

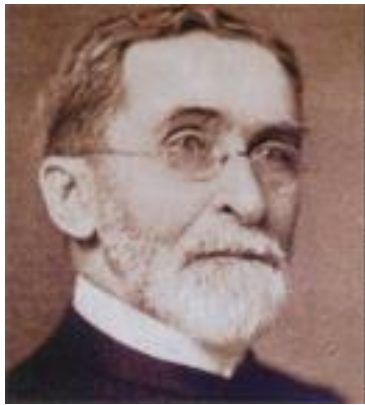
**THIRTEENTH OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES**  
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**WESLEYAN RESOURCES FOR A DANGEROUS INTER-FAITH WORLD:**  
**MAKING THE CASE FOR EVANGELICAL PEACE MAKING -**  
**A SINGAPOREAN METHODIST'S PERSPECTIVE**

*By Rev Malcolm T.H. Tan*

**I The Thoburn – Oldham Connection**

The link between the Methodist Church in India and the Methodist Church in Singapore was clearly established in history when the American Methodist Episcopal Church through the South India Annual Conference met at Hyderabad on 20th November 1884 and decided to appoint William F. Oldham as pioneer missionary to Singapore. A party of Methodist missionaries left India, comprising Dr & Mrs Thoburn, Rev Oldham and Ms Julie Battie setting foot for the first time on Singapore soil on 7th February 1885. It was a very fruitful beginning. Evangelistic meetings held immediately in the Town Hall resulted in the establishing of the first Methodist congregation in Singapore by 23rd February 1885. The first Methodist sermon preached in the Town Hall was by Thoburn with *Zech 4:6* as his text: *'Not by might, nor by power but by my Spirit, says the LORD'*.



*Bishop James Mills Thoburn (1836 to 1922)*



*Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham (1854-1937)*

Soon Methodist preaching points were started in the main towns north of Singapore in the then Peninsula Malaya i.e. Penang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca. Eventually the preaching points became town churches with Methodist schools operating alongside many of them. In 1905, responding to opportunities arising, Methodist missionaries left Singapore to start work in the newly opened Philippines. By 1908 there was already a Philippines Annual Conference. Bishop James Thoburn was one of the earliest protestant missionaries to set foot on Filipino soil, while proceeding enroute to Manila. Thoburn's long held seemingly impossible 'dream' of

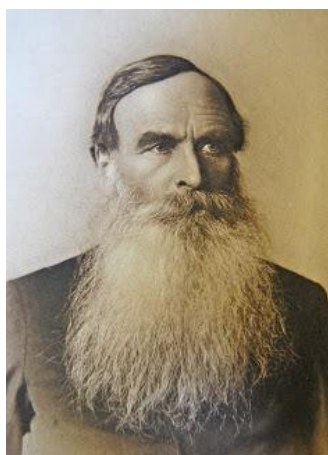
seeing Methodist mission stations south of the Ganges, and then, beyond the subcontinent to Rangoon, Singapore, Malaya and the Philippines was eventually realized within his life time. *'Have faith in God' (Mark 11:22)*



Singapore and the island world of South East Asia

## II Wesleyan Style Revivalism

The Methodist mission to Singapore would not have had their beloved pioneer missionary William F. Oldham if not for the intense four years of evangelistic preaching south of the Ganges (1870-1876) by William Taylor. It was Thoburn who asked Taylor to come to India to conduct evangelistic preaching 'beyond the Ganges' river. The fruit of this wave of evangelization resulted in the formation of preaching points and churches which became the early beginnings of the South India Annual Conference. Oldham himself was converted at Pune during one of those meetings. William Taylor was a Wesleyan style evangelist cum revivalist. He seemed to have preached a clear decisive message of conversion to Jesus Christ, a further experience of sanctification or inner heart cleansing and the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit which would bring renewal and spiritual awakening in answer to the united earnest prayers of the people of God.



Evangelist William Taylor ( 1821-1902)



Evangelist John Sung Shang Chieh (1901-1944)

Later, in the 1930s, Singapore was to see an evangelist with the same spirit as William Taylor come by. Between 1935-1940, the Chinese evangelist Dr John Sung visited Singapore four times. Thousands were converted to Christ. Nominal Christians were awakened. New congregations were founded. John Sung was a Methodist evangelist with the same Wesleyan-Holiness spirit as William Taylor. He preached a clear message of Salvation in Jesus Christ, the deeper experience of having a sanctified heart and the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon God’s people in revival fire. The Methodist churches were greatly strengthened, along with many others. Many believe that the churches in Singapore would not have survived the brutal Japanese military occupation during the second World War if not for the revival that came to Singapore during the second half of the 1930s. In fact, between 1933 – 1936 over 100,000 Chinese were soundly converted to Christ through John Sung’s ministry in China and South East Asia.

### III. Religion in Singapore – Looking at the statistics

	1980	1990	2000	2010
<b>Buddhism</b>	27%	31.2%	42.5%	33.3%
<b>Christianity</b>	10.1%	12.7%	14.6%	18.3%
<b>Taoism</b>	30%	22.4%	8.5%	10.9%
<b>Islam</b>	15.7%	15.3%	14.9%	14.7%
<b>Hinduism</b>	3.6%	3.7%	4%	5.1%
<b>Other religions</b>	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%
<b>No religion</b>	13%	14.1%	14.8%	17%

Source: Census of Population Office, Department of Statistics

Looking at our national census figures, it is clear that although Singapore is a secular state with no one official religion; our existing social order which allows for a measure of religious freedom has resulted in a multi-racial and multi-religious country. Religious revivalism in the 1980s and the 1990s resulted in the numerical expansion of Christianity, Buddhism and those with ‘no religion’ all before the year 2000. After the year 2000, Buddhism experienced significant decline while Christianity saw a significant increase. Christians rapidly grew to 18.3% of the total population by the year 2010. (Note: Singapore was 2% Christian in 1970 and 8% Christian in 1978)

