



# Practical Expressions of Methodist Belief

The Council on Social Responsibility is the body appointed by the Conference to undertake study and analysis of social, political and moral issues. It has northern and southern committees as well as meeting on an all-Ireland basis and over the years, it has issued reports and statements on a wide range of matters. These are issued to stimulate debate, to guide thinking and to state the church's considered judgement on certain issues. The following paragraphs indicate some of the issues on which statements have been issued and action taken, but they are by no means an exhaustive summary of the church's work and thinking in relation to Christian citizenship.

## **E.1 Community relations and conflict in Northern Ireland**

For many years, officers and members of the Council have been involved in an inclusive process of dialogue with political parties and other groups, north and south. The Council has issued many statements throughout the period of conflict and the development of the peace process.

The following are some of the basic principles contained within such statements and reports of the Council.

- We affirm the right of individuals and groups to hold their distinctive beliefs, values and perspectives.
- We seek to work for understanding and mutual respect amongst those of differing traditions.
- We encourage all ministers and congregations to be involved in the work of reconciliation and the development of genuine inter-community relations.
- We advocate a system of government within Northern Ireland in which both main traditions are involved and with which they can identify.
- We believe that all parties must renounce violence as a means towards political ends.
- We believe that those who constitute the majority in any community have the responsibility of ensuring that the rights of minorities are respected.
- We call for the church to exercise a sensitive and sensitising ministry in relation to victims of violence; acting pastorally in support of victims and speaking prophetically on behalf of victims.
- We look forward to, and seek to build, a society which is open, inclusive, tolerant and at peace with itself and its neighbours.

## **E.2 Asylum seekers and refugees**

We urge all Methodist people to be open to the diversity and enrichment that can come from people of different cultures, including those who have come to this island as refugees and asylum seekers. We deplore all forms of racism and seek to promote understanding and inclusion within church life and society in general.

We encourage governments to show humanity, understanding, generosity and openness in their dealings with asylum seekers and refugees.

We encourage local communities to welcome strangers to share in the life of this island.

## **E.3 Social action programmes**

Through "city mission" churches in Belfast, Londonderry and Dublin, Methodism has long been engaged in social outreach work. Examples of current projects include provision of housing with care for older people and those with Alzheimer's Syndrome, residential social work with adolescents, provision of hostel accommodation for homeless men and cross-community reconciliation work. Furthermore, local congregations throughout Ireland are encouraged to develop programmes of social action that are relevant to the needs of their communities. Where possible, this should be done in partnership with other churches, statutory and voluntary agencies.



#### **E.4 Marriage, sexual relationships and sexuality**

We recognise the family as the primary unit in society and all possible encouragement is given to ministers and congregations to support and strengthen family life. Marriage is a relationship, intended as permanent, between one man and one woman within which sexual intercourse establishes a unique intimacy. A loving marriage relationship is seen as the only appropriate relationship within which sexual intercourse may take place. The church advocates responsible family planning, with the use of contraception.

Modern scientific knowledge has no uniform view about the factors involved in sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. What is recognised is their complexity. In keeping with New Testament teaching, we are opposed to all debased forms of sexuality and sexual practice, whether heterosexual or homosexual. However, we plead for understanding and tolerance for those whose sexual orientation is towards those of their own gender. We encourage the Church to give a greater lead in the education of society, including Christians, regarding this issue, so that ignorance, prejudice and fear may disappear.

#### **E.5 Divorce**

Whilst the church upholds the Christian ideal of lifelong marriage, it is recognised that this situation is not always achieved. The resulting circumstances should be handled pragmatically and sensitively. Where a marriage has broken down irretrievably, and, despite attempts at reconciliation, has demonstrably ceased to exist, divorce should be available.

The re-marriage of divorced persons in Methodist churches is permitted, upon due consideration of the circumstances and with appropriate pastoral care. Methodist ministers are not required to officiate at such a marriage if they have a conscientious objection.

#### **E.6 Abortion**

We believe that abortion on demand is wrong. However, we believe that termination of pregnancy is a permissible, though by no means easy or certain, choice in very specific circumstances, i.e. where the mother's life is at risk; where there is risk of grave injury to the physical or mental health of the mother; when the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest; when there is gross abnormality of the foetus. We believe that complex social issues such as this should be dealt with through carefully drafted, sensitive, but restrictive legislation rather than through Constitutional clauses.

#### **E.7 Euthanasia**

Christian principles insist that we must preserve meaningful life as far as is practicable. However, where a person is clearly terminally ill but conscious, the emphasis must be on maximising the quality of life for that person rather than artificially prolonging it. Where a person is irreversibly comatose there is no moral obligation to prolong medical intervention. We believe that active euthanasia, i.e. assisting a patient in terminating their life, is contrary to Christian teaching. However, we recognise that this a complex matter and we would encourage further calm, reasoned debate on the issues.

#### **E.8 Suicide**

We recognise that suicide is a complex issue, which presents many challenges in developing appropriate responses. We believe that the church's role is to show, in speech and action, the compassion of God for those who are suffering. We seek to promote deeper understanding of the many causal factors that lead to suicide. We work for the development of sensitive pastoral responses for all affected by suicide.

#### **E.9 Abuse and misuse of substances**

Whilst recognising the rights of individual conscience, we commend total abstinence from alcohol to Church members, as an act of self-discipline and witness. We urge Methodists to seek to understand the social and economic causes of alcohol dependence and to give support, wherever possible, to those who suffer directly and indirectly from alcohol abuse.

We advocate education programmes aimed at preventing misuse of drugs and encourage churches to participate in such programmes on a partnership basis with other agencies.

We support the continued development and provision of a range of treatment and rehabilitation responses for those suffering from addiction.



In accordance with church legislation, the sale, consumption or supply of alcohol is not permitted on premises occupied and used by the Methodist Church.

#### **E.10 Gambling**

We regard gambling as an expression of the love of money, which the Bible defines as the “root of all evil”. We regard betting, lotteries, raffles, sweepstakes, football pools and all forms of gambling as morally wrong and economically unsound. Accordingly, these activities are not permitted in Methodist church buildings.

We recognise the responsibility of society, including the church, to provide counselling and support to those with gambling addictions.

#### **E.11 World development**

Through its World Development and Relief Committee, the Methodist Church is involved in education, campaigning and practical action to address poverty and promote sustainable development worldwide. As a sign of commitment to such action, members of the Methodist church are encouraged to donate at least 1% of their income to the work of world development. In keeping with this principle, 1% of all church income is directed to world development funds.

#### **E.12 Pacifism and military action**

We believe that the principles of pacifism are clearly in keeping with the message of Jesus. We believe that both the creation and the use of weapons of mass destruction are immoral, as are weapons such as land mines, which are targeted primarily at civilians. However, we recognise that in practice, there may be circumstances in which limited military action is a necessary evil in order to reduce or remove an even greater evil.

#### **E.13 Other issues**

As indicated in the introduction to this section, the paragraphs above should not be taken as an exhaustive summary of the Methodist Church’s work and thinking on Christian citizenship issues. The agenda of the Council on Social Responsibility seeks to address a wide range of other issues also, ranging from matters such as human fertilisation and embryology to global economics and world trade. Furthermore, as a matter of principle, and in keeping with the practice of John Wesley, all Methodists are urged to relate their faith to their responsibilities as citizens. Through personal study and the worship and learning life of the local church, they are encouraged to reflect biblically and prayerfully on all areas of life, not least on matters of social concern.