

A
BAPTIST
PERSPECTIVE
ON
INTERFAITH
DIALOGUE



PUBLISHED BY
JOPPA PUBLICATIONS

PREFACE

"A Bangladeshi man has heard the gospel over several years because I have made a friendship with him. On one occasion I had the opportunity of conversation with some men, because I first listened to their attempts to evangelize me! On another, a group in the Bangladeshi mosque after prayers, sat down with me and said 'Tell us about Jesus. We want to know'. But that only happened because they knew me, had received me into their homes, and had seen me in the community."

This was the sort of story being shared at a conference organized in 1991 by the Joppa Group, Baptist Christians who are wrestling with the issues raised for Christian witness by a multi-faith society. We met to bring a Baptist perspective to the revised guidelines for dialogue with people of other faiths, produced ecumenically and recently published as *In Good Faith*. The results of our sharing are to be found in this booklet, where all the stories are real situations involving Baptist Christians at grass roots level.

For some, the word 'dialogue' is rather technical and not a little off-putting; it conjures a vision of high-powered theological debate, far-removed from daily life and experience. We hope that by reading this booklet you may discover that dialogue really does begin when ordinary people rub shoulders in everyday life.

1. SECTION A : INTRODUCTION

The word "dialogue", as used to describe a Christian way of relating to people of other religious traditions, emerged into common use only as recently as the 1960s. Because of its newness some Christians are a little wary of it. They are suspicious that the consequence of Christians entering into dialogue with people of other traditions might be to betray the Christian commitment to Jesus as Lord and that of the Christian Church to mission.

However, the experience which led many Christians to an increasing use of the word "dialogue" goes back at least into 19th century missionary work, and, as we hope to show, is not foreign to the Bible itself.

During the 19th century, the majority of Christian missionaries who encountered other religious traditions formed essentially negative judgements about them and their followers and followed a path of confrontation with them. There were, however, significant exceptions to this pattern. Amongst Baptists, the missionaries Timothy Richards (1832-1919), George Henry Rouse (1823-1909) and, of course, William Carey (1761-1834), should be mentioned. Richards went to China and became a sympathetic student of Chinese religious and cultural life. He aimed at penetrating the thought and mind of the rising intellectual class with Christian ideas so that, in time, the whole of China might experience a Christian transformation. Rouse, who was one of the Baptist Missionary Society's most distinguished scholars, taught and befriended Richards at the Haverfordwest Missionary College. His attitude towards Islam, on which he concentrated, was not as positive as some later approaches, but it did represent a significant movement in sympathy. Islam, he said, contained "of all the non-Christian religions the largest element of truth."

Carey worked for the conversion to Christ of Indian Hindus and did not hesitate to confront such evils as the practice of "suttee" (sati), where a widow threw herself onto the funeral pyre of her dead husband. However, in opposing this practice, Carey worked together with the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy. Carey also spent considerable time and effort in translating the *Ramayana*, the epic Hindu scriptures.

Among missionaries of other Christian traditions, J N Farquhar's life and work (1861-1954) bridged the 19th and 20th centuries. Through his work he became more and more convinced that Hinduism contained a finding as well as a seeking of God. Farquhar served with the YMCA in India from 1902-1923 and his classic book, *The Crown of Hinduism* was published in 1913. In this book, Farquhar argued for an understanding of Christianity which was that of a "fulfilment" of the aspirations and insights of other religious traditions, rather than simply a negative judgement upon them, citing Matthew 5:17, "I have come not to destroy but to fulfil". Throughout the 1930's there was considerable debate within the International Missionary Council and the embryonic World Council of Churches, between missionary proponents of Farquhar's approach, and those who adopted the position of Hendrik Kraemer (1888 - 1965) who argued for a radical discontinuity between Christ and the non-Christian world. Within the World Council of Churches and its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism,

Kraemer's approach represented the consensus until the 1961 Assembly in New Delhi where the word "dialogue" appeared. This described an attitude to people of other religious traditions which is open to the discovery of spiritual truth within them, as well seeking to share the Christian faith. A desk or sub-unit for dialogue was established by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. In 1979, this Unit (now renamed the Office on Inter-Religious Relations) produced its *Guidelines on Dialogue* in which 13 specific guidelines were offered to the Churches, with the suggestion that member Churches might adapt the guidelines for their own particular contexts.

1.2. The Four Principles of Dialogue.

Here in Britain, the British Council of Churches responded by summarizing the 13 WCC guidelines into "four principles of dialogue":

1. Dialogue begins when people meet each other
2. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
3. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
4. Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

These four principles were explored and commended to the British churches in a booklet entitled *Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*. In subsequent years a number of British Churches, including the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, have endorsed and adopted these guidelines as their own whilst undertaking further work on them in relation to their own particular denominational traditions and insights. In 1992 the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) of the new Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland has published *In Good Faith* as a re-statement of the original guidelines for Britain. The British Churches' adoption of the 1990s as a Decade of Evangelism makes the exploration and adoption of guidelines for Christian witness all the more important.

1.3 A Baptist Perspective

This booklet has been produced by the Joppa Group, a group of Baptist Christians which seeks to wrestle with the issues posed for Christian witness in a multi-faith society. In doing so the Joppa Group draws upon twin themes in Baptist history and tradition: commitment to Christian witness and commitment to religious freedom. This booklet commends to Baptists the "four principles of dialogue", and these provide a framework for the next section of this document. We have aimed to bring the "four principles" into conversation with five distinctive Baptist emphases which may be summarized in the following way:

1. The primacy of Scripture in the life of the Christian believer and in the fellowship of the Church;
2. The liberty of conscience and religious practice within the Church and society at large;
3. The understanding of the Christian Church as a fellowship of believers;
4. The centrality in the Christian life of witness to Jesus confessed as Lord and the focal point of God's saving work.