In 1982, Keith Hinton, an OMF missionary serving then in Singapore, did a study<sup>1</sup> on 12 Singapore churches in the hope of deriving the factors that attracted new converts (in the 12 churches) towards the Christian Faith. 3 consistent factors were clearly identified, that people were

1. Looking for Truth
2. Attracted by Community life
3. Experienced a Crisis in life

<sup>1</sup> Hinton, Keith Growing Churches Singapore Style OMF Pub, Singapore pg 120

The percentage breakdown was as follows:

Looking for a true religion	41.2%
Attracted by the corporate life of Christianity	35.4%
Faced a Crisis in life	18.4%

The 3 factors identified confirm the fact that any church that tries to avoid engaging in service and having meaningful contact with the larger community outside by isolating itself, will not be able to have significant social impact. Moreover, without some measure of consistent conversion growth, congregations will shrink and die out eventually. ('Evangelize or Perish!') The study also affirms the importance of having a credible belief system available for the searching pre-believer. In the words of the first Asian to be ordained a Methodist Elder in Singapore, the Rev Goh Hood Keng: *'No man can preach with the driving force of conviction, who has no convictions himself with regard to the central truths of Christianity. It is the man with a burning heart that can give a burning message'*.<sup>2</sup>

#### **IV Charismatics and the Mainline Denominations**

After a decade of steady youth and campus evangelism in the 1960s, the churches in Singapore suddenly encountered the charismatic movement in the 1970s. By comparison, the 1960s were 'quiet' years. The so called 'Clock Tower Revival' erupted in 1972 among some students of a well known Methodist school in Singapore, resulting in the renewal movement penetrating the Anglican and Methodist Churches. Later, the Roman Catholic Church also received a visitation of the Holy Spirit in a charismatic way with some of their local seminarians speaking in tongues in the 1980s.



This 'renewal' resulted in the revitalization of many Anglican and Methodist churches. To quote a former Singapore Methodist Bishop, the late T.R. Doraisamy, a renown local church historian: *'The period following the autonomy of the Methodist Church in Singapore (1968) was one of slow*

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<sup>2</sup> The Malaysia Message, June 1926 Pg 15

*growth for Wesley Methodist Church, our largest church. However, 1973-1974 may be looked upon as a turning point for the church for it began what is now seen as a decade of renewal and significant growth of church membership and attendance. The reason for this may be attributed to the influence of the modern day charismatic renewal in the church'.<sup>3</sup>*

Churches flounder and may even eventually die when they are consistently unclear about their *message*, their *mission* and their *methods*. Prof. Alister McGrath, former Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford gave his controversial personal assessment that the Mainline Protestant denomination already has 'one foot in the grave' and is 'very likely to not survive the next century in the west, at least in its present form'. He believes that 'to change their future they must first change their present'. He makes this observation:

*The only sections of western Denominations which are showing signs of life or growth are those affected by evangelicalism or charismatic renewal...What is most likely to determine whether a Protestant congregation survives in the west throughout the twenty-first century is not whether it is Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian, but whether it is evangelical or charismatic.<sup>4</sup>*

#### **V Government Concerns about Revivalism**

In 1988, the Singapore Government's Ministry of Community Development (MCD), published a report on 'Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore' where the concern was expressed that religious zeal and expansionism could provoke interfaith competition and conflict.

To quote the MCD report:

*The rapid growth of Christianity is a major element that may affect the long-time delicate equilibrium of all religions in Singapore. Its evangelistic activities are often perceived by members of other faiths to be aggressive and showing little sensitivity to their feelings.<sup>5</sup>*

It also expressed the fear that this potential conflict could, also bring up issues pertaining to the 'Haves' and the 'Have-nots' as Christians appear to be economically more progressive than most of their fellow citizens. Generally in Singapore, Christians have a positive reputation for hard work and clean living. Education remains the preferred route for upward social mobility for most Christians in Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> T.R. Doraisamy (ed) Forever Beginning: 100 years of Methodism in Singapore (Singapore 1985) pg 135,

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, Alister The Future of Christianity, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, pg 100

<sup>5</sup> Kuo, Eddie; Quah, Jon; Tong Chee Kiong Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore (Singapore, Ministry of Community Development 1988), pg 31

The year 2010 was not a completely good year for Christian churches in Singapore. By the middle of the year, some Singapore pastors from well-known charismatic churches were taken to task by the authorities. To quote a Straits Times editorial dated 16th June 2010:

*Scatter of evangelical Christian churches have had to answer to the authorities and the wider public for causing offence to other believers in their sermonizing. The defence usually was that there was no intent to question or denigrate other faiths and certain rituals. Without fail, the preachers in question would apologize and their churches undertook to be respectful of other beliefs in discharging their mission.<sup>6</sup>*

The news editorial was entitled, "Points to ponder when sermons chafe". One of the points made for us to ponder was that "Freedom to worship is not the same thing as freedom to put down other practices.... All believers should comprehend that mocking other religions does not help to propagate one's faith."<sup>7</sup> The editorial even raised the possibility that all that has transpired may be symptomatic of something deeper. "We hope those are indeed isolated instances and not symptomatic of a wider problem."<sup>8</sup>

As a Singapore pastor, I can't help but feel the need now for our own heart searching and for us to personally ponder the valid question: *Is hurtful Religious-Speak symptomatic of something deeper than just careless talk in our preaching?* This 'feedback' about the potential social danger of Church growth created a sense of Missional awareness for many of our thinking Christians: That our mission to the world in our society has to be also socially relevant; our passion for the salvation of lost souls without Christ must be coupled together with a strong social conscience, where the two important social issues of interfaith tension and the widening economic gap between communities must also be addressed.

