

Understanding and Using...

Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church

(a report 'received' and 'commended for prayerful and constructive discussion' by the Methodist Conference of 2006)

Introduction

This Study Guide is meant to help people 'get inside' the content of the 2006 Conference report *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church*. By using this Guide, it is hoped that people will appreciate how its insights can be of practical use in the life of the church.

The guide contains a summary of the report's content and a number of suggestions for 'ways in' to its content. These take the form of possible structures and exercises for group discussion. *All of these will need to be given some thought and preparation by group-leaders beforehand.* Group-leaders will especially need to give thought to which particular exercises may/may not be appropriate for their group. When dealing with disagreements, and when asking groups to examine and reflect on why people have different views (and may have come into conflict), it is vital that the discussion process is carefully thought through. The exercises are not, however, intended as 'therapy sessions'! This Study Guide is simply a point of access, a starting point, to enable people to see what *Living with Contradictory Convictions* was driving at. The report and the guide together therefore also shows how deep, and theological, some of our differences and disagreements might be, and how they might begin to be addressed.

It should be stressed that it is hoped that users of this Guide will themselves have read the full report, and that users of the exercises may be encouraged to go on to read it in due course.

Summary

What's in the report?

The report contains the following sections.

1. *Introduction*

This section spells out why the report exists and what it is trying to do. It locates current discussion within the kinds of diversity with which the Church has always lived.

It's recognized that homosexuality is a current issue over which Christians are disagreeing with each other a lot. This issue is the main prompt for this report [1.2]. But pacifism was also an issue over which Christians disagreed, and still do [1.4]. Apartheid was another [1.4]. So it isn't as though homosexuality is likely to be totally different from other issues which Christians have faced. Pacifism, though, continues to be a cause of disagreement. There has been no solution found. Apartheid, as a form of racism, is untenable as a Christian position. What we don't yet know (collectively as a church) is which of these two examples homosexuality is like [1.5]. In other words, we don't know whether a single solution will be found, or whether the church will need to go on living with difference. But whatever conclusions individuals might come to, we're talking about *people* here, as well as 'issues' [1.6].

2. *A History of Difference*

This section explores some of the biblical background to the question of how diversity and difference have been, and are to be, handled. It is acknowledged that Scripture has been used to support diverse and sometimes ultimately untenable positions in the Christian past.

The Bible is a rich book and has been interpreted in many different ways [2.1 - 2.3 and 2.5 - 2.7]. It even has different ways in which it presents its own diversity. Sometimes it seems to say 'yes, life really is contradictory and you can't do much about it. There isn't even one view of faith you can put your finger on'. At other times it works hard to show what's 'just not on!' [2.4] But whichever approach to scripture is adopted, there's no dodging the task of handling it.

3. *Tradition*

This section recognizes that theology, rhetoric and political strategy have always been part of the Church's life. The question facing us as a Church at present is this: 'Is what we are examining an acceptable or an unacceptable form of diversity?'

There are plenty of examples of how the church has handled both diversity (the fact of difference) and the disagreements, conflict, divisions and separations which have sometimes resulted. Some are referred to in this section [3.2]. Not all differences can be 'resolved'. Sometimes, differences have had to remain. At

other times, the search for what is common has eased tensions. But because the church's history has many examples of division within it, it's crucial that any issue be very carefully explored before a decision is made as to whether a difference is 'liveable with', or a cause of division [3.3 - 3.4].

4. *Diversity, Personhood and the Church*

This section explores what it means to 'be' Church in the handling of difference. The extent to which the Church is to reflect God as Trinity in its own life, and how the Trinity informs our understanding of what it means to be a 'person', are prominent concerns.

The church tries to reflect what God is like. But how is this to be done? We reflect what God is like, because we are called 'the body of Christ'. In other words, by participating in Christ, churches are both enabled and challenged to be 'one' [4.1]. This is a tall order. But the doctrine of the Trinity helps. This doctrine enables us to see that relationship is fundamental to God. Father, Son and Spirit are in constant interaction. Being 'one' and being 'three' at the same time lies at the heart of who Christians believe God to be. God's Spirit helps us to see and be individuals and in relationship with others. 'Church' is a decisive place where we learn and practice this [4.2 - 4.3]. A 'person' is not simply an individual. A person is always in relationship to others.

