

33. The Faith and Order Committee

Extract of the Report to The Conference 2006

Section B Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church

Summary

The report below contains the following sections.

1. *Introduction*

This section spells out why the report exists and what it is trying to do. It locates current discussion within the kinds of diversity with which the Church has always lived.

2. *A History of Difference*

This section explores some of the biblical background to the question of how diversity and difference have been, and are to be, handled. It is acknowledged that Scripture has been used to support diverse and sometimes ultimately untenable positions in the Christian past.

3. *Tradition*

This section acknowledges that theology, rhetoric and political strategy have always been part of the Church's life. The question facing us as a Church at present is starkly posed: 'Is what we are examining an acceptable or an unacceptable form of diversity?'

4. *Diversity, Personhood and the Church*

This section explores what it means to 'be' Church in the handling of difference. The extent to which the Church is to reflect God as Trinity in its own life, and how the Trinity informs our understanding of what it means to be a 'person', are prominent concerns.

5. *Openness in personal relationships: Handling experience and reason within the Quadrilateral*

This section explores the power of personal stories. It explores how such stories are received and responded to in the life of the Church and highlights the need for critical reflection. It is acknowledged that being an apostolic community is not merely a doctrinal question, for the Church is to reflect in its practice 'the grace of a God who is always more merciful than we can imagine'. Equally, it is seen that the Church constantly has to confront the question of the limits of acceptable diversity. All such exploration is seen to occur within the interplay of scripture, tradition, reason and experience ('the Quadrilateral').

6. *Openness to a challenging God*

This section spells out the challenge for the Church of living in relation to God, as a body which seeks to live by the Spirit. The reality and necessity of dialogue with God – constant listening and speaking – is emphasized.

7. *By Way of Conclusion: On Being a Church*

The final section suggests that despite uncertainty and apparently irreconcilable difference, openness to God at the very least means *being* the Body of Christ. Even if broken and fragmented, the Church always seeks to celebrate and anticipate the resurrection without yet knowing what form that resurrection body may take.

What is required of the Conference?

(Via Resolutions 33/2 and 33/3) That the Conference receive the text of the report, commend it for study, and acknowledge that its contents will inform future work undertaken on this and similar matters.

Introduction

1.1 The 2005 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee ‘to reflect upon the theological implications of being a Church that has to live or contend with different and mutually contradictory convictions’. It has done this to the best of its ability within the very limited timescale available (in practice, nine months) and offers the following material for the Church as a whole to consider and use.

1.2 The Committee makes its contribution in the knowledge that this is by no means the first time that the Church as a whole, or the British Methodist Church in particular, has faced issues which have caused fundamental division. In much Christian history, divisions have been doctrinal. Ethical questions have, however, also caused division. British Methodism has had experience of facing issues over which Methodists have disagreed passionately. Current disagreements about homosexuality are not different *in kind* from what the Methodist Church has faced in the past.

1.3 In the process of examining how to face this particular contemporary challenge within its life, therefore, the Methodist Church in Britain has to decide whether this is an issue about which a clear conclusion is needed or whether it is an example of a form of diversity which has to be ‘lived with.’

1.4 In exploring in an informed way the rich resources of Christian scripture, tradition and experience, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that different kinds of diversity exist. Some forms (e.g. diverse views on styles of worship) are part of the Church’s life. Critical scrutiny of all views held, together with hard decisions and disagreements, are therefore built into the way the Church does its work. The same is true of some tough ethical questions such as temperance and pacifism, about which Christians have disagreed, and still disagree, strongly. Christian history shows, however, that some forms of diversity do not take this form. Support for racism, for example, is unacceptable for a Christian. Even though apartheid was once defended by appeal to the Bible and supported by Christians, this is not a form of diversity which would now be deemed tenable.

1.5 Consideration of the diverse approaches to the question of homosexuality takes place against such a background. Humility is needed lest any participant

assumes that the answer is already known or will prove straightforward, or even to which of the above examples the question of homosexuality is similar. The fact of contradictory convictions existing in the Church does, however, have to be faced.

1.6 The Committee has undertaken its work mindful that the contradictory convictions are held *by people*, and that this is no abstract or theoretical exercise. The conclusions to be drawn and the proposals made have an impact upon the Church's life. The Committee has also been conscious that it, like the whole Church, is limited in its knowledge and experience. It carries, however, a responsibility to offer guidance on how the Bible and the Christian tradition may be used in the task of facing this key question for the life of today's Church.