As I see it, our Singapore Christian missional priorities for the twenty first century should be (1) to graciously offer Christ to all in our land (2) to give special emphasis to assisting the poor and needy to achieve upward mobility through relief and education (3) to build interfaith bridges of friendship within our multi-racial and multi-religious society. As Jesus said: 'Blessed are the Peacemakers!'

## **VI Aldersgate as Evangelical Peace-Making**

Wesley's Aldersgate experience is well known to many Singaporean Christians. Wesley's personal testimony is recorded for our edification:

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<sup>6</sup> The Straits Times, June 16, 2010, A20

<sup>7</sup> The Straits Times, June 16, 2010, A20

<sup>8</sup> The Straits Times, June 16, 2010, A20

*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*

*I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart.*

*Journal, Wed, May 24, 1738*

Wesley's Aldersgate experience can mean different things to different people. Looking at it from my Singaporean Methodist context, several things become clear.

1. Wesley's evangelical experience was the direct result of a social process of communication about evangelical truths through the friendship of Peter Bohler and the reading of Luther's preface to his commentary on the Book of Romans, at the gathering on 24 May 1738. Evangelical truth here was part of a transmission of Tradition; that there were living communities that experienced, believed and faithfully transmitted the truth of justification by faith in Christ alone, for the sake of the generations to come.
2. Wesley's evangelical experience at Aldersgate provided clear, unmistakable comfort within his soul, significantly clearing up his confusions and giving him an inner assurance which imparted the confidence to rebuild his shattered life. He was a man now with a Testimony to tell.
3. Wesley's Aldersgate was more than a subjective personal experience. It had lasting social impact in two ways. It empowered him to relate positively to the Other, even praying for those who have ill-treated him. It also caused him to testify of the goodness of God to those around him, from the overflow of his heart that was 'strangely warmed' in Christ Jesus. History has continued to repeat itself ever since.

Consequently, Salvation in Jesus Christ should actually save us from the sin of inner hatred against the Other, even the religious Other. Evangelical Peace-making tries to take seriously the NT conviction that a New Creation is the decisive result of anyone who is in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Sanctification supposedly starts at the very moment of Justification or Pardon. Evangelical Peace-making therefore, believes in preaching Christ *in order to* make peace. To quote D T Niles, Sri Lankan Methodist Evangelist and Peace maker who spoke at the 3rd Oxford Institutes:

*Since there is only one name by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12), only one way to the Father (John 14:6), therefore in him all must meet. If there are many ways for men to attain their destiny, they can go by those several ways without meeting one another. But if there is only one way and one door, all men must meet. The human community is constituted by the finality of Jesus Christ. All things are not only from him, but unto him.*<sup>9</sup>

## VII **Wesley's Passion for Souls and for Peace**

John Wesley, in 1777, 39 years after his 1738 evangelical experience at Aldersgate Street, at the laying of the foundation of the City Road Chapel in London, described his own vision of a true heaven-sent revival. He preached and invited his hearers to come and work with him to see a revival that would not only awaken the unconverted, bring sinners to Christ, but also create peace and good will among humanity. To the multitudes gathered for this grand and happy occasion, he challenged them to have "scriptural religion" as well as "benevolence to all". By "scriptural religion," he clearly meant:

*Gratitude to the Giver of every good and perfect gift, the Father of the spirits of all flesh, who gives you life and breath, and all things; who hath given you His Son, His only Son, that you "might not perish but have everlasting life".*

Wesley also explained his vision of "peace and goodwill among men" through the following heart searching questions for his listeners that day at the City Road Chapel gathering:

*Is your soul warm with benevolence to all mankind? Do you long to have all men virtuous and happy? And does the constant tenor of your life and conversation bear witness of this? Do you 'love, not in word' only, 'but in deed and truth?' Do you 'walk in love, as Christ also loved us, and gave Himself for us?' **To do good to all men as you are able!**<sup>10</sup>*

Therefore, in the midst of his inexhaustible evangelistic labour, Wesley also firmly believed that in order to serve and bring glory to God, one had to also work tirelessly to "establish ... good will among men" (including the religious Other) thereby, simultaneously producing the social conditions for peace. Like a true revivalist, Wesley preached for a decision on that occasion in 1777. He gave a stirring conclusion to his sermon which remains for us, an invitation to be responded to, today:

*Come, and let us magnify the Lord together and labour to promote His Kingdom upon earth! Let us join hearts and hands in this blessed work,*

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<sup>9</sup> KirkPatrick, Dow (ed), The Finality of Christ, Abingdon, Nashville 1966 pg 26

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley's sermon on Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, near the City Road, London, preached on Monday April 21, 1777, from the Works of John Wesley (3rd Edition) Volume VII, Volume III Sermons (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint 1979), pg 430.



*in striving to bring glory to God in the highest, by establishing peace and goodwill among men, to the uttermost of our power!...let us provoke all men, not to enmity and contention, but to love and to good works.*<sup>11</sup>