5. A life of baptized discipleship through obedient living in response to the ethical imperative of the kingdom of God.

Such a list cannot, of course, claim to be an exhaustive definition of the Baptist expression of Christianity. But it does offer a shorthand indication of the convictions that lie close to the heart of Baptist Christianity and would be recognized as such by the vast majority of Baptists.

This booklet hopes to illustrate how these five Baptist emphases and the "four principles of dialogue" might be brought into creative interaction with each other. We hope to show how our Baptist tradition of Christianity, with its distinctive understandings, might own a set of principles already welcomed and endorsed by other Christian Churches in Britain. At the same time we believe that we may contribute insights from our own Christian tradition which might be of benefit to the wider Church as it wrestles with the questions posed by Christian witness in a multi-faith society during the Decade of Evangelism.

1.4 Notes

For a more detailed exploration of the five Baptist emphases in relation to Christian dialogue and witness in the multi-faith society of contemporary Britain see the articles by Paul Weller, a member of the Joppa Group and Head of the Religious Resource and Research Centre at Derbyshire College of Higher Education. :

"Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society: A Baptist Perspective." Part I was published in *The Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXIII, No 6, April 1990, pp 252-264 and Part II in Volume XXXIII, No 7, July 1990, pp 302-315.

For a discussion of the relation of dialogue to mission see two articles by another Joppa Group member, Revd Dr Clinton Bennett, Executive Secretary to CRPOF: "Dialogue: Witness or Treason?", in *Current Dialogue*, June 1988 and "Does Dialogue betray Mission?" in *Discernment: A Christian Journal of Inter-Religious Encounter* Volume V, 1991, pp 5-10.

Further resources will be found in Section C of this booklet.

SECTION B : THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

2. PRINCIPLE 1 : DIALOGUE BEGINS WHEN PEOPLE MEET EACH OTHER.

2.1. The Baptist Emphasis

As Baptists we are serious about people. Our understanding of the Christian Church as a gathered fellowship of believers grounds all discussion of Christian life and practice in a commitment to mutual encounter. It is not for nothing that the first Baptist places of worship were called Meeting Houses. The meeting in Christ that takes place as the congregation of believers gathers for worship and fellowship can then become a model for the way we relate as Christians to others. People of other faiths and ideologies are people, and we have a fundamental commitment rooted in our Christian faith to respond to them in all the richness

and complexity of our shared humanity.

2.2 The Biblical Witness

So dialogue should not be strange to Baptists. Indeed it surely lies at the heart of our understanding of the way God meets us in Christ by his Spirit. A practical commitment to a way of life based on mutual encounter is rooted in the scriptures. Dialogue shapes the pattern of Jesus ministry. The most significant part of his activity, to judge by the gospels, was not his address to large crowds, but his meetings with ones, twos, and threes. And in these meetings he sought to enable people to articulate their questions, their concerns, their needs. They were two-way encounters. There was about his approach an openness, a warmth of welcome, that affirmed them, so that it was especially those who were labelled as non-persons who recognized that they were particularly invited to join the party, to receive affirmation, to become part of the group. Jesus did of course also encounter those who refused to address him in a spirit of dialogue, or to recognize what was happening in his ministry of meeting. And, at the end, he plumbed the desolation and emptiness of that place where there is no meeting, the place of the cross. But as Christians we believe that wonderfully and mysteriously, even that place of ultimate loneliness was held within the unfailing victorious love of God. That is what the whole ministry of Jesus was about. As Jesus met people he offered the reality and the presence of God's Kingdom, God's community. And as people met Jesus they discovered in him the embodiment of God's welcome and care. In Jesus was personally focused the whole story of the meeting between God and the world.

That personal focus was earthed in history. Jesus was a Jew. The particular strand of the human story from which Jesus comes is that of God's dealings with the people of Israel. One of the major themes of the Old Testament witness is that of the covenant: a two-way relationship, in which God commits himself to his people, and they dedicate themselves to live in his ways. From Abraham to Malachi the story of the nation, and the story of individual men and women within the nation, reveal the joys and the struggles, the disappointment and the fulfilments of that divine-human encounter. It charts some of the threats to, the pitfalls in, and the possibilities of, dialogue. Though there is a particularity about God's commitment to Israel, it is not exclusive but on behalf of, and opening out to, God's covenant relationship with the rest of humankind. Indeed the stories of creation and the flood reveal a vision of covenant embracing the whole universe.

This sense of personal and particular encounter, opening out to a wider world is echoed in the story of the New Testament as the early Church moves from its Palestinian Jewish roots into the length and breadth of the Roman Empire. The stories of Acts and the letters of Paul and others reflect a situation where meeting between people, encounter, dialogue, was the context in which the Christian mission was undertaken. Telling the good news of Jesus involved caring about people, listening to them, discussing with them as well as proclaiming the message.

2.3 The Trinity

The bible tells a story of people meeting each other, and in the midst of that human

encounter meeting and being met by God. It is a story focused in Jesus Christ. It is a story in which the voice of God is continually being heard through the voices of men and women. And from that story has grown a Christian vision of God as in himself the source of meeting and encounter. The doctrine of the Trinity seeks to give expression to belief in a God who is not silent and alone, but who is eternally reaching out in expression and response. Without falling into tri-theism we can celebrate a divine love which goes out from itself in overflowing fullness and returns to itself in unfathomable fulfilment. Human beings are made in that image of God. Two-way meeting is written into our very nature.

2.4 Practical Implications

What happens when people of Christian and other faiths meet each other? First of all, most basically and continually, we discover our common humanity. Mary lived next door to a Muslim family. She started smiling at the lady of the house whenever she saw her. She then tried to time walking up the street when she knew her neighbour would be bringing home her child from school. There were more smiles and eventually a few words were exchanged. Mary expressed a wish to become her friend and was invited into her Muslim neighbour's home.