A History of Difference

2.1 Any reflection on 'different and contradictory convictions' needs to begin by acknowledging that this has been part of the life of the Church from the start of Christianity's history. Christian faith has found expression in a vast range of worship, tradition, attitudes and actions in ministry or sacrament, and in ethical conduct. This diversity has resulted in disagreement, conflict and schism within the body of Christ. Tensions between conservative and liberal, traditional and progressive, individual and community have been energising as well as draining in the Church's history. Diversity has thus been the catalyst for growth and new life as well as pain and division. Paul's letters bear witness not only to his passion for unity but also to the divisions and conflicts arising from different convictions and behaviour within the life of the early Church (Rom. 14.1-15.6; I Cor 1.10-17, 6.1-11, 8.1-13, 10.23-11.1). Indeed, the Bible itself, despite legitimate claims which may be made for an essential unity of purpose in the collection of texts of which it comprises, bears witness to the presence of diversity amongst the people of God.

Scripture

2.2 The report *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* resulted from an enquiry set up as a consequence of the discussions about sexuality at the Derby Conference of 1993 and was received by the Conference of 1998. That report therefore emerged from earlier discussion about sexuality, and its content is returned to now within a broader discussion about the parameters of diversity, within which debate about homosexuality occurs. The report sets out what the Methodist Church means by 'the Bible': 'the 39 books of the Jewish Scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament which had come to be recognized as "canonical", or normative by the fourth century AD.'¹ These books span more than a millennium in composition and derive from widely varying circumstances and contexts. They exemplify different literary genres and they demonstrate complex editorial histories.

2.3 It is not surprising, therefore, that Scripture bears witness to considerable diversity among the people of God. Generations of editors, interpreters and

¹. *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* (Methodist Publishing House 1998), 2.5.

exegetes have not seen this as a problem; they have, rather, evolved theologies of development or fulfilment (see, for instance, Hebrews 1.1-4; 1 Peter 1.10-12) or sought to identify unifying themes or a 'Great Tradition' (W. Brueggemann) giving coherence to the canon. These themes and traditions have themselves been hotly debated in the course of church history. Indeed, whether or not there is in fact diversity of belief within Scripture, as well as diversity in theological perspective and practice, is itself a cause of debate. Certainly Scripture is used to support many different viewpoints. But some would identify a core thread which runs right through Scripture.

2.4 It should be noted, though, that Scripture's witness to diversity is in itself diverse. Sometimes the canon seems deliberately to accommodate an alternative or rival point of view, where one part of the text corrects, modifies, contradicts or allows dissent from another part. Thus, for example, the 'inclusive' texts of Ruth and Jonah are set against the more 'exclusive' emphases of Ezra, while the notorious differences of Paul and James on faith and works are held together within the canonical New Testament. There are also four Gospels, and the Church, in not following Marcion's lead and choosing only one of the four Gospels, or in not taking into the canon Tatian's second-century attempt to conflate the four into a single Gospel, actively refused to reduce this diversity. More commonly, however, dissenting voices are clearly stigmatized and placed outside the community of faith. Paul laments the divisions at Corinth (1 Cor. 1.10), and urges the Philippians to be 'in full accord and of one mind' (Phil. 2.2). Furthermore, Paul's own texts have proved dominant and, in Protestantism in particular, have led to the devaluing of the insights of James. The Johannine letters ascribe rival theologies to 'false prophets' and identify them with the antichrist. And an overarching theme in the book of Judges is that the absence of authority leads to fragmentation and destructive diversity: 'in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 17.6). Scripture, therefore, acknowledges diversity, sometimes uses or celebrates it, but often struggles to account for it and set bounds to it. This biblical struggle is both reflected in, and useful for, the present situation.

2.5 This brief reference to the biblical material thus raises the question as to what are the principles according to which it may be possible to determine what lies within and what lies beyond what is identifiably Christian (see further below 5.10 and Section 6). In terms of what made it into the New Testament canon, the apostolicity and then the actual use in the earliest churches (when linked with an apostolic figure), became two key criteria for inclusion. How such criteria might be brought to bear in later discussions is a further question which will need to be addressed.

2.6 *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* noted considerable variations in contemporary Methodist approaches to Scripture, offering a series of 'perspectives on biblical authority' currently held within the Church. The models presented, although neither precise, nor exhaustive nor necessarily wholly mutually exclusive, showed that the Church has no single agreed approach to

Scripture.² What was not in doubt, however, is that the Church cannot pay lip-service to its Scriptures. The question is not *whether* the Church uses the Bible, only *how*.