5. *Openness in personal relationships: Handling experience and reason within the Quadrilateral*

This section explores the power of personal stories. It explores how such stories are received and responded to in the life of the Church and highlights the need for critical reflection. Trying to be a community that follows the example of the original apostles is not an easy matter. And it is not merely a matter of following 'right doctrine'. The Church is to reflect in its *practice* 'the grace of a God who is always more merciful than we can imagine'. Equally, it is seen that the Church constantly has to confront the question of the limits of acceptable diversity. All such exploration is seen to occur within the interplay of scripture, tradition, reason and experience ('the Quadrilateral').

Life throws up so many challenges. And people have such interesting stories to tell. But how is all that to be made sense of? This section recognizes that Methodism has always acknowledged the richness of personal experience [5.1 - 5.2]. Christian community is not, however, simply about letting people tell their stories. 'Church' is where people tell their stories and seek to have them interpreted and re-interpreted alongside 'the story of God' [5.3]. This is a task which takes courage and involves hard thinking [5.4 - 5.6]. And sometimes churches don't want to hear unfamiliar stories. People who aren't already 'in' the church might not be made very welcome [5.7]. On the other hand, not everyone's story, or their interpretation of their story, may be 'of God' [5.9]. But it's a tough job working all that out.

6. *Openness to a challenging God*

This section spells out the challenge for the Church of living in relation to God, as a body which seeks to live by the Spirit. The reality and necessity of dialogue with God - constant listening and speaking - is emphasized.

In the church, people try to live *with each other* and *with God* all the time. So the way that people relate to each other is affected by their awareness of God. People are shaped by that awareness - individually and as a group. This may not always be conscious. But that's ultimately why people are 'in church'. Being shaped in this way then affects how Christians try to conduct all their relationships. At its best, Christian conduct includes 'respect of the other, listening and responding, giving and receiving' in a spirit of openness. Being genuinely 'open' means you can't decide beforehand, before you've heard someone's story, how diversity is to be handled.

7. *By Way of Conclusion: On Being a Church*

The final section suggests that despite uncertainty and apparently irreconcilable difference, openness to God at the very least means *being* the Body of Christ. We are not just to talk about the fact that we are Christ's Body, and live 'in Christ'. We are, individually and together, to act as Christ's people and to be seen to be who we are. Even though broken and fragmented, the Church always seeks to celebrate and anticipate the resurrection without yet knowing what form that resurrection body may take.

We haven't got it right, and we don't know how or whether we'll ever get it right in, and as, the Church. But God is with us in the struggle. We don't call the Church 'the Body of Christ' for nothing. We can claim to know something about how to live with brokenness, incompleteness. 'not-yet-thereness'. But because we celebrate the resurrection within our life *already*, therefore we anticipate all that might yet be possible. New life is always possible, despite not knowing what's right sometimes. And the challenge is for members - even members who disagree radically with each other - to recall that they are members of the same Body of Christ.

Exercises to Use

In this section, a number of possible exercises are presented for a leader of a group discussion to choose from. *Leaders will need to choose very carefully from this list!* Some exercises are potentially more explosive than others. Handling difference is rarely easy (and especially when that difference is about disagreement and even conflict). But you will know your group. If you choose to begin from a recent experience of disagreement, you will know (at least some of) the issues that might become the focus of attention. As a group-leader, bear these in mind as you plan. Don't plan to *create* conflict; but don't plan to avoid tough challenges if there *has been* conflict, when you know it would be in individuals' and the Church's interests to examine *theologically* what went on. How can our believing in, and thinking about, God actually help us deal with difference and disagreement?

In relation to each of the possible exercises below, you may find it helpful to use a basic 'listening exercise' along with the discussion method. (It could be a first part of a session, before you begin to address the content of *Living with Contradictory Convictions* itself.)

Note: this 'introductory exercise' could itself take half an hour, but would be useful because it would set the tone of your whole discussion. Group-members do, though, need to be disciplined about keeping their contributions succinct.

- Each member of the group thinks of a situation where they have encountered disagreement.
- They spend a few minutes reflecting on the experience by themselves and they can if they need to jot down the key features of how it seemed to them.
- Then in small groups 3-4 max, each tells their story of this encounter/experience. The other members listen and make no comment whilst the story of the disagreement is being told.
- The person who told the story then remains quiet while the others in the group say in turn what struck them about the story and any thoughts and questions which arose for them whilst they were listening. No comments are made by other members of the group at this point.
- The story teller responds with any further details and then the group as a whole reflect on the experience of the listening exercise and what they learned from it and how that might be applied positively in their exploration of the material in the report.

