

METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Towards a Methodist Ethos for Education Purposes

Christian education in schools is integral to the mission of the Methodist Church. Inspired by Christian faith and infused with Christian values, Methodists in education put the worship of God at the centre of their life and are committed to the service and wellbeing of everyone involved; children, young people and their families, school principals, staff and governors.

Methodists:

- Believe that schools are inclusive and unpretentious communities where individuals are valued, good order is respected, relationships cherished, and where excellence in its widest sense (academic, extra-curricular, lifestyle) is pursued.
- Encourage a sense of belonging, seek to improve lives and boldly expect the impossible.
- Promote educational experiences and activities that bring mind and heart, intellect and passion together.
- Believe schools should work in mutually beneficial partnerships with each other, the community and the wider Church.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A school is not a church. But schools, like Methodist congregations, flow out of the faith and spirituality of Methodist people and our tradition. A school attempts to embody as far as possible (bearing in mind its special vocation is to be a school), the 'spirit' in which the Methodist Church generally nurtures its worship and mission. This is not an 'add on' requirement: it is a liberating resource and inspiration to help a school to become a very good school.

1.2 The Methodist ethos is the Christian ethos*. There are synergies and overlaps with what could be written about ethos by any of the mainstream Christian communities. Though characteristically Christian, there are some emphases in the Methodist expression of its ways of working, its values and its spiritual ideals, such as Christian love that give it a distinctive colouring. These are set out in the next section as a series of headings, with brief expositions in note form.

* Appendix A 'Christian Ethos in Education'
Appendix B 'The role of Churches and religion in Education'

2. HINTS AT A METHODIST PERSPECTIVE ON ETHOS

2.1 Connexionalism

This is our core understanding of how to live as humans. It is the form the Church takes, and is therefore our fundamental witness to society and the wider world about how we may live together in harmony and peace. Its essence is relationships of mutuality: respect for one another, a mutual sharing of gifts and experience, mutual service and care.

‘Connexionalism’ is about building up a common life through interdependency, majoring on just dealings for all and patient attention to one another as we confer about what is for the best for local and national education.

Special attention is devoted to those least able to articulate their insights, that they may find their voice. There is some suspicion of established hierarchies and entrenched power. In its place is a vision of community where all play a part in establishing quality relationships and the common life. Leadership at all levels encourages everyone’s participation and provides a lived example. Individuals flourish in relatively small communities. Such fellowship groups gladly embrace difference of temperament, background and experience. Their procedures enable people to help one another to grow and develop without fear of isolation.

(There is more on this in paragraph 2.9 below).

Small groups flourish within larger communities or networks of mutuality. (Methodism is organised so that a fellowship group is connected to a congregation and other fellowship groups; a congregation is linked to a circuit and other congregations in the circuit; a circuit to a district and other circuits in the district; and a district to the Methodist Conference and other districts in the Connexion).

Inter connectedness is a necessary structural feature for communities, organisations and societies of all sizes. No institution is ever on its own. To flourish, every group, of any size, must release from within itself a yearning to connect to other groups, maybe of differing size and context (so that the strong help the weak - and learn from them); and a desire to create partnerships for the pursuit of common interests. This is a global vision as well as a local vision: working together, with all our differences, in tolerable peace and harmony, towards justice and freedom for all, towards truth in its many facets, a shared celebration of life in its fullness, and care for the well-being of the planet.

2.2 Holy living

In and through the Church’s fellowship and worship, and participation in its mission, each individual person aspires to grow in maturity, integrity, wisdom and breadth of loving sympathy, i.e. in holiness. At the end of the day, the witness of a good life trumps the words we speak and the skills we deploy in proclaiming our faith. Having been instructed in Christian belief and doctrines and the particular influence of Methodist teaching, it is hoped that this will equip any graduate of a Methodist school to make informed choices and to combat secular thinking as they grow and develop their personal beliefs and/or faith commitments, including a general knowledge of the major world faiths.

2.3 Caring for all

The practice of love, coupled with the expectation of gracious refreshment from those who are served, is the fundamental characteristic of all relationships. As we say, we watch over one another in love. This applies in the ever-broadening circles of fellowship that constitute the Church. Such attitudes and expectations always reach out beyond the Church. The first duty of care is towards those in a neighbourhood who are in greatest need.