2.7 In this regard, one specific example of the Church's past use of Scripture merits highlighting. In its initial acquiescence in, and then eventual support for the abolition of, slavery the Christian Church has a chequered history. It is, however, clear that support for and arguments against slavery were both grounded in Scripture. On this issue, therefore, whatever now be felt to be Scripture's 'basic line' (if indeed it has one), there is no doubt that in the past both positions have been supported from its pages. In the light of this, we make two observations. First, it is clear that time – sometimes a long time – is needed before the Christian Church as a whole comes to what may later appear to be a very obvious (and 'right') conclusion. Second, when brought alongside the contemporary issue of homosexuality, the Methodist Church is divided on the more basic question as to whether the issue of homosexuality can be compared to that of slavery i.e. that a single way forward will be found.

2.8 The task of interpreting Scripture on this issue is a crucial aspect of the discussion. However, there remain even more basic questions. How do we expect Scripture to be used? What do we expect our use of Scripture to be able to deliver *now*, given where we are as a Church?

Tradition

3.1 As a human institution, as well as a divine society, the Church has always been diverse – in doctrine, polity, liturgy, ethics and ethos. This diversity has often generated tension. Sometimes it has issued in conflict, division or separation, as individuals have left a local congregation or as a denomination has split.³ On other occasions, however, the diversity has been understood and managed in ways which have controlled its destructive potential, minimised its importance or even celebrated it as a positive strength (pride in being a 'broad Church').

3.2 Various strategies have been employed to manage diversity. 'Exclusive' strategies have looked to confessional or credal statements to define orthodoxy and have appealed to ecclesiastical authority to expound and enforce it.⁴ Sometimes, whilst emerging from tense struggles of this kind, confessional

² This became evident from the response received to *A Lamp*, summarized and commented upon in the brief 2001 report 'The Nature of Authority: Responses to *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*'. In the 2001 report, none of the seven models offered is deemed off-limits, and none is highlighted as *the* way in which Methodists are to regard the Bible. The Conference adopted the recommendation that the seven ways 'simply be acknowledged as different ways in which Methodists do in fact use the Bible today' (4.1). These seven models are explored in the training course undertaken by all Local Preachers, *Faith and Worship*.

³ The history of British Methodism, especially between 1791 and 1857, affords many examples of local and national divisions: by 1860 there were at least eight significant separate denominations in Britain and Ireland deriving from the Wesleys' Methodism.

⁴ British examples include the requirement for clergy of the Church of England to record their assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles and the obligation of Wesleyan Methodist ministers to sign the *Large Minutes*.

statements have proved lasting examples of how theological positions can at least be partially reconciled with each other.⁵ More ‘inclusive’ strategies have drawn distinctions between matters on which all Christians should agree and those admitting room for differences (*adiaphora*).⁶ Contemporary pluralism might make the case that each individual has limited understanding and that all opinions are affected by context, so should be held with due humility and remain open to revision. This position can appeal to seventeenth century Puritanism, citing John Robinson’s dictum that ‘the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word’. The present day URC seeks to handle diversity through a process whereby members gathered in the Church Meeting attempt to reach a consensus concerning the ‘mind of Christ’ rather than gaining consent for actions based on a simple majority. In achieving a consensus, members have to consider the views of others with care.

3.3 Rhetorical strategies have drawn on the appeal to what believers hold in common, on the grounds that agreement vastly exceeds differences, that it is more Christian and more winsome to emphasise the positive and that acknowledged differences are either relatively or absolutely unimportant. This rhetoric has often proved persuasive, but sometimes it has failed to convince. Differences have become insuperable and division has become unavoidable. The costs of conflict, even to the point of separation, have seemed worth paying for the sake of consistency or purity.⁷ It may be argued that managed diversity breaks down when the point at issue is seen as fundamental and when it overcomes the imperative to maintain visible unity and institutional coherence. Clearly this point is reached more quickly in traditions which set little store by visible unity and in situations where the individuals or groups in dispute feel less investment in the Church as institution.

3.4 In the context of the Methodist Church’s current ‘Pilgrimage of Faith’ these forays into the Church’s past invite reflection on whether we are now facing a question where some kind of diversity can or must be lived with, or whether unity ‘at any price’ is not a price worth paying. Is what we are examining an acceptable or an unacceptable form of diversity? If the former path is adopted, the challenge is to clarify what is entailed in the ‘living with diversity’ if talk of ‘reconciled diversity’ proves inappropriate.⁸

⁵. The Chalcedonian definition of Christ’s divinity and humanity of 451 is one such example.

