

# Irish Methodism and Inter-Faith Understanding

## *Report to Conference 2007*

*In this report we are indebted to the Rev. Stephen Skuce and his recent publication "The Faiths of Ireland," as well as the Rev. Patrick Comerford and the comprehensive report published by the Church Unity Committee and the Bishops of the Church of Ireland on the same subject. Throughout this report, and in any future Inter-Faith engagement, it should be noted that 'Inter-faith' describes the relations among different world religions, e.g. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity. It does not refer to relations between Christian denominations where the term 'ecumenical' may be used.*

We are considering inter-faith relationships and understanding at a critical moment in Irish history. After a thousand and more year history of interaction with members of various world religions by Irish missionaries and a shorter history of Jewish presence in Ireland , the last ten years have witnessed significant Muslim, Hindu and other faith populations becoming established in Ireland .

Ireland has changed. We are not at the start of a process but well into a maturing phase of a multi-faith island. This is not a temporary change; we need to recognize that the Ireland we inhabit differs from the land of our parents and grandparents. This new and permanent expression of what it means to be Irish is to be welcomed. Irish Methodists, as 'friends of all and enemies of none', can do nothing less if we are to be true to our traditions and heritage.

In 1998 we produced '[Guidelines on Inter-faith Worship](#)' to enable our members to participate, with integrity, in state and other community occasions that, even then, were becoming increasingly multi-faith (An amended version of these regulations are to be found elsewhere online). The Presbyterian and Anglican churches in Ireland are currently considering similar issues. There needs to be an over-arching Christian understanding of inter-faith relations within Ireland , but there should also be a distinctive Methodist voice and perspective.

Ireland has a number of inter-faith bodies. The Council of Christians and Jews has had a Republic of Ireland branch since 1981 and one was established in Northern Ireland in 1996. The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum began in 1993 and the Three Faiths Forum was inaugurated in Dublin in 1999. Methodists have participated on all of these bodies.

The response of the Methodist people in Ireland needs to be on a number of levels:

- **Friendship:** Within most localities there are people of other faiths. Methodists should be among the first to befriend, to include in community life and to journey along with those whose faith is not Christian. This requires both personal and local church initiatives.
- **Scripture:** Methodists need to look to Scripture to find a Biblical understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. To assist with that process the Faith and Order Committee intends to publish a short series of Bible Studies to enable our people to think through these issues.

- **Participation:** The Methodist Church in Ireland should welcome the existence of the various Irish inter-faith bodies and formally appoint Methodists representatives to these bodies on a connexional (as with the Council of Christians and Jews in each jurisdiction, and the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum) or a district level (as with the Three Faiths Forum in Dublin).
- **Worship:** Irish Methodism has clear guidelines on inter-faith worship.
- **Mission :** the Conference should note and welcome the emergence of a multi-faith Ireland as an opportunity to leave behind narrow historic arguments and to work alongside others in areas of shared interest and mission. Where there are areas of common social concern we should have no hesitation in co-operating across faith-boundaries. Irish Methodism also has a long history of inter-faith evangelistic encounter, both in Ireland and beyond, from which we can learn how to offer Christ to all in Ireland both courageously and sensitively.
- **Theology:** Irish Methodism understands Scripture to teach that God has always been in relationship with many beyond the covenant people of Israel and fulfilled in the disciples of Jesus Christ. We affirm that God reveals himself in many ways to many peoples, but salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. Therefore, whilst Methodists and others can confidently acknowledge that God is at work in and among many people of various faiths, there is still an evangelistic calling to Methodists to share the good news of Jesus with all, with the desire and expectation that all may be saved and become disciples of Jesus Christ.
- **Education:** In addition to Bible Study material, the Faith and Order committee, will endeavour to collate a list of appropriate resources and helpful commentary on Irish developments to assist all who are thinking through these issues.
- **Freedom:** Methodists in Ireland should be committed to freedom of religious expression for people of other faiths. This is what we would wish for Christian sisters and brothers in countries which are not predominantly Christian.

We are people subject to a great Commission and obedient to a Great Commandment.

**The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19).** Jesus tells us to make disciples of every nation. Thus we want to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all whom we meet.

**The Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31).** Jesus teaches us to love God and to love our neighbour. No distinction is made of status, sex, race or religion. Thus we must befriend, respect, listen to and love our neighbour even if they do not share our Christian faith.

It is our hope that, inspired by both the great Commission and great Commandment, and drawing on our particular history and experience, the Methodist Church in Ireland, despite its relatively small membership, will give an inter-faith lead in Ireland, based on a firm but generous Wesleyan faith, similar to the lead in ecumenical relations given by Methodist people both in Ireland and in other parts of the world.