The friendship developed and she made visits to other members of the family. Eventually the visits became two way, with the Muslim woman taking food and presents to Mary's house. Once Mary called when the Muslim woman was praying and she felt compelled to pray silently at the same time. This happened again and the two friends discussed how they prayed to the same God. The whole family has now adopted Mary as an honorary aunty. So we see how everyday human encounters can lead to the sharing of common conviction.

A Baptist minister and a Sikh man, who had previously met at an interfaith group, found themselves regularly together at the local swimming baths, taking their offspring to weekly swimming lessons. Conversation between them grew and deepened in this informal setting.

Another Baptist minister tells of how friendship developed with someone who is a Bahai. This led to a series of meetings in which each shared their journey of faith and their convictions. There was much that was discovered in common, but there were very clear points where each recognized they could do no more than witness to their differing beliefs. Dialogue is not about trying to show that everyone is the same. Openness to one another reveals differences as well as shared beliefs.

Some of these differences are cultural as well as religious. There is a great need for sensitivity as Christians begin to establish friendly relationships with Asian neighbours. There will be a need to respect attitudes to contact between women and men. A Baptist family in inner-city Birmingham always made a point of setting aside a room for each sex when entertaining Muslim friends. Great care was also needed in preparing food - no pork or shellfish, only *halal* meat or fish cooked in vegetable oil. We may have to be tactful about the way we relate to the extended family network amongst Asians. It is difficult to explain, for example, why you have to set a limit on the number of guests attending a western wedding celebration; the assumption is that the whole family of each guest are free to attend. And what happens on the evening before the wedding when, after the final sharing of preparation for a "peaceful meal", Muslim friends turn up - the

Imam and his family with some sacrificial meat from the Haj festival? Not only are tact and sensitivity required but there may also be moments when one simply has to accept that there are apparently unbridgeable differences of perception and understanding. Two women, one Christian and the other Muslim, had become very close friends over a period of five years. The Muslim woman would often share family problems and they regularly talked together about their faith. One day, very upset after a meeting at work, the Christian sought refuge in the Muslim's home, but found her at prayer. It was a moving experience sitting quietly and prayerfully while her friend finished praying. She then burst into tears and told her friend how someone had upset her. "Don't worry", said the Muslim friend, "God will punish him". At that moment the Christian realized that there was still a deep gulf separating her from her Muslim friend.

Dialogue begins when people meet each other. But such meeting is not necessarily easy or comfortable. However, if we do not disengage but continue to celebrate what we share and explore what separates us, we shall grow to a deeper mutual understanding that will make dialogue more real and fruitful. That persistence and patience reflect the character of God's encounter with us. They are the qualities of the God who meets in Jesus and whom we discover in the rest of the bible story. When people meet each other and do not give up on the testings and challenges of such meeting, they are already bearing witness to the God who comes to us in his Son and who sustains us by his Spirit.

3 Principle 11 :

DIALOGUE DEPENDS UPON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND MUTUAL TRUST

3.1 The Baptist Emphasis

Mutuality is the key element here. This depends on the willingness of both partners in dialogue not only to listen to each other, but allowing each other the freedom of self-definition. It is a recognition of that liberty of conscience which has been a long-standing emphasis of our Baptist position.

3.2 Developing Mutual Relationships

Five aspects of a relationship of mutual trust can be identified : first, each must listen to the other; second, listening is an acquired skill which means giving our full attention to what the other is saying, not developing our own contribution for the next stage of the discussion! Third, true listening involves suspending our judgement about the other, for so often we assume we know what they think and believe, when it turns out that we are just as misinformed about them as they are about us. Some preparation for such an encounter may well have positive benefit and help us in our task of "being all things to all men" as Paul expressed it, in order that he might "save some" (1 Corinthians 9.22). Thus he was a Hebrew to the Hebrews, but a Roman citizen within the Greek world in which he was also at home, quoting Greek poetry and philosophy at Athens (Acts 17). This ability to move easily between cultures is not to be had quickly or without effort, as missionaries who have given a lifetime of study to the nuances of another language will testify. But some effort at understanding is often greatly appreciated.

Fourth, true listening involves a vulnerability in ourselves which allows us to be

challenged and possibly changed by what we hear. Jesus himself was taken aback by the faith of the Roman Centurion and exclaimed "Not even in Israel I have not found such faith!" (Matthew 8.10). We too must expect the unexpected! Finally, within such a relationship of trust, we in our turn may claim the privilege of being heard and offer our witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ,

3.3 Working it out

The process of developing mutual trust and understanding will not only involve words. There are many ways in which, as we live along side our neighbours of other faiths, we may gain their trust by our actions and attitudes. This will not, however, be calculated to take advantage of the weak or vulnerable, but service offered in open-handed love. It was in this spirit that Jesus healed the sick and gave sight to the blind - never to place people under a sense of obligation, but simply because he loved them. Such a Christ-like approach is inherent in a life of responsible baptized discipleship and will be more effective than any amount of words.

Lewis Bevan Jones (1880-1960) for 37 years a Baptist missionary amongst Muslims, wrote in his classic work *The People of the Mosque* (1932): "We may uplift Christ by our preaching and by our writing but pre-eminently by our lives, if so be that we are Christlike in spirit...where in the world is the Muslim [and we might add the Hindu, Sikh etc] who despises the really Christlike man or woman?" This second principle of dialogue builds upon the sort of encounters envisaged by the first, reminding us that there can be no manipulation of such relationships in order to achieve some predetermined response. This would be to abuse the privilege of friendship. We shall need the gift of discernment as to when to remain silent and when explicit witness to our faith is appropriate.