⁶. Lit. ‘things indifferent’: a position identified with the moderate Lutheran Reformer Philip Melancthon (1497-1560).

⁷. Consider, for example, the ‘Disruption’ in the Church of Scotland in 1843 over issues of patronage, the departure of the ‘Reformers’ from Wesleyan Methodism in the 1840s and 1850s, the establishment of the Methodist Protestant Church in the USA in 1830 over lay rights and representation and the secession of conservative evangelicals from the Student Christian Movement after 1910.

⁸. It is worth noting that some of the challenges brought by, and strategies for approaching, diversity have long been faced in inter-faith dialogue. Though we are here talking about difference within Christianity itself, there is nevertheless much to be gained from the insights of Christians who have been dealing with diversity in inter-faith encounter. Questions such as ‘Is there scriptural support for inter-faith dialogue?’, ‘Is there one truth? If so, why does God say different things to different people?’ and ‘Should we be willing to be changed in inter-faith dialogue?’ are all pertinent. These questions are addressed directly in *Faith Meeting Faith: Ways Forward in Inter-Faith Relations* (The Methodist Church 2004), pp.14-15, 24-25 and 34-35.

Diversity, Personhood and the Church

4.1 The one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church is the Body of Christ.⁹ As such, the Church lives as a broken, fragmented body which at the same time anticipates the resurrection of all things. As a body made up of many parts, the Church is also a body of individuals, each unique and shaped by experience (Rom. 12.3-8; I Cor. 12.12-31). Within this diversity, the body is held together by the spirit of unity in Christ and by the Church's proclamation of the gospel of Christ.¹⁰ A hallmark of the strength of this unity is the nature and quality of the relationships between the members of the body and their shared commitment to the Church's vocation. Acknowledging diversity within such a body is risky, especially when this diversity comprises deeply held convictions. Recognised differences may be exploited or perceived as weakness. Alternatively, differences may be viewed as threatening, either to the unity of the body or to individuals within it. Difference frequently divides rather than bringing unity. Human history provides ample evidence of the negative effects of difference and draws attention to the fundamental human difficulty of relating to those who are different or hold different convictions. As noted, the Church has never been immune to this and contradictory convictions have been and continue to be a source of pain within the Church.

4.2 In addition to biblical insights and from the Church's historical tradition about the handling of diversity, we must also ask what contemporary theological insights may offer to the Church's current reflections. A re-consideration of the theology of personhood and community offers a way towards a positive and celebratory approach to diversity within our unity in Christ. An understanding of relationships lies at the heart of such a theology. Human beings are related to God and to one another. This conviction is fundamental to a Christian understanding of personhood and the social nature of community. Christians are required to reflect both on who God is as revealed to us in Christ, and on who we are in relation to God and to others. Crucial to such reflection is the attention which must be paid to the doctrine of the Trinity.¹¹ God's Trinitarian life is a source of love and dynamic movement and energy. One contemporary Christian theologian depicts the partners of the Trinity being simultaneously independent and inseparably bound together in a search for mutuality of understanding.¹² In the same way, then, that the work of the Church as a whole can be located within the life of the Triune God, whose reign and mission the Church serves,¹³ so also the

⁹ For a full recent statement of a British Methodist understanding of the Church, see *Called to Love and Praise* (Methodist Publishing House 1999).

¹⁰ On the unity and diversity of the Church as explored in the New Testament, see e.g. *Called to Love and Praise* (1999) 2.3.

¹¹ For examples of how the doctrine of the Trinity informs the life of the Church and the oversight exercised within it, see e.g. the Methodist Conference reports *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), II.1, and *The Nature of Oversight* (2005), 4.7, though the whole of Section 4 of the latter text can be read as a theological exploration of issues to do with responsible relating in the life of the Church.

¹² A. McFadyen *The Call to Personhood* (Cambridge University Press 1990).

¹³ *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), 2.1.

way that human beings relate to each other within the Church is to be understood as participation within God's Trinitarian life.

