy gives preference to children of one faith. However, it is true that parents of strong religious convictions, who see their children turning their backs on the faith of their parents, may select a faith school if one is available at least to ensure that the children are given the opportunity to learn about the faith of their parents and family.

24. Fourthly, some parents chose a faith school precisely because issues of faith and belief are taken seriously in such schools, and they wish their children to be educated in an understanding of what faith and belief mean, how they have contributed to the history of mankind, and how they influence society today. Most of these parents will claim a belief in God, but will not themselves be actively committed to any faith. At least they can be reasonably certain that religious education will be well taught in faith schools, and arguably that the schools can make a significant contribution to building a society in which knowledge, understanding and tolerance predominate over ignorance, prejudice and discrimination.

25. Having said all that, it is important to make some other distinctions. Many will recognise a significant difference between the rural and the urban situation, and between primary and secondary schools. Rural faith schools are almost always village primary schools serving all the local community's children and their parents. Secondary faith schools are usually urban establishments and, along with the small number of urban primaries, have been encouraged in recent years to be in competition with their neighbours for admissions. Particularly under the Conservative government, league tables of results were designed to encourage parents to choose the 'best' schools; it is hardly surprising that faith schools worked hard to improve their academic standards, and the many that succeeded are to be congratulated. Similarly, both the former and the present government have encouraged distinctiveness and diversity to give parents more 'choice'; the most obvious distinctiveness for a faith school is to emphasise its historic religious foundation.

26. In the past twelve months the debate about faith schools has moved on substantially. Most importantly, Christian denominations and different faith groups have demonstrated that they have more in common than the general public has traditionally understood. At a national level, and amongst all but a few individuals, we are all committed to high quality education for every young person, we are all striving for strong pluralistic community development, and we all denigrate religious and racial prejudice or discrimination. But we also all strongly support the contribution of the Religious Education curriculum to the achievement of these aims, and believe that issues of faith must be taken seriously.

27. Consequently the argument that faith schools engender religious or racial intolerance has foundered, assisted by a recognition that schools cannot solely be blamed for the inequalities in our society, that if schools genuinely reflect their local community many of them, especially in inner-city and urban areas, will be predominately of one faith or of one race, and that operating any kind of quota system is both impractical and unethical.

28. At a seminar hosted jointly by the Institute for Public Policy Research and the British Humanist Association in March 2002, the BHA and the Local Government Association conceded for the first time not only that faith schools would continue for the foreseeable future to be part of the educational provision in this country, but that more faith schools would be welcomed into the state sector, though they would always remain a minority. They invited faith groups to support them in moving forward on policies that we can share — good quality Religious Education including teaching appropriate to a society in which many different faith positions are held, proper recognition of the religious and cultural differences amongst our school populations with suitable provision regarding food, dress and religious observance, and a review of the legislation regarding Collective Worship and the operation of the

Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education in each Local Education Authority. All of these have been advocated strongly by the Methodist Church in recent years.

29. The Connexional Education Officer was present at what could be called this historic occasion and, on behalf of the Methodist Church, welcomed this new position and committed herself to further work with these organisations and with all those similarly interested in state education, in line with the Conference policy of The Essence of Education.

30. Conference 2002 is invited to continue to explore the Methodist position in the current debate about faith schools.

RESOLUTION

The Conference receives the report.