We must bear in mind that in giving an account of the hope that is within us, we should do so with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3.15) For example, a Baptist Minister and former missionary who had gained the confidence of local Muslims through assisting grant applications for community projects, was invited to present the prize in the Mosque, to children who have passed tests in their ability to recite the Qur'an. An opportunity for witness? Perhaps, but to have done so on such an occasion would have barred future entry to the Mosque and destroyed the relationship of trust which the minister had built up. Like Jesus, we must develop open and trusting relationships which leave people free to choose what their response to the gospel will be.

4 Principle III:

DIALOGUE MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO SHARE IN SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

4.1 The Baptist Emphasis

The Baptist understanding of the Christian life as responsible baptized discipleship, together with the primacy of the scriptures, encourages Baptist participation in service to the community with people of all faiths and none. As Christians we have our own particular motivation and goal to which we witness by the way we act. Our motivation is to be found in such parables of Jesus as "the Good Samaritan" and in his command to love our neighbour as ourselves. The goal of such service is to create signs of the Kingdom of God.

The weakness of the Baptist understanding of the Church as a fellowship of believers is that it can sometimes result in an introverted Christian community which takes no responsibility for action in the wider world. More positively, however, this understanding of the Church rules out the idea of Christianity as a national or ethnic religion and discourages the Church from reliance on religious privileges conferred by the State. As members of wider society therefore Baptists claim only the same social and legal standing as people of any faith, and can co-operate with them towards the achievement of common social goals. Our emphasis on liberty of conscience affirms the right to exist of all religious groups within society, and the establishment and extension of freedom of conscience for all has been one of the major themes of Baptist history and tradition. It is in itself a common ideal for which all can work together, and it is reflected in the constitution of the Baptist World Alliance which states as a primary aim : "The safeguarding and maintenance of full religious liberty everywhere, not only for own constituent churches, but also for all other faiths."

4.2 Service with Others.

Others, who have a different basis for their motivation and a different understanding of its goals, are also rendering service to the community. We have to relate to them in the course of our service. Conflicts can arise from these differing motivations and goals in the common work for justice and peace and such tensions can be the occasion of dialogue about the basis for our actions. Witness such as this, rooted in action rather than in abstract questions of belief, can lead to an effective dialogue between the partners in action and concern.

4.3 Examples of Co-operation.

The involvement of Baptist Christians in the revision of local Religious Education Syllabuses and in Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education has been an important contribution of service to the community. Membership of such bodies includes Christians of all varieties together with members of the major faith communities with a common concern for the place of Religious Education within the school curriculum. From Derbyshire it was reported that these multi-faith forums, established by secular authorities to help religious communities take some collective responsibility for Religious Education in the county school system, were both an opportunity for service to the community and a means of authentic witness. In Bradford, the drawing up of a new multi-faith Religious Education Syllabus, followed by the establishment of the Inter-Faith Resource Centre, owed a great deal of inspiration to a Baptist officer of the Council.

Education in all its forms is a key arena for Christian service to the community in a multi-faith society. Educational institutions are one of the few institutional spaces in society where people of different faiths and backgrounds can come together. Teaching of English to sometimes isolated Asian women of other faiths is also an important service to the community which broadens the scope of the lives of such women. In the experience of many Christian teachers it also becomes, quite naturally, an occasion for dialogue about religious beliefs and values.

4.4 Dialogue and Service

Our discussion of this third principle of dialogue leads us to reflect on whether

dialogue leads to service, or rather in reality, common action in the community leads to dialogue. In the weak sense of dialogue it is important to talk to others before engaging in common service. But this is just the beginning of dialogue which will be all the more real for its being rooted in sometimes difficult issues arising from action in the community. In Bradford a group of Christian women meet regularly with Asian Muslim women who are experiencing the pain and injustice of separation from their fiances and husbands through British immigration law. In South London, a Baptist woman was active in the campaign against the deportation of a deaf and dumb Pakistani Muslim girl receiving therapy for her condition. In Ashton-under-Lyne, a weekend sanctuary fast was held at a local Baptist Church to draw attention to the plight of an Indian Hindu threatened with deportation following the breakdown of his marriage. In all these instances the common action strengthened and developed the possibilities for dialogue and authentic witness.

5 Principle IV:

DIALOGUE BECOMES THE MEDIUM OF AUTHENTIC WITNESS

5.1 The Baptist Emphasis

Witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is dear to the hearts of Baptists. It is one of the five emphases of Baptist life already identified, and it is clearly enshrined in the Baptist Union Declaration of Principles: 'It is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.'

5.2 What is "authentic witness?"

The fourth Principle of Dialogue talks of 'authentic witness' and it is important to explore what might make our witness 'authentic' or 'inauthentic'. The booklet *In Good Faith* refers to both coercion and manipulation, and with our long tradition of liberty of conscience (the second of our Baptists emphases), such patterns of witness ought not to be encouraged within the Baptist confession. Some reflection on our own experience of aggressive doorstep evangelism by sects like Jehovah's Witnesses might help us to realize that such approaches are usually ineffective and even counter-productive. The end result is rarely conversion, rather it tends to confirm us in our own ideas (and prejudices!) and makes us less open (not more) to the possibility of further truth or deeper understanding.

Moreover, as will be clear from the initial discussion of the Biblical pattern of encounter and relationship, the witness of our dialogue should leave each partner free to receive or reject the truth which has been offered. Jesus watched with sadness as the rich young man walked away from the challenge which Jesus had posed in answer to his questions. "So near and yet so far" might be a paraphrase of Jesus' reaction to the exchange (Mark 10 17-23 and parallels), and yet there was no pressure from Jesus for the young man to leap the gap of faith and understanding which remained between them. Authentic witness must leave both partners free from any pressure or inducement other than the force of truth itself.