4.3 The theological exploration of relationship requires us also to reflect upon the factors which shape and form us as individuals and members of the body of Christ. Difference and diversity are powerful factors in this process of formation and transformation. Members of the Church are given the tasks of knowing themselves, recognising their uniqueness as well as their shared humanity. They are to reflect on their personal desires, convictions and sense of calling and to relate these respectfully to those of others. Such tasks can be achieved only in a community in which individuals are open to God and one another. By being open to one another, each individual's convictions, experience and insights, however diverse, are brought into conversation with each other. In this way, people's various convictions, experience and insights interconnect and contribute to the shaping of identities, challenging people's understanding of who they are. By being open to God, the shape and nature of the Church community are formed in response to God's creative spirit. The Holy Spirit transforms both individuals and communities through this openness to God. Participation in the Holy Spirit's work in this way is a fundamental part of any theology of relationships which acknowledges that the Church is a complex community in which pluralism and difference are inevitably present. The diversity which is celebrated in the Church may not prove to be limitless, but the polyphony of voices heard at Pentecost (Acts 2.5-13) constantly challenges the Church to re-examine the ways in which the welcoming of diversity is to be understood.

Openness in personal relationships: Handling experience and reason within the Quadrilateral

5.1 Reflection on experience and the sharing of experience have always been important within Methodist theology.¹⁴ An influential strand of this has been the role of narrative and personal narrative in particular.¹⁵ Stories shared concerning personal experience or the experience of others are powerful. They can inspire one to respond in different ways, arouse emotion, initiate commitment, provide new insights, encourage and transform. The value and importance Methodism ascribes to personal experience has been manifest in the way the tradition has engaged with personal stories to encourage and inform both the personal and communal pilgrimage of faith. Methodism's Arminian belief in the availability of God's grace for all means that it places a high value on stories we tell as churches and as individuals. The tendency towards an all-embracing inclusivism which is implied in the readiness often shown to listen to powerful, personal narratives means that any person's story has the potential to carry revelatory value as an example of God's transforming power and steadfast love. Listening to and responding to stories can shape and influence people's understanding of themselves, others and the God who is always ready to welcome and embrace all.

¹⁴. See e.g. T.A. Langford *Methodist Theology* (Epworth Press 1998) pp.57-9.

¹⁵. As recognised e.g. in B. Glasson, 'Stories and Storytelling: The Use of Narrative Within Methodism' in C.Marsh, B.Beck, A.Shier-Jones and H.Wareing eds. *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (Continuum 2004) pp.99-108.

It is through the telling and hearing of personal stories that people reveal how they are approaching and ‘accessing’ the content of Scripture and the Christian tradition. All Christians ‘make the tradition their own’ in some way. It is both essential, but also problematic in so far as the personal nature of the links made with Scripture and tradition are then hard to evaluate and, as necessary, critique.

5.2 A readiness to ‘accept people as they are’ and to listen to people’s stories is basic Christian practice. Such readiness can, however, mask any sense that people may be changed by God. Christian practice also entails what, within a person’s story, may invite change in the process of their story being read in the light of the story of God. Exploration of living with contradictory convictions within the Church means accepting that all must be prepared to change and develop in the light of what God is doing in, for and amongst us. Our main difficulty is that we are not always able clearly to see what it is in us that God needs to change. And we differ, amongst ourselves, in our interpretations of what needs changing in us and in others. As those who have been involved in inter-faith encounter have noted, however, without entering into dialogue with a preparedness to be changed, as well as to bring change in others, no real dialogue happens.

5.3 ‘The story of God’ to which the Bible bears witness is the primary narrative resource to enable us to address these crucial issues. God’s story proves revelatory, life-shaping and transformative when we bring it alongside our own stories. The transformative power of biblical narratives, the narratives of the Gospels in particular, is a fundamental aspect of what it means to live in and by faith. Personal stories and experience connect with the story of God contained in the story carried by the Christian scriptures and are interpreted by them. Life-stories are given new meaning, and are re-shaped, as a result. This is what having our minds renewed means (Rom. 12.2). Critical comparison between life-stories and biblical narratives is thus a main feature of the theological reflection undertaken in the Church (even if such activity may not carry the label ‘theological reflection’). For the sharing and reflection on personal experience to inform people’s pilgrimages of faith, both respectful listening and openness and a reasoned attempt to relate this to the story of God and our understanding of God’s kingdom are required. Scripture and tradition are thus decisive in a reflective process in which creativity and spiritual growth can emerge out of the richness of the diversity of humanity as celebrated and explored honestly and comprehensively within the life of the Church.