## **VIII The Methodist Pastor as an Activist for Souls and for Peace**

Like John Wesley, preaching Christ for the purpose of saving souls is an essential part of a Methodist minister's work. In the Methodist Discipline, one of the "Responsibilities and Duties of a Pastor" is "to be involved and to lead the congregation in missions, evangelistic and social outreach in order to win persons to profession of faith".<sup>12</sup> In fact, the commitment to win souls to Christ is one of the marks of a person called to the Methodist itinerant ministry: "In order that we may try those persons who profess to be moved by the Holy Spirit to become ministers, let the following questions be asked ... Have they fruit? Have any been truly convinced of sin and converted to God?"<sup>13</sup> John Wesley in 1748, 10 years after his Aldersgate evangelical experience, wrote a letter to an unnamed clergyman, where he stated categorically: "He that saves no souls is no minister of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Yet Methodism following Wesley's lead, tries to hold both evangelistic ministry and social concerns in dynamic tension. Our Social Principles clearly states: 'The Methodist Church has a special interest in social concerns because of its desire to be obedient to Christ in bringing the whole of life ... into conformity with the will of God.' This emphasis is derived from our earlier history: "Such obedience is exemplified in the life and labour of John Wesley who ministered to the physical, intellectual, spiritual and social needs of the people to whom he preached *the gospel of personal redemption and social holiness*".<sup>15</sup> It is under this ambit of "social holiness" that we understand our mandate for activism towards peacemaking in human community: "the influence of the church must always be on the side of every effort seeking to remove the seeds of war".<sup>16</sup>

## **IX Inter-Human Relations as the Key to Religious Peace**

In his printed but never preached sermon 'A Caution Against Bigotry', published in 1750, Wesley acknowledged that religious differences can result in enmity between peoples, including even family members. In this aspect, religion can be socially destructive, creating a dangerous interfaith world.

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<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, Sermon preached at City Road, 430.

<sup>12</sup> *Methodist Discipline* (2009), Section XIII, para 568, no.4

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Section IV, para 533, no.3

<sup>14</sup> Gill, Frederick *Through the year with Wesley – An Anthology* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), 170, no. 26

<sup>15</sup> *Methodist Discipline* (2009), Section I, para 89, no.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Section III, para 89, no.2

*Nor are any animosities so deep and irreconcilable as those that spring from disagreement in religion. For this cause the bitterest enemies of a man are those of his own household. For this the father rises against his own children, and the children against the father; and perhaps persecute each other even to the death, thinking all the time they are doing God service. It is therefore nothing more than we may expect, if those who differ from us, either in religious opinions or practice, soon contract a sharpness, yea, bitterness towards us.<sup>17</sup>*

In his 1750 published sermon, "A Catholic Spirit", which he preached twice in the latter part of 1749 before its publication, Wesley challenged his hearers and readers to have a 'catholic' spirit without diluting their core convictions as Christians. They were challenged to have a heart of goodwill that can overflow to other Christians and to all humanity in spite of religious differences. Surely, Wesley's Catholic Spirit is consistent with the Good News that God's love in Calvary's Universal Atonement can reconcile even bitter enemies to each other. (Eph 2:14)

*Go, learn the first elements of the Gospel of Christ and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit (such a person)... while he is steadily fixed in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in His sight; and while he is united to a particular congregation — (yet) his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is Catholic or Universal love.<sup>18</sup>*

Authentic dialogue brings understanding and acceptance. It must also lead to genuine friendships. Friends do not withhold from each other what is most precious to them. Both dialogue and evangelism are needed at different times in our ministry to our precious neighbours. Dialogue must be free from evangelism but evangelism must not be free from dialogue. Yet dialogue must not try to replace evangelism. Both are important activities with their own legitimate areas. Wesley's concept of the Catholic Spirit raises the real possibility of two persons having deep seated opposing religious convictions, yet being able to have a peaceable genuine dialogue and friendship between them because of a heart of good will and respect that they both have learnt to have for each other through their interactions. With this approach, human relations prevails over religious differences, competition, conflict and hatred. We must avoid artificially forcing completely different religious Traditions to sound like each other, in the false

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<sup>17</sup> John Wesley 'A Caution against Bigotry' *Works of John Wesley*, Volume 2, *Sermons* Volume 2 (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979) pg 486

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit', *the Works of John Wesley*, Volume V, *Sermons*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pg 502.

assumption that having similar convictions will always reduce conflict between peoples! Non-Sequitur!

The earlier question, "Is hurtful Religious Speak symptomatic of something deeper?" should now be addressed. According to Wesley, such an insensitive attitude on our part is a clear sign that we do not really love the very people whom we desire to reach with the love of God; hence our lack of sensitivity and courtesy. Wesley, in another sermon, "On Pleasing All Men" (1771), exhorted his Methodists "to be courteous to all, to the rich and to the poor, to those who feared God and even to those who did not".<sup>19</sup> He tried to reason out the connection between love and courtesy:

*What is the source of that desire to please, which we term courtesy? Let us look attentively into our heart and we shall soon find an answer. The same Apostle that teaches us to be **courteous**, teaches us to **honour** all men; and his Master teaches me to **love** all men.<sup>20</sup>*

Even in courtesy towards the (religious) Other, because of the Love of God for our neighbour, Evangelical convictions serve as a leading light.

*I honour him for his Creator's sake. I see that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ. I love him for the sake of his Redeemer. The courtesy, therefore, which I feel and show toward him is a mixture of the honour and love which I bear to the offspring of God; the purchase of his Son's blood, and the candidate for immortality.<sup>21</sup>*

#### **X Wesley's Call to Peace-Making and being a Good Neighbour**

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) is the parable of the Good Neighbour. Our Lord commands all to "go and do likewise". Jesus taught the parable as an illustration of the command to love our neighbour, which is understood here as any human being that is in need of our help. The 'good neighbour' is the one who defied prejudice and crossed confessional lines to help another human being even in times of desperate need, the 'Samaritan' being the hated religious Other.