From a Christian perspective authentic witness also suggests the notion of integrity. In both content and presentation our witness must be a true reflection

of the Gospel which we claim to present. Clearly there must be both conviction and passion in our witness, but this will count for little if we are not prepared to afford our partner the same dignity and respect which we would want for ourselves. Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria (John 4 5-32) is instructive here, for this was a meeting quite literally on her own ground. It began with Jesus' acceptance of, and indeed request for, her help. In our own willingness to listen to and receive from others, we may win the opportunity for their hearing of our witness. A fine example of this is the story of a Christian who felt called to explore Islam with considerable empathy, taking time to learn Arabic and to study the Qur'an, gaining a deep understanding of the faith and life of the Muslim community in Britain. In due time he was able, as part of a small group, to tell quite simply the story of the passion of Jesus which moved a Muslim listener to tears.

5.3 The Content of Christian Witness

This raises the issue of the content of our witness, and in the light of our Baptist perspective, we are glad to endorse the exposition of the fourth principle of dialogue in the booklet *In Good Faith*, when it refers to our confession of the Lord Jesus as the True and Living Way (John 14.6) Baptist life has always had clear commitment to Christ as its centre, and we would therefore wish to commend and underline the emphasis of this principle. It is at this point in our dialogue that our partners may have most difficulty in understanding that our commitment to Jesus Christ has universal implications. It is often around this issue of Christology that our truth-claims conflict most sharply with the understanding of others.

Nevertheless, even at this point we must remind ourselves that Jesus is recognized as Lord and Messiah through his own willingness to suffer and to die, not by an irresistible imposition of himself on other people. His way is that of humility and sacrifice, and our witness to him must be faithful to this both in content and manner. It should perhaps be emphasized here that our dialogue is not just a matter of words, but a matter of life and lifestyle. Our words will mean little if our lives do not reflect the compassion and humility of Christ himself. Such "dialogue of life" is consistent with our emphasis on a life of responsible baptized discipleship. Such a view of discipleship means discovery and growth, and dialogue also includes a willingness to change and be changed, as Peter discovered in his encounter with Cornelius. It has often been noted that this was a conversion experience not only for Cornelius, but also for Peter and the Church. This dialogue led to a fuller, more inclusive, and more Christian understanding of the nature of the Gospel (Acts 10:1 - 11:18).

5.4 Witness and Dialogue

In the light of this discussion we would want to affirm the Fourth Principle of Dialogue from a Baptist perspective, recognizing the need to continue to explore what authentic witness may mean for us. But we also want to suggest that the principle should be stated more tentatively, recognizing that dialogue, like all aspects of our relationships, will be marked by sin, open to abuse, neglect or an unwillingness to face honestly the questions that divide us. Christians will engage in dialogue conscious of the radical nature of evil within our world, which is no more absent from religion than any other realm of human life. Indeed as both Gospel record and Christian experience testify, (and as Karl Barth and Lesslie Newbigin remind us), religion can sometimes become the focus of sin and

evil. But we need to remember that this temptation is as real for Christianity as for other faiths. Commitment to dialogue precludes neither proclamation of the Gospel nor confrontation with the 'principalities and powers' which radically distort our humanity. It will require a readiness to listen carefully and speak with humility as well as conviction. When this happens: 'Dialogue can become the prime medium of authentic witness.'

SECTION C : SOME PRACTICAL ISSUES

6. THE DECADE OF EVANGELISM AND PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

The Decade of Evangelism is seen by many British Christians as an opportunity for growth and forward movement within the life of the Church, but as *In Good Faith* points out it has been greeted with some suspicion by members of other faith communities, who perceive it as a threat to their culture and an attack upon vulnerable minority groups. It is important to remember that many people of other faiths will have personal experience of racial abuse and harassment which will inevitably shape their understanding of what Christians would see as legitimate evangelistic activity. As we have already suggested it is essential that our witness to people of other faiths should eschew power, privilege and manipulation. The Four Principles of Dialogue may have things to teach Baptist Christians in their evangelistic outreach, as we live with the tension of commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our strongly-held beliefs about religious freedom and toleration in society at large.

6.1 Serious Engagement.

Authentic Christian witness will require serious engagement by Christian believers, not least with their own faith, as they prepare to give a reason for the faith they hold. Some of us will need to be prepared to wrestle with issues of religious language, the authority of sacred texts, and other important theological matters. For most people, however, the necessary disciplines will be those of empathy and the careful listening which many already exercise within a pastoral context.

6.2 Spirituality.

It may be that it is in the area of worship and spirituality that the most vital work has to be done. This may be an issue that many Baptists find difficult, although the growing evangelical appreciation of different expressions of Christian spirituality may lead to the development of mutual trust in this area. This aspect is so important because it is at the spiritual level, rather than the level of creeds or even words, that we encounter God for ourselves. It is within the human spirit that the good news of God's involvement in our lives is either received or rejected.

6.3. The Holy Spirit

This leads naturally on to our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in human life and history. Christians are called to give witness to our encounter with God in Jesus Christ, but it is the Holy Spirit who convicts and converts, occasionally through extraordinary means such as dreams and visions, more frequently through frail human channels. The doctrine of the Spirit is central to our Baptist understanding of conversion, the gathered Church, and the priesthood of all believers, and has received renewed attention through the influence of the

Charismatic movement. But in our witness to people of other faiths we must learn to trust the Spirit in a new way, walking with our friends without apprehension, relying on the Spirit to prepare, guide and over-rule. We must learn to be sensitive to the Spirit, and allow him to make us sensitive to others.