5.4 A review of responses to difference and diversity – be that of gender, race, sexuality, ability or theology – reveals that the most significant growth in understanding takes place when empathetic listening, respect and openness for the other is present within the context of a relationship. This growth in understanding often stretches beyond a fuller appreciation of the other’s experience and thinking to new insights into the individual’s self-understanding and their understanding of God. It is therefore not surprising that experience and reasoned reflection are significant in the task of addressing theologically the question how the Church lives with contradictory convictions and diversity. Sexuality, gender and faith, for example, are integrated into people’s

understanding of themselves and who they are before God. Honest, open encounter between people who are different can be profoundly influential in informing a person's identity and in influencing the way a person responds to these issues. The fact that theological exploration includes person-to-person encounter signals the possibility of difference becoming a source of transformational love rather than producing fear and discord.

5.5 Reason is crucial within the task of critical engagement with experience. In the process of bringing experience alongside Scripture and tradition, experience must not be considered in isolation, or as determinative of the outcome. It is, as already noted (5.1) too easy to leave stories unchallenged because they refer to personal experience. Stories unique to the individual are left unexamined because they appear beyond critique, being people's own 'stories to tell'. The testing of such truth has always presented difficulties. But reflection on experience can be self-deluding as well as being capable of deluding others. Experience is always open to interpretation. In Christian understanding, the process of placing personal stories alongside the story of God contained in the Bible means that the task of interpretation includes the critical comparison of experience with Scripture and tradition. Scripture and tradition may not simply 'answer' questions posed by life-experience. But they are not to be ignored in a context in which diverse life-experiences are narrated.

5.6 Reasoned reflection must also include an awareness of personal interpretation in the understanding of scripture and tradition. Interpretative frameworks influence not only the way that experience shapes understanding but also the way experience is influential in the interpretation of Scripture and tradition. The earlier discussion (see 2.2 ff above) highlights the significance of the interpretation of scripture in considering this issue.

5.7 There is, however, also the question of whose stories the Church chooses to listen to, whose experience is willingly and openly listened to and whose is dismissed, ignored or declared as unworthy. This is a serious point of challenge in the task of addressing diversity and difference. Openness to new insights and difference requires us as a Church to engage with different stories beyond those with which we are familiar and comfortable. The unfamiliar can disturb and unsettle the stories we usually live by. Where contradictory convictions and difference have led to such discomfort, pain and division, the need to remain open to listen to and learn from negative experiences and contradictory interpretations of individuals and communities is emotionally and spiritually demanding. Such diversity may reflect a God who delights in difference and has created a rich, complex, diverse world for God's creatures to enjoy. However, by listening selectively and being open only to the stories which affirm our personal or traditional interpretation, we devalue the experience of others and restrict the Kingdom of God.

5.8 The diversity of the Church can always in part be regarded as a diversity of narratives: stories of groups of people with similar but different experiences (of the world and of God). Some aspects of life experience may, however, appear, or be, mutually contradictory, and ultimately whether some life-experiences are

deemed compatible with God's story is precisely what is at stake. The important appeal to the grace of a God who is always more merciful than we can imagine is qualified by the knowledge that not everything is acceptable to God. The Church's recognition that it does have some boundaries is a reflection of its need to respond to God's desire both to challenge and rebuke the people of God.

5.9 Furthermore, the question persists as to how, within an openness to the narration of personal stories, the Church exercises its responsibility to discern, with the help of God's Spirit, as to what is, and is not, of God. How, in other words, is the Methodist Church to decide which narratives of life-experience place those who tell them beyond the Church? What are the limits of acceptable diversity? How can working in practice with the quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason and experience enable such questions to be addressed satisfactorily?

5.10 It is here where the question arises of what it means *in the present* to be 'in continuity with the apostolic tradition' (the clear criterion for what proved acceptable to the early Church). The question appears to need addressing not merely as a doctrinal question. Scripture itself is not a doctrinal text-book. It carries its doctrinal insights as the record of an apostolic people seeking to be faithful to God. In what follows, therefore, the question of how to *be* apostolic (and thus biblical and traditional) is addressed not merely in doctrinal terms.