John Wesley in his 1754 edition of the Explanatory Notes on the New Testament has this to say about the command of our Lord in Luke 10: 37,

*Go and do thou in like manner — Let us go and do likewise, regarding every man as our neighbour who needs our assistance. Let us renounce that bigotry and party zeal which would contract our hearts into an insensibility for all the human race, but for a small number whose sentiments and practices are so much our own, that our love to them is but self love reflected. With an honest openness of mind let us*

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<sup>19</sup> "On Pleasing All Men", in *Wesley's Sermons, Volume III*, pg145

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

*always remember that kinship between man and man, and cultivate that happy instinct whereby, in the original constitution of our nature, God has strongly bound us to each other.*<sup>22</sup>

Wesley's comments on the parable can help form the basis for better interfaith relations:

As a preamble, this parable warns us that oftentimes, as the examples of the priest and Levi indicate, the demands and activities of loyally belonging to a religious organization may stand in the way of loving and helping our neighbours, thus preventing us from obeying the commandments of Christ. Consequently, this parable, in keeping with Wesley's hermeneutic, challenges all who wish to follow the teachings of Christ to (a) be prepared to do good to all people, whether or not they hold the same religious affiliations as we do, as well as (b) to do good for its own sake, in obedience to the Commandments of Christ and not for lesser reasons such as the ulterior motive of converting the religious Other. It calls us (c) to be humble enough when we are in need, to be willing to gratefully receive help from our neighbours, some of whom may be from a different faith persuasion from us. This parable also challenges us (d) to work against religious bigotry and blindness, which keeps us from acknowledging the good done by other human beings simply because they belong to another faith persuasion. And finally, it challenges us (e) to have hope and faith in the possibilities of a fruitful co-existence between differing religious communities, and that we will be able to relate to each other consistently in a humane and helping relationship.

Consequently in matters of interfaith relations, it should be recognized that it is essentially more a meeting of peoples rather than the meeting of religious systems. It is important for Christians to realize that we do not relate to other faiths, so much as we relate to *people* of other faiths, as people to people and person to person. Wesley seemed to have held more to the unity of the human race than to the unity of religions!

## **XI When Preaching Christ Becomes Ungodly**

Much has been made of John Wesley's letter to James Hervey in 1739 where he proclaimed his vision of a worldwide evangelistic parish:

*Let me now tell you my convictions in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish, by this I mean, that in whatever part of it, I am in, I consider it appropriate, right and my bounden duty to declare unto ALL THAT ARE WILLING TO HEAR, the glad tidings of Salvation.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (London: Epworth Press, 1976 reprint of the 1754 edition), pg 241-2

<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, "Letter to the Rev James Hervey" (dated: 20 March 1739) in John Telford (ed.). *The Letters of the Rev John Wesley, A.M.*, Standard Edition Vol I, (London: Epworth Press, 1931), pg 285-286.

Most of the time we listen selectively and miss out on the fact that Wesley deliberately limited his evangelistic preaching of the glad tidings of Salvation only to "all that are willing to hear". This he did while still firmly believing that God had given him a worldwide global parish.

Ironically, it is possible to preach Christ in an unChrist-like manner, which must be for us, areas of repentance before God and our Neighbour. Examples of unChrist-like evangelistic preaching seen sometimes in Singapore include:

- When sharing Jesus persistently with the decidedly unwilling. Such insensitivity would be a case of blatant disrespect. To disregard the clear wishes of others by imposing incessant gospel preaching upon them would surely be a definite case of unChrist-like conduct.
- When sharing Jesus with others degenerate into a diatribe and monologue, a one-sided communication without any discussion. Theologian Kosuke Koyama complained about Christianity in Asia: "It wants to teach. It does not want to learn. It is arrogant. It is suffering from teacher complex."<sup>24</sup> Those with a calling to teach and preach must also be humble enough to learn from others.
- When sharing Jesus, we make Christians appear superior, because we think we have the truth, we are always right and others are wrong. This condescending, triumphalistic attitude is not the spirit of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). Sri Lankan Methodist evangelist DT Niles puts it helpfully: "Evangelism is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find food!"
- When sharing Jesus becomes a life and death ideological struggle between two combative parties. Occasionally such conversations degenerate into nasty shouting matches with insults and name calling. The apostle Paul admonished: "*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone*" (Col 4:6, NRSV).
- When sharing Jesus with others, we make enemies, dividing community into bitter unforgiving, opposing camps, cornered into an interpersonal relationship of animosity and conflict. This is not the way of a disciple of Jesus Christ, as we have been taught by Him to forgive and love, not only our neighbours but also our enemies! (Matt 5:44) May God hear our honest prayer to be His instruments of peace as true disciples of Jesus.

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<sup>24</sup> Kosuke Koyama, "Christianity suffers from Teacher Complex," in Mission Trends 2, eds, Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (Paulist Fathers & Eerdmans, 1975), pg 71.

- When there is such a sharp distinction in our understanding, between the work of Christ at His first Advent and His Second Coming, that we have no interest whatsoever today in the wellbeing of human society, focusing instead only on the salvation of lost souls and leaving the Second Coming to solve the practical problems of human community. Such an approach promotes a gospel which will have no social conscience or any real social relevance for today. How we have forgotten the Lord's prayer: *"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* (Mt 6:10 NRSV)
- When sharing Jesus becomes an evangelistic *campaign* or a gospel *crusade*. Both models result in the depersonalization of the Other. They give the image of a salesman bringing in his sales target at the end of the day. These "evangelists" make their reports on the number of persons they have "brought to Christ" through their daylong canvassing. The language of "crusade" is even worse, as "crusading" was an act of religious war in its original meaning! Surely, it is time for us, evangelizers to be evangelized by the very gospel of peace that we should always share with others.

In the midst of all this Christian Imperfection, the insights of Hans Küng, may be helpful for us here:

*Can the Christian message transform the world? It has transformed the world. That is an historical fact. But it has not transformed the world deeply enough - and this is the fault of Christianity.... But the Christian message will transform the world. This is our hope and Jesus Christ himself is the ground of that hope. 'Behold, I am making all things new' (Rev21:5)<sup>25</sup>*

## **XII     A Framework for Evangelical Peacemaking**

The following 10-point conceptual framework tries to combine both our commitments of preaching Christ and pursuing peace, thereby encouraging a more positive engagement with the larger society. For the sake of authenticity, it is built upon Christian conviction and assumptions.