2.4 Informality

This does not imply indifference or laziness. It refers to relationships flourishing when people work together as friends, at ease with one another; it is about engaging with one another using all facets of the personality. Even the most sombre occasion can be creatively laced with good humour. Informality is also about how Methodists do much of their learning. Certainly they prize formal educational processes. Alongside that, however, their imagination and attention are captured through everyday living, especially life's puzzles, its ups and downs and its wondrous complexity. We want to understand as much as we can and link it to our faith. Making sense of the deepest matters, God, people and ourselves often ends up not in a systematic thesis but a portfolio of workable insights, convictions, attitudes and wisdom drawn from many sources.

2.5 Respect

Respect for good order and discipline; in the use of time; in the exploration and communication of complex ideas; in the conduct of relationships, so that the Church may pursue its ambition for everyone to be safe in a school setting, especially the young; in the conduct of business; in effective administration; and in personal lifestyle. A Methodist school should reflect a 'warm-hearted' atmosphere where the fruits of the Holy Spirit are evident in love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, self-control, faithfulness and gentleness.

2.6 Lay leadership

This applies to almost every significant activity, including (non-sacramental) worship and prayer, witness and pastoral care, learning, service and evangelism. Methodist activities and organisations flourish without requiring the presence or contribution of ordained persons. When ordained persons are available, they are perceived as a gift, making a distinctive contribution to the work of the Church. Lay people work in partnership with the ordained and in complementary ways.

2.7 Action against discrimination

The co-dignity of women and men is a norm for all significant activities. In institutional terms, it is expected that every reasonable effort is made to enable the full participation as equals of women and men, though provision is also made for single gender organisations and fellowship groups to empower both women and men for their shared responsibilities. Extending this theme into wider 'equalities and diversity' concerns requires initiatives to be taken to ensure contributions from people from many ethnic backgrounds, nations and cultures; across the age range (with special care to avoid discrimination against the young and the very elderly); with disabilities; irrespective of marital status or sexual orientation; with differing, even contradictory, theological and ethical convictions. Methodist groups and organisations aim to be as inclusive as possible.

2.8 Mission

God's mission is our mission. It is a big mission: because we are convinced that the Christian message is good news for all; and we are inspired by hope.

So Methodists:

- Are never afraid to tackle the large-scale issues of social justice, harmful lifestyle choices, peace-making and reconciliation, in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and internationally.
- Are undaunted by the challenge of proclaiming a gospel of salvation to everyone everywhere, without fear or favour. Faith matters. We unashamedly call people to believe.
- Are not afraid to get practically involved with alienated young people, desperate poverty, or broken communities.
- Offer a warm-hearted welcome for the stranger and anyone whose life is in turmoil.
- Show a costly generosity of spirit and self-giving to the disadvantaged: 'going the extra mile'.
- Display a breadth of sympathy for the afflicted, bereaved and broken-hearted.
- Boldly expect the impossible of people; that they will achieve beyond what the past has suggested is their capacity; that they will be converted from self-concern to put themselves at the service of others.

2.9 Size matters.

Methodists love to find ever more opportunities of broadening the scope and impact of their mission. Local churches want to grow. But the reality is that Methodism has always been a network of relatively small congregations, some very

small. This is not necessarily a cause for regret; smallness may be celebrated. Large-scale events and organisations also have an honoured place - though they require special attention to issues of leadership and power if they are to enhance human well-being.

Wherever possible Methodist organisations foster person-centred participation in family-scale groups and communities. This cultivates a sense of common ownership; and may affirm the wisdom, faith and insight of ordinary people who have no pretensions to social status or worldly power. Face to face encounters encourage genuine mutuality and support, and facilitate depth of trust and love in relationships.

2.10 Uncomplicated enjoyment of life with a grateful heart.

Plain speaking is the order of the day. Praying for people and situations of concern in a straightforward and unselfconscious manner is normative. Life itself is an extraordinarily rich gift, to be received gratefully and used well, to the glory of God. Everyone we meet may mediate to us the grace of God, and so becomes the content of our thanksgiving. Singing praise and thanks to God is the hallmark of Methodist spirituality. Confident singing, with gusto and unaffected joy, gives vent to warm feelings, and expresses what is in the heart: a celebration of faith. Heart and head belong together, as do passion and intellect, depth of commitment and unceasing openness to new understandings: they should be visible to all.