Openness to a challenging God

6.1 Facing and embracing the challenge of being open to God both individually and within the community of the Church is the means by which the Holy Spirit leads and directs the body of Christ. Such openness is necessary in the task of discerning where God's Kingdom is breaking into the present order. Within the community of the Church our relationships with God and with others are co-present. Both of these shape and form us and are the means of transformation. Therefore, the quality of these relationships is crucial in the formation of persons and the formation of the community of the Church. The interconnectedness of the nature of our relationship with God and with others in the multiple communities of family, friendships, contexts of work and leisure, and church forms the fabric of our being. Both personal spirituality and the nature of the Church, including the way it lives with different and mutually contradictory convictions, are characterised by the exercise of these two dimensions of relationship, namely with God and others. How we live with each other, in other words, is a hallmark of who we believe God to be and how we believe God enables us to be.

6.2 An understanding of personal relationship with God can be characterised in terms of respect for the other, listening and responding, giving and receiving. God's grace, as evident in the divine-human relationship, can be expressed in the form of 'dialogue partners'.¹⁶ Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace is important here, since God's free and generous activity in the world gives us the responsibility and freedom to respond to God and our surroundings as free

¹⁶. A. McFadyen *The Call to Personhood*, p19.

beings.¹⁷ In this way God's purposes are achieved through relationships of response and responsibility.¹⁸

6.3 In conceiving of a relationship with God which is dialogical, responsible and infused with grace, the place of openness becomes immediately significant. Any form of dialogue with God would be distorted without such a quality. The dangers of misinterpreting God's intentions are apparent throughout the history of the Church. They have taken such forms as grasping at or attempting to impose power in inappropriately assertive forms, disrespecting the freedom and responsibility which is given, or ignoring God's word. Such manifestations of a lack of the kind of relationship willed by God indicate a lack of openness to God and a quenching of the work of the Holy Spirit.

6.4 A relationship with God is one of ongoing movement through the processes of reflection, openness and living in dialogue with others and God. The dynamic quality of Christian living is rooted in this relationship which is marked by its creative and continuing nature. God communicates with us as free partners within our present context. Openness is central to the process of discerning the divine Word and responding to God's will. Hence God's communication with us is reinterpreted through the scriptures and our experience as our continued openness before God reveals new insights with the unfolding of time. Therefore there is always a danger of assuming that we have the capacity to know the difference between right and wrong or the authority to exercise a decisive judgement, particularly in issues which elicit a wide diversity of opinion and response. By the assertion that one instantly knows what is right, communication and openness cease, since the assumption is that no further information or insights are necessary. This can foster fear, even within a community which seeks to embrace difference and celebrate diversity. It can also deny the mystery of God's grace and the acceptance that at present we need to continue on this pilgrimage, seeking what is right in openness to others and God.

6.5 The Christian understanding of being in relationship with others and God presents an interpretative framework for relationships in which difference and diversity are not to be feared but engaged with respectfully and openly. This openness to others and to God takes decisive shape in the Church. The Church as the body of Christ is engaged in the task of responding both to the divine Word and to human words. The divine Word as revealed to us in Christ shapes the Church's life through both presence (God is with us in Christ by the Spirit) and proclamation (God speaks to us in Christ by the Spirit). By being open to this Word, understood as both presence and proclamation, the Church seeks to discern how to respond to the challenges of difference and diversity whether these are of belief, practice or tradition. In asking 'how is Christ with us as we relate to each other?' and 'what is Christ saying to us as we speak to each other?' we are challenged to see Christ working in all those to whom we relate.

¹⁷. On which see e.g. C.Williams *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Epworth 1960), ch. 3, T.Runyon *New Creation: John Wesley's Theology for Today* (Abingdon Press 1998), pp.27-42.

¹⁸. As suggested in D.Wilkinson, 'The Activity of God' in C.Marsh, B.Beck, A.Shier-Jones and H.Wareing eds. *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (Continuum 2004), pp.152-153.

6.6 This involves, as already noted, prayerful and informed reflection holding together all four constituents of the ‘Wesley quadrilateral’ of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.¹⁹ The revelation of the will of God in the present calls us to draw upon our tradition, the revelation given to us in scripture and our experience of God in the present and the past, and to use our reason in considering each. The various interpretations on offer on any issue (contentious or otherwise) within any community and the primacy afforded to any one of these constituents continue to be a matter of debate. The diversity of interpretations also reminds us of the necessity of open, attentive listening to each other and to God. Living with the tensions arising from difference in all its complexity is necessary for growth in grace and holiness. The pilgrimage of faith is not without challenge and struggle. But this is a shared pilgrimage and it is through our relationships with others and God that the Holy Spirit works to bring us in to closer communion with Christ.