6.4 Culture and Tradition.

As Baptist Christians, who have often been suspicious of religious tradition, we may need to recognise and own that tradition of which we are a part. Our acceptance of our separatist heritage, our pride in non-conformity, which has never made for easy ecumenical relationships, should put us in a good position to relate to people who find themselves part of a minority tradition within our own society. It should also make us sensitive to the "cultural package" in which our Christian faith is wrapped, and which can be difficult for people who do not share our culture (whether they have a faith commitment or not) to adopt.

6.5 Central Affirmations.

a. Christian witness is a call to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not an attempt to detach people from a particular cultural tradition.

b. In Christ God is creating a new humanity, redeemed by his sacrificial death on the cross, a new community in which all people may find their place and true fulfilment. Within this community ungodly prejudices are challenged and people from any kind of background may find acceptance. The local church should be an expression of this breaking down of barriers to true community.

c. Our evangelism must therefore affirm and never deny all that makes for peace in terms of the Biblical concept of Shalom, but never evade our Christian responsibility to confront the "principalities and powers" which obstruct God's kingdom of justice and joy.

d. Christian evangelism is the telling of the story and the giving of an invitation with both commitment and humility. It is a call to obedient living in response to the grace of God in Christ and carries conviction only when issued by those who are themselves living humbly, graciously, and obediently.

7. WORSHIP WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

"Inter-Faith worship" arouses a great deal of discussion and feeling. There are important issues, but the difficulty is that the label covers a wide range of activities. We need to be clear precisely what is being talked about, and then think through carefully how we understand and respond to each kind of activity.

The following list is not exhaustive, but outlines four possible approaches.

7.1 Attending an act of worship as an observer.

Here we visit a mosque, temple, gurdwara, synagogue, shrine-room or other place of worship and are present on the edge of an act of worship. It is important to observe any custom associated with the particular religious tradition, such as removing shoes, covering the head, sitting with those of your own sex. The aim of the visit is to be open with all the senses to what is happening, and perhaps even to discover how what we see and perceive echoes or challenges our Christian ways

of worship. There is no intention of being a participant in the act of worship. Our presence shows respect for the people who are gathered there, and a readiness to be open in dialogue with them (which of course includes a readiness in the appropriate context to share our convictions with them).

7.2 Sitting in silence with people of other faiths.

Silence allows us to be ourselves alongside others without imposing anything on one another. In the silence we are free as Christians to pray or meditate in the way that is right for us, while leaving our neighbours to pray or meditate in their own way. Such silence can open or conclude a time of conversation together: as Baptists we can learn the value of a period of silence rather longer than the two or three seconds we usually allow ourselves!

Or we can agree that sitting together in silence for a prolonged period is the most helpful and appropriate way of being together in worship. As we are open to the silence we may well discover how the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our relationships with people of other faiths.

7.3 Contributing to a "serial" act of worship.

This is a way of being together in worship that allows people of different faiths to contribute in their own way and according to their own convictions without demanding that others present participate if they cannot in conscience do so. At one such act of worship a representative of each faith present (in alphabetical order of faiths) read a passage from their sacred writings that was specifically significant for their tradition. At the end of each reading (no longer than two minutes) there was a minute's silence for everyone to reflect. The distinctiveness of the faith expressed in each passage was evident. At the same time there were echoes and parallels that gave food for thought and prayer. At another act of worship, a variety of forms - words, music, dance - were used by different participants. Such an act of worship reflects the trust already established between people of different faiths, and helps to strengthen and develop it.

7.4 Participating in a shared act of worship.

For this to have any real meaning all the participants, from two or more faiths, need to agree that they share a common object of worship; have a clear, if partial, understanding of what is being expressed in the worship of the other participants, and are open to enter into what it being offered by them. It is not a question of abandoning our own convictions but of being ready to welcome and receive what is brought by others, even if it is unfamiliar and strange. The resulting act of worship can be a source of mutual enrichment, and celebrate that which we believe and worship in common.

7.5 Conclusion

Whatever approach to worship with people of other faiths we decide to take, it is vital that we give adequate time for preparation. We need to prepare ourselves, so that we enter into the activity in good conscience, wholeheartedly and in glory to God. Equally importantly we need to prepare with those whom we shall be meeting, so that we together understand what is happening and behave in ways that do not cause offence. Good preparation can lead to new discoveries in dialogue with people of other faiths

8. EDUCATION

8.1 Legal Requirements

Many of the issues and questions that arise for a religiously plural society are at their sharpest in the field of education. Under both the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts, a daily act of collective worship is compulsory for all children, unless withdrawn by their parents. Under the 1988 Act such worship must be "broadly Christian" in nature. However, in a school whose pupils (and staff) are drawn from a variety of religious backgrounds, how can worship be offered which is both acceptable and meaningful for all? Is "multi-faith" worship desirable or even possible? Schools with large numbers of children from different religions, or from a single faith other than Christianity, can apply to their SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) for a "determination" that the requirement for "broadly Christian" worship need not apply for some or all of its pupils. In such circumstances "broadly Muslim" or "broadly Hindu" worship may be offered instead. The teaching of Religious Education is also compulsory, although not a core subject of the National Curriculum, and again parents may exercise the right of withdrawal. Should one religion or several be taught, and with what aim? The 1988 Act specifies that the Agreed religious Education Syllabuses (agreed by local SACREs) must "reflect the fact that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (8.3).