1. In the name of Christ, we seek to work with others to build up human community for the common good. We uphold the values of multicultural tolerance and genuine respect between people of all faiths and those of no faith. We seek to have a free and open society with mutual acceptance, where there is the necessary institutional disconnect between religion and the power/privileges of the State. We boldly declare that the use of violence to intimidate the religious Other, by any one particular religious community, is a shameful disgrace

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<sup>25</sup> Hans Küng, *"What is the Christian Message?" Japan Missionary Bulletin*, Dec 1970, in Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends No. 1; Crucial Issues in Mission Today* (Paulist Fathers & Eerdmans, 1975)

unworthy of any of the great religions of the human family. We also call upon those societies which discriminate against their own citizens because of differing racial or religious affiliation, thereby treating them as second class citizens, to repent of their offensive discriminatory behaviour.

2. In the name of Christ, we are one humanity. We acknowledge people as human beings first, who share this fragile planet in common. The image of God in us all, accounts for the widespread adherence to the ethics of moral reciprocity (i.e. the Golden Rule) which provides a common ground in the values that we hold, regardless of differing religious convictions and commitments.
3. In the name of Christ, we are each individually special and unique. It cannot be truthfully said that we are all only saying the same things but in different ways when it comes to our religious beliefs. Our common humanity and the Golden Rule do not reduce the rich cultural intellectual diversity found in the human family. We still have a lot more to learn and share with each other, thereby celebrating the unique individuality that God has given to each of us.
4. In the name of Christ, we must still try to think freely and independently. We must never allow religious loyalty or political correctness to hinder us from critical thinking and personal honest judgment. After all, in real life, not all notions are equally true and of equal value. Some notions may even be wrong and harmful. Hence, we must look at our own convictions critically first. We must, also, learn to intelligently discern what we can or cannot receive from each others' religious insights. When we lose the right to be different we lose the right to be free.
5. In the name of Christ, we as His Disciples, celebrate the richness of the universal love of God. We bear witness that this gift of Divine Love comes definitively and decisively in Jesus Christ, without discrimination towards anyone. We cannot rightfully withhold from our sisters and brothers what God has freely given, in sacrificial costly love, to the entire human family for our common salvation.
6. In the name of Christ, God's word of grace must always be spoken forth graciously. We confess Jesus Christ as God's universal gift of Love, full of Grace and Truth (John 1:14). The Good News of Christ crucified for sinners, must be communicated in a manner that is gracious, peaceable and sensitive to hearers, in the same spirit of God's sacrificial love.
7. In the name of Christ, people should not be rushed or pressured into making decisions. We cannot assume that all who are hearers are always ready to receive what has been offered to them. In many instances, it is best not to say more but to prayerfully live out an

authentic Christian life before a watching world yet to be convinced by our testimony.

8. In the name of Christ, we wholeheartedly affirm that those called to saving souls are also called to be peacemakers. All who have received the Prince of Peace, should also be committed to a lifestyle of peacemaking in this conflict-ridden world. The church must see herself as a global peace movement initiated by God through the gospel. That Gospel when sincerely received, has the ability to produce generations of peacemakers for our world. Yet peace must be genuinely promoted for its own sake. 'Peace' must never be a ploy to get a hearing for our evangelistic preaching. To do so, would be to cheapen both the ideals of preaching Christ and of making peace.
9. In the name of Christ, transforming Christianity will transform the world. The global Church can birth a worldwide people movement for peace, where acknowledging Christ as divine Saviour should save us from prejudice and antagonism towards the racial-religious Other. Our accountability groups can help us to watch over each others' souls, lest we fall into the sin of hatred against the Other. In Jesus Christ, we receive God's justification/pardon which produces sanctification. The grace of sanctification is both personal and social. Social holiness includes our commitment to be peacemakers. In the words of our Methodist Social Creed: "We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to freedom for all people, and to the rule of justice and law among nations."<sup>26</sup> We pray that this evangelical peacemaking will gradually become more of a reality every day.
10. In the name of Christ, those who do not receive our message are not our enemies! We are still friends of all and enemies of none. We seek to respect the rights of those who do not agree with our convictions and beliefs, hoping and praying that God will be allowed to be the final arbiter and persuader in all our religious differences and disagreements. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me!

### **XIII Conclusion**

John Wesley held to a future eschatological hope. He looked forward to the Day when 'the holy lives of the Christians will be an argument Others will not know how to resist'.<sup>27</sup> Wesley's optimism is grounded in scripture: "*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (Isa 11:9, NRSV). Isaiah of Jerusalem (circa 700 BC) dreamt prophetically of the future. He saw the appearance of the Messianic Son of David, and that of a New Day where the knowledge of Yahweh will be globally widespread. The reign of God starting from Jerusalem, will then be visible on earth, resulting in newly created

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<sup>26</sup> Methodist Discipline (2009), Section IV, para 90, no 7, page 47

<sup>27</sup> John Wesley "The General Spread of the Gospel" works Vol II, Sermon 63



social-spiritual communities, given to peace and not to destructiveness. This vision included the hope that: "*they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*" (Isa 2:4, NRSV). It will be a day when the culture of violence will give way to fruitful and peaceful living. Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) saw the vigorous spread of the gospel in his day as also contributing to the realization of Isaiah's dream:

*Far from Jerusalem there did go out men, twelve in number, into the world ... and in the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by the Christ to teach to all the Word of God. And we who formerly used to kill one another, not only do not make war on our enemies, but, rather than lie and deceive our inquisitors, willingly die confessing the Christ.*<sup>28</sup>

Justin Martyr had good basis for his stated perspective, because what Isaiah saw as future, Paul declared in the New Testament, as a present reality through the finished work of Jesus Christ at Calvary: "*and through Him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross*" (Col 1:20, NRSV).