By Way of Conclusion: On Being a Church

7.1 Openness to the other and to God finds expression in acts of love and service as Christians seek to love God and others as ourselves. Where there is difference and diversity of practice and belief then the process of moving towards a mutuality of understanding depends on such openness. This requires attempting to share the understanding we have of ourselves, the other and the world with one another. Openness necessitates vulnerability from all parties. This is the case not only for individuals but also for communities. Hence, the Church as a community is challenged by God to be open in the way it relates to those who have chosen not to belong to it or cannot engage with it for whatever reason.

7.2 The Methodist Church is a diverse Church, and lives with a vision of the Kingdom which is God’s alone to bring. As such it is open to respond to the challenge of a variety of convictions and enthusiasms. Its vision is not one of limitless diversity.²⁰ As noted earlier in this report, the need always to be engaged in clarifying what is and what is not acceptable to God, as expressed in forms of living, qualify the desire to reflect God’s mercy in a form of Church which is as inclusive as possible. The extent of God’s mercy continues to surprise God’s people (e.g. Jonah 3). But though as God’s people we are constantly challenged by the generosity of God, we also know that God is not indifferent (e.g. Amos 8.4-14). In seeking justice, the Church attempts to clarify how the justice which God desires for the whole of creation is to be reflected already within the life of the Church.

7.3 But when it appears that the Methodist Church may simply be reflecting social change in some of the developments in its own life, how is discernment to

¹⁹ A formulation adopted by the United Methodist Church in 1972, and much debated thereafter: see W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted A. Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles and Randy L. Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral. Renewing the Conversation* (Abingdon Press 1997).

²⁰ Its caution about Freemasonry is a good example. See e.g. ‘Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry’ (1985) and ‘Freemasonry’ (1996) (in Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, Volume 2, 1984-200, Part Two (Methodist Publishing House 2000), pp.493-508, esp. para 22 of the 1985 text.

occur? Methodism continues to recognise the importance of the Church in forming and influencing public life with all of its diversity and pluralism. It has been argued that there has been a notable shift in the twentieth century towards matters of social and economic justice where respect for the other is paramount.²¹ In responding to these developments, and also to the liberalising of attitudes regarding matters such as divorce, abortion and sexual behaviour, the Church is clearly engaging with society, thereby indicating how the Church as the body of Christ remains open in its relationship with its changing context. The Church does not simply accept changes which occur in society. But the Church does not remain unaffected by, or learn nothing about God through, what occurs in society at large. The task and responsibility of discernment, with the help of the Spirit of God, is again paramount.

7.4 These questions – all variants of the basic question with which this report is concerned ‘how does the Church live with openness?’ – are not to be addressed in abstract form. And where the answer to any concrete question (such as ‘are Christians to be pacifists?’) cannot be answered conclusively, then the most concrete form of response of all must be offered: the Church is to *be* itself the answer to the question of how to live with diversity. The Church lives in the light of its openness to God, ready to receive new truth from God, through whatever channels God wishes to speak and act. As it ‘contends with different and mutually contradictory convictions’ *the Church is committed to being the Body of Christ as a body of people who through the quality of their relationships and their theology of personhood delight in diversity and engage with it not fearfully, but with respectful love for the other.* This necessitates a willingness to work with a dynamic tension of diversity, recognising that openness does not mean that ‘anything goes’ but is a desire to discern God’s will in and for the other and the Church. The Church encompasses both a personal and communal response in Christian living.

7.5 Methodist commitment to communal working towards (social) ‘grace and holiness’ provides a theological framework within which the shared pilgrimage of faith is undertaken. By being a body of people which reflects (is!) the broken body of Christ, the Church celebrates and anticipates the resurrection without yet knowing what the form of that resurrection body will be. How does the Church then live ‘with contradictory convictions’? In short: by seeking, with God’s help, to be a body which remains open to God, and to welcome all those who are prepared to share and critically compare their personal stories with the story of God within a commitment to do this with each other.

***Resolutions

33/2. The Conference receives the Report.

²¹. As noted in D. Clough ‘Theology through Social and Political Action’ in C.Marsh, B.Beck, A.Shier-Jones and H. Wareing eds. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, Continuum 2004), p.47, though note M.Davie’s critique of this suggested development in British Methodism in his review of *Unmasking* in *Ecclesiology*, 2/1 (2005) pp. 141-4, here p.144.

33/3. The Conference commends the Report for prayerful and constructive discussion and use in relation to all areas of the Church's life in which diversity and disagreement appear.