8.2 Issues and Questions.

Some British citizens who belong to the "other principal religions" may interpret the law as being biased in favour of Christianity. Others will be happy provided their interests are properly safeguarded. There are issues for teachers too. How do teachers with a particular faith commitment, often Christians, feel about teaching other religions? This may well depend on their understanding of the role of Religious Education within the curriculum as a whole. Christians will also find themselves serving on SACREs and Baptists will most likely be on Committee A which includes Roman Catholics, the Free Churches and "such other Christian and other religious denominations which in the opinion of the Local Authority, ought...to be represented." The committee though has only one vote. The Church of England has its own committee and the teachers another. Some faith communities have profound difficulty with an approach to education which is essentially secular and wish to obtain their own Voluntary Aided schools. Thus far, only Christian and Jewish schools receive state subsidies. Is this fair? How are we to devise a state education system and a curriculum which meet the felt needs of all within our pluralist society? Is fragmentation inevitable? These are only some of the questions that confront both providers and receivers of education in Britain today. Many Baptists involved with schools and other institutions as parents, teachers, governors and children face these issues and need help and support from our churches.

9 BIBLE READINGS - INSPIRATION FOR FAITH TO FAITH RELATIONSHIPS

9.1 Creation and Covenant

Genesis 1 v. 26 - 28.

All of creation is God's initiative with a particular role for the human race.

Genesis 8 v. 20 - 9 v. 1 and 12: 1 - 3.

The covenants made by God with Noah and Abraham embrace all creation and all humanity.

Isaiah 42.

Through his servant, the blessings of God's covenant love are to extend to all nations (v.6). The mission of his Servant-Messiah is to establish justice, law and the mercy of God upon the earth. The mission is to be fulfilled without coercion or the power that oppresses. It is rather with that sensitivity which protects the frail and refuses to extinguish a flickering flame: "His mission is carried out by seeking in others that which is of worth and true. He is to draw that out and not extinguish it however dimly it burns" (*Towards a Theology of Inter-faith Dialogue* - see resources below.)

John 1 v. 1 - 14

The pre-existent Word of God gives life and light to all humanity. (v.9). Those who believe and receive the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ are given the right to become children of God. (v 12).

9.2 The New Relationship of Faith.

Romans 9 V. 1 - 16.

This section reflects Paul's anguish for his people who have inherited the glory of the covenants, the law and worship. But he rejects any notion of automatic relationship in favour of the response of faith to God's call. It always depends on the mercy of God.

Ephesians 2 v. 11 - 18.

Both Jews and Gentiles share in the benefit of Christ's reconciling acts, through which God creates a new people, one body through the cross of Christ. By this means all people are able to enter into the presence of the Father.

9.3 The Unique Nature of Christ.

In response to the anxious questions of Thomas and the other disciples, Jesus affirms that he is "the way, the truth and the life". True security is possible because the divine truth and life of the Father are accessible in Jesus. Indeed to know Jesus is to know the Father.

Acts 4 v. 5 - 12.

The ringing declaration of verse 12 is in the context of the healing of the lame man in the temple precinct, and the preaching of Peter and John who attribute the healing to the power of the name of Jesus Christ. Note that the word translated "salvation" in verse 12 is the same word used in verse 9 for "healing". Peter draws on Psalm 118 to set Jesus as the "cornerstone" of God's saving activity. 9.4

THE APPROACH TO PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS.

Mark 7 v. 24 - 30 (Matthew 15 v. 21 - 28.)

After criticising the religion of the Pharisees, Jesus goes into Gentile territory and speaks with a Greek woman. The hidden meaning of the conversation is that the good news is offered first to Israel. With some wit the woman asks for the leftovers.

Matthew 8:5-13 (Luke 7: 1 - 10)

Jesus is impressed by the faith of a pagan Centurion, and compares the lack of faith among the people of God!

John 4 v. 1 - 42.

Jesus breaks through the customary restraints which prevented dialogue in his meeting with the Samaritan woman, and he goes on to offer a fresh understanding on the nature of our relationship with God.

Luke 10 v. 29 - 37.

The familiar parable challenges us to accept as neighbour the person who is apparently unacceptable. It questions all our human stereotyping.

Acts 10 and 11.

This lengthy passage records not only the conversion of Cornelius and his household but also that of Peter and the Church from a narrow exclusivism which saw Gentiles outside the saving purposes of God. Christ is offered to Cornelius as one who brings his existing faith to completion and fruition.

Acts 13 v. 13 - 43.

Paul presents Jesus Christ to his fellow Jews as the fulfilment of their faith and history. There is continuity between the history of Israel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Acts 14 v. 8 - 18.

Paul appeals to the pagans at Lystra on the basis of their shared humanity (v 15) and a creation theology (vv 15 - 17.)

Acts 17 v. 16 - 34.

Paul's horror at the idolatry in Athens is expressed not in condemnation, but by recognition of the valid insights into the nature of God, which the religions and philosophies of the ancient worlds had enshrined. His appeal to them and discussion with them were on the basis of their own questions, from which he moves sensitively to the commendation of Christ. This is true dialogue and has been described as "the greatest missionary document in the New Testament".

Acts 19 v. 8 - 10.

Here we see the long-term nature of witness. Paul spent three months in discussion with Jews at the synagogue in Ephesus, followed by two years with Greeks in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

Acts 8 v. 9 - 23.

Acts 13 v. 6 - 12.

Acts 16 v. 16 - 21.

Acts 19 v. 11 - 20 & 23 - 27

Many people perceived the apostolic witness as a threat to their folk religion and

superstitions. The confrontation between the Gospel and the demonic forces of magic and superstition are highlighted through remarkable demonstrations of the power of God. Nowhere is it suggested that it does not matter what is believed!

9.5 The Promise and the Hope

Isaiah 2 v. 2 - 4, 66 v. 18 - 24.

The Old Testament in looking forward to the inclusion of all nations within the Kingdom of God, often pictures them streaming to Zion. This hope is reflected also in the parable of Jesus which speaks of the tiny mustard seed of the kingdom growing into a mighty tree, and of the divine banquet at which people from all points of the compass will sit down, a vision shared by Revelations 5: 9 - 10.