Although God has done His part, will we succeed in the daunting task of evangelical peacemaking within our fallen world? The Methodist Social Creed is optimistic: "We believe in the present and final triumph of God in human affairs and affirm that the world is our Parish".<sup>29</sup> Till then, we must watch and pray, working tirelessly until "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever*" (Rev 11:15, NRSV). Therefore, we pray for strength this day to keep the COMMAND: "*Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*" (Heb 12:14, NRSV). Remembering also, the PROMISE of our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace: "*Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.*" (Matt 5:9, NRSV)

#### The Prayer of Saint Francis<sup>30</sup>

*Lord, make me an instrument  
of thy peace.  
Where there is hatred,  
let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console,  
To be understood as to understand,  
To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life*

<sup>28</sup> Justin Martyr "1 Apology 39", quoted in William Young, Handbook of Source-Materials for Students of Church History (Up to 650 A.D.) (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969), pg 10.

<sup>29</sup> The Book, of Discipline (2009), Section IV, para 90, no 7, page 47.

<sup>30</sup> Prayer of St Francis UMH 481

**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF SINGAPORE,**  
**AUG 2008**

A Guide to Common Issues in Inter-Religious Relations

**1. How should Christians respond to invitations to attend and participate in community functions (e.g. memorial service, commissioning, open house, or social gathering) where members of other faiths are also represented or involved?**

Christians should feel free to attend and participate in community functions where members of other religions are represented or involved. These functions serve to foster community cohesion, which Christians as citizens should support and be involved in.

Though many parts of community functions are primarily cultural in nature, there may be some religious elements. Where a community event includes acts of worship or rituals practised by other religions, the Christian in attendance should politely decline participation, or ask to be excused from that portion of the event.

Other aspects of community functions may relate to customs, traditions and values generally held by the larger society which are not incompatible with Christian practice. These, the Christian may feel comfortable to attend and take part in. However, there may be some practices such as gambling, which Christians should avoid.

Christians need to be able to identify the different cultural and religious elements so that they can confidently attend these functions and interact cordially with all those who are also present.

**2. In what circumstances can Christians give or receive funds from other religious organizations?**

Christians can give to, or receive funds from, other religious organizations, where such gifts are clearly designated for services that promote the general welfare of humankind. God the Creator has provided resources, including money, to be used to bless His world. In Christian love and liberty, we may use these resources to benefit others.

Christians, however, should not give to funds that directly promote the cause of other religions (e.g. building of temples or places of worship). This is because such giving is contrary to the Great Commission which calls Christians to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20).

Thus, for example, Christians may contribute towards a fund that assists poor families to send their children to school, but not towards a fund to send those children to a religious school.

### **3. In what ways can Christians co-operate with followers of other faiths for the good of the community?**

Christians are citizens of the nation. As citizens, Christians can and should work with others in efforts which promote the common good, and which build up the community as a whole. Thus, since Christians believe that every human person is created in the image of God, they will seek to care for all others, regardless of race or religion.

In Singapore's multi religious context, where up to 85% of the population are followers of one religion or another, harmony among followers of religions is important and necessary for society as a whole to flourish. Christians should work with others to achieve racial and religious harmony. One thing they can do is take part in the Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) which have been initiated and set up by the government.

Christians are also concerned for justice and peace, and in particular, that the vulnerable, weak and marginalized in society are adequately cared for and protected. Thus, Christians can work with others in services which benefit these sectors of society.

Christians may also initiate projects and work with followers of other religions in such common concerns as caring for the environment.

### **4. In what ways can Christians dialogue and interact with followers of other faiths in everyday life?**

The aim of dialogue between followers of different faiths is to promote understanding of each other's faith and practices. There are various forms of dialogue which can be carried out by Christians. First, there are the daily interactions in school, around the neighbourhood, in the market and at work. These interactions are opportunities for Christians to speak with neighbours, friends and colleagues about their common concerns about life and family, as well as about their religious practices. These daily interactions could also give rise to opportunities for Christians to find out more about the life and religious practices of followers of other faiths and to speak about their practices. In these social interactions, Christians can find opportunities to give a reason for the hope that they have (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Secondly, dialogue can also be conducted at an official or organized level. Here, leaders of two faiths can meet together to seek better understanding of each other's doctrine and practices. The aim of such dialogue is not conversion, nor an attempt to synthesise religions, but mutual understanding. At all times, both parties should maintain utmost respect for each other.

## **5. How should Christians participate in inter-religious dialogue?**

Christians should be involved in inter-religious dialogue when its basic purpose is to enable members of different faith-communities to understand one another better.

Inter-religious dialogue, as is with all social interaction, should lead the conversation partners to better understand one another as well as respect the differences between them. For the Christian, such dialogue can be understood simply as the conversation between people who hold different religious beliefs. Thus, inter-religious dialogue is part of the larger context of social intercourse in a pluralistic society. Inter-religious dialogue can be conducted at different levels and with different objectives and goals (see Issue 4 above). Even when such dialogue is conducted at official levels with more concrete goals in view, e.g. inter-faith collaboration for nation building, they cannot detract from this basic criterion of fostering understanding between the different faith communities.

## **6. How should Christians be involved in Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC)?**

Christians should be involved in such platforms, as well as other inter-faith dialogue activities, both as individuals as well as a church or a denomination.

IRCCs and other inter-religious channels have been set up to promote racial and religious harmony. They achieve this end by bringing people of different faiths and races for dialogue and cooperation. The role played by these organizations has taken on heightened importance in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

In Singapore, people of different faiths and beliefs live side by side. IRCCs are an opportunity for us to work together with fellow citizens to build a harmonious and cohesive society. The different traditions we come from offer us many resources to do this. Inter-faith meetings also provide opportunities or settings to correct misunderstandings and misrepresentations not only of our own but also of those of other faiths as well.

Involvement in such platforms is an expression of Christian commitment towards community building. Together with those of other faiths, listening and responding to one another with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences, but build on shared hopes and values.

## **7. In what circumstances can Christians allow their premises to be used for meetings with followers of other faiths?**

Christians may wish to invite followers of other faiths to use their facilities for common activities such as group games or dialogue. These events may be held in fields, meeting rooms, or halls owned by the church. Opening their doors in this way is an act of hospitality. While Christians may wish to invite followers of other faiths

to their worship services (see Issue 12 below), they should restrict the use of their sanctuary or worship halls to Christian worship only.

### **8. How should evangelism be carried out in a multi-religious society?**

Christians are called to proclaim Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life and not to denounce other religions. Instead we are to witness in love by good deeds, testimony and personal evangelism.

We need to recognize that those who are of a different faith are also human beings like us, created in the image of God. Many are often sincere and are struggling to do good. Like us, they are sometimes lonely, disappointed, troubled, sick or facing death.

We need to live a godly life, displaying the fruit of the Spirit. There are many non-Christians who have high standards in their conduct and values. We must do better, to demonstrate that we believe and serve a holy God who has commanded us to live holy lives. Indeed, a godly life demands showing of respect and giving honour where it is due, being scrupulously honest in all transactions, and being polite to one and all.

People are generally responsive to love and friendship. We need to develop genuine friendship and establish a caring and loving relationship.

We should also note that the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act gives the Government of Singapore the right to restrain a person from addressing orally or in writing any gathering of institution when that person has committed or is attempting to commit among other things, an act which causes feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups.

### **9. How should Christians respond when invited to take part in inter-faith religious services?**

Proponents of inter-faith religious services believe that the deities of the different religions all point to the same ultimate reality. However, the orthodox doctrines of many religions, including Christianity, reject this.

For Christians, worship is an act of praise and adoration directed to the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is directed to this God and no other. Christians also maintain that God has revealed Himself specifically, first through His dealings with Israel, and then finally and supremely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word (Heb 1:1 - 2). Given these basic premises of orthodox Christian faith, inter-faith or multi-faith worship for the Christian poses serious theological problems because the object of that worship is, at best, ambiguous. Christians should, therefore, not participate in inter-faith worship.

What Christians can do, however, is encourage the organizers of such events to conduct them as civic events with opportunities given for those present to pray silently according to each person's faith and tradition. At such moments, Christians

may also pray silently in their heart knowing that God hears their unuttered prayers (cf. Matthew 6:6).

**10. How should Christians participate in a public civic memorial or ceremony where there is public ‘prayer’ provided by leaders of the other religions?**

A civic or memorial ceremony organized by a religiously neutral body in the wake of a tragedy (e.g. the Silkair jetliner crash in 1997) is an act that fosters social solidarity as the tragedy affects many people. Such ceremonies draw family members, relatives, friends and citizens together to mourn the deaths of the innocent victims.

The basis of such a gathering is human solidarity in a time of crisis or in the wake of a tragic event. It is the recognition that this crisis or tragedy has affected every member of society, regardless of race and religious convictions. The purpose of the gathering is to reflect on what has happened, to mourn with those who have lost their lives, and to express sorrow, faith and hope (through the use of religious language and symbolic gestures). Christians may attend such events because they are part of the larger society.

Such civic rituals, while they may not be inter-faith religious services as described in Issue 9 above, usually involve prayer. For Christians, corporate prayer is seen as part of worship liturgy to God and as such they cannot offer prayers on the same platform as with members of other faith communities. However, Christians join their fellow citizens in such a time of tragedy and at the appropriate time may pray silently to God who hears these prayers (cf. Matthew 6:6).

**11. What can Christians do when invited to attend and take part in religious services at temples or mosques?**

Sometimes, Christians may be invited to visit places of worship of those of other faiths. Some Christians may politely decline such invitations for their own valid reasons and this should be respected. Others may wish to visit those places when there are no worship or religious activities going on in order to better understand the other religion and so build relationships with the other communities and persons in it.

When acts of worship are being carried out in that temple or mosque, Christians should bear in mind the following:

- Christians should find out more about the other faith community prior to attending its worship activity.
- Christians attend such activities as visitors and not as participants. This means that they should not take part in any rituals or religious activities performed during these worship events.

- When Christians attend the worship activities of other faith communities, they must learn about and observe any restrictions that may be practised in that place of worship. This includes appropriate behaviour relating to attire, food and drink, gestures, gender roles as well as postures.

## **12. In what ways can followers of other faiths be invited to attend and participate in Sunday worship services in church?**

Although the Sunday worship service is primarily an activity for Christians, people of other faiths should be allowed to attend if they wish to. Through the work of the IRCC, some churches have hosted people from other faiths in their worship services. While Christians should welcome followers of other faiths to the Sunday worship, it is important to note the following:

- Visitors should not be compelled to participate in the worship service if they do not wish to do so, e.g. they should not be compelled to give during the offertory. If they are comfortable with participating in the acts of worship (e.g., sing, stand, kneel, etc.), they should be informed before the service that they are welcome to do so.
- Throughout the worship service, visitors should be accompanied by a mature Christian who can explain clearly the meaning of the actions, rituals and liturgical materials.
- When the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated, it is important that the ritual is clearly explained to visitors. It would not be appropriate for them to participate in this sacrament.