Zachariah 8 v. 22 - 23.

A picture of many peoples encouraging one another to seek the Lord. There is an attractive quality in the lives of the people of God! Malachi 1 v. 11. Even if the people of God do not offer the worship that they should, all around the world and amongst all nations true worship is offered by sincere people, "validated by a pure hearts", according to the Baptist Old Testament scholar, H. H. Rowley, (*The Missionary Message of the Old Testament*, Page 73.)

10 RESOURCES.

Contact People

BAPTIST MISSIONARY SOCIETY - Promotion Department, Baptist House, PO Box 49, Didcot, OX11 8XA.

BAPTIST UNION - Department of Mission and Evangelism, Baptist House, PO Box 44, Didcot, OX1 8RT.

JOPPA GROUP : Baptist Group for Christian Witness in a Multi Faith Society - Secretary : Revd E Williams, 60a Birmingham Rd, Alcester, B49 5EG.

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM - Director: Brian Pearce, 5-7, Tavistock Place, London WC1 9SS.

The Network's **Handbook of Affiliated Organisations** contains many useful addresses, including local groups, national bodies and academic institutions. Booklets

Statement on Inter- Inter-Faith Relations In Britain

Inter-Faith Network , 1991

In Good Faith. The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue

CRPOF CCBI 1992 £1.95

Entertaining Angels Clinton Bennett BCC 1990 £1.95

Invitation to Dialogue C. Bennett BCC/CCBI 1990 £1.95

Towards A Theology for Inter Faith Dialogue by the Inter-faith Consultative Group. 2nd ed CHP 1986 £1.75

His Other Sheep Pat Hooker Grove Books 1989 £1.10

Christ's Exclusive Claims and Inter faith Dialogue. Chris Sugden Grove Books 1985

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Belonging to Britain: Christian Perspectives on Religion and Identity in and A Plural Society ed Roger Hooker and John Sargant CCBI 1991 £9.95

Belief in A Mixed Society Christopher Lamb Lion 1985 £3.95

Love The Stranger: Christian Ministry in Multi Faith Areas.
Roger Hooker and Christopher Lamb SPCK 1986 £4.50

Worship in Education by The Religious Education Group.
CRPOF BCC 1989£2.95

"Multi- Faith Worship"? Questions and Suggestion from the Inter-faith Consultative Group
CHP 1992 £3.50

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: Some key books from a vast range:

Religions in Conversation Michael Barnes SPCK 1989 £9.95

Towards a New Relationship Kenneth Cracknell Epworth 1986 £6.95

The Christ and the Faiths Kenneth Cragg SPCK 1987

Theology and Religious Pluralism Gavin D'Costa Blackwell 1986 £12.95

An Interpretation of Religion John Hick Macmillan 1989

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society Lesslie Newbiggin SPCK 1989 £8.95

Jesus Christ the Only Way Patrick Sookhdeo Paternoster 1978

Christian Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue
Maurice Wiles SCM 1992

The debate within current theology is reflected in two volumes of essays:

The Myth of Christian Uniqueness (ed) John Hick & Paul Knitter
SCM Press 1987

with responses in:

Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered (ed) Gavin D'Costa Orbis 1990

THE RELIGIONS

"The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths" (ed) R.C. Zaehner

Lion Handbook: The World's Religions' Lion Publishing

"Encountering Other Faiths" Alan Woodfield,
Baptist Union -Christian Training Programme Manual M4

MISSION

"The Unfinished Story" BMS Study-History by Basil Amey,
Baptist Union -Christian Training Programme Manual M3

Also forthcoming

Definitive BMS History by Dr Brian Stanley, T & T Clark 1993,
and A Popular History by Gwenda Bond, Harper-Collins.

Transforming Mission David J Bosch Orbis 1991

"From Everywhere to Everywhere"
Michael Nazir-Ali Collins \Flame 1991

JOURNALS

- "Discernment: A Christian Journal of Inter-Religious Encounter"
CCBI - 3 issues p.a. £6.00
- "World Faiths Encounter" - World Congress of Faiths,
3 issues p.a. £15.00
- "Common Ground" - Council of Christians and Jews
- "Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations"
CSIC, Selly Oak - 2 issues p.a. £16.00

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The material for this publication was gathered at a Joppa Group Weekend Conference in June, 1991 and subsequently written up by a working party comprising the Revd Dr Clinton Bennett, the Revd David Wilcox, Mr Paul Weller and the Revd Nicholas J Wood, who acted as convenor. The Revd Graham Routley also contributed significant material, for the section on the Bible. Nicholas Wood and David Wilcox edited the final draft, which was then circulated to all members of the Working Party, as well as to several other people within the denomination, for response and comment.

This final text has tried to include some of the suggestions and criticism offered but its authors are alone responsible for its contents. However, this Baptist perspective is offered as a contribution to thinking within our denomination, and beyond, about faith-to-faith encounter and relationships.

The Joppa Group records its gratitude to all who have made this publication possible, especially to members of the Working Party, and to all those who participated in the 1991 Conference, whose names are listed below .

Marion Beales
(Revd Dr) Clinton Bennett
Christine Benson
(Revd) Barbara Bond
(Revd) Tom Bowman
(Revd) Arthur Grimshaw
(Revd Dr) Brian Haymes
(Revd) Donald Hudson
Brian Phipps
(Revd) Graham Routley
Susan Sheppy
Joan Styles
(Revd) Roger Tomes
Paul Weller
(Revd) David Wilcox
(Revd) Edward Williams
Rosemary Williams
(Revd) Nicholas Wood

Typeset and Printed by Church Enterprise Print: 0121 458 1757