Whether or not you use such a listening exercise, the basic principles behind it are useful to follow in all your discussions:

- ◆ Letting people speak
- ◆ Encouraging all group-members to let people speak
- ◆ Actively inviting comment
- ◆ Inviting responses

Sometimes, of course, as a group-leader you may have to:

- use your right to invite people to limit what they say ('letting people speak' does not in this case mean 'letting people go on and on and on for as long as they like!')
- use your authority to stop many people speaking at once, or some people from butting in.

If either of those interventions is needed, then, in the interests of the group, you will need to act.

Now for the possible exercises:

Method 1

Begin from an experience which your group knows

Write up (for handing out at the start of the group) or describe (orally at the start of your meeting) a situation in the life of your group/church which was an example of disagreement. This could be almost anything (though will need to be chosen carefully!):

- e.g. whether to remove pews
which political parties church-members vote for
which hymn-books to use

whether to join in with a local inter-faith social action group
whether to lobby the local council about a particular issue
whether to purchase a data projector for the church.

This may have been a situation where a clear decision had to be taken (e.g. did the pews go or not?) or one where people will go on disagreeing (e.g. political party support).

Invite the group to think of all the reasons why, as Christians, they did/could support the different positions in the chosen situation [NB: It's probably best not to choose a very recent, hotly disputed church council decision, otherwise the debate is likely to be re-run! This may, though, admittedly also apply to a decision made 20 years ago too!]

Consider whether the chosen disagreement was one which *could* be resolved, or *was/is not likely* to be resolved.

Relate this to the report - linking it to the content of the Introduction.

Then work through the content of the report using the first part of Methods 3 or 4 below.

Method 2

Begin from experiences which your group knows

Invite the group to think back over recent years in the life of the (local) church and identify as many matters as they can think of where there has been disagreement.

Categorize them according to whether clear decisions were reached, or whether people had to 'agree to disagree'. [*NB: If the disagreements all/mostly turn out to be church council decisions about which concrete action was needed, then note the influence of such a weight of decision-making on the way we think i.e. we expect there to be a clear conclusion/solution to our debates.*]

Relate these to the report - linking them to the content of the Introduction. Note the difference between those on which a decision can be reached and those which cannot.

Can the group at this point identify issues and disagreements (local or national) which they know affect the church, which do not even get raised. [*This is a potentially risky strategy, but if you know your group well may be worth taking. The group is only being expected to name/identify them, not to address or try and solve them.*]

Then work through the content of the report using the first part of Methods 3 or 4 below.

Method 3

Begin from the text of the report

Invite a member of the group beforehand to read the full report and then to use the summary above to prepare a short presentation. [*The boxed sections can be used - or adapted - to prepare OHP slides or handouts. If the computer technology is available, the text can also be lifted out to be used in a Powerpoint presentation.*]

Ensure that people have opportunity to ask questions or make comments during or after the presentation so that the basic gist of the report's content becomes clear.

Having got hold of the 'basic gist' of the report, **focus then on Section 5.**

Get your group (as a whole or in small groups) to identify some of the 'different stories' that are told within your particular setting/congregation/circuit. In this way you move from the content of the report to your experience.

The different stories may, of course, be about *difference* (in social class, ethnicity or theology), or they may be about *disagreement* (some are for contemporary worship songs, some are against; some agree with closing smaller churches, others don't). Very often, difference and disagreement are mixed up together, sometimes understandably, sometimes unhelpfully (e.g. White Christians making statements like 'of course, Black people prefer lively music'). A *disagreement* can be assumed to be based on a particular *difference*, when it may not be.

Choose one of the differences or disagreements identified and get your group (or small groups) to explore it further. Ask them to come up with:

As many features of the difference/disagreement as they can think of, in terms of how it takes shape/appears in the life of the Church.

And then (having collected these together), ask them to think further about how these features are informed or challenged by how God is understood in Christianity.

Collect these together.

At this stage, your role as a group-leader may be quite a difficult one. It is likely that lots of statements like the following will emerge: 'God is one, so we should be one'; or 'God is Trinity, so there will be difference amongst us as a Church'; or 'we're the body of Christ, so we're all one in Christ - there is no difference in Christ between us'. Though all such statements (and many like them) will be true, they don't actually help us as they stand to deal with what goes on. Christians *are* one in Christ, and are *also* different from each other in many ways. The challenge of Section 7 therefore has to be pushed further at this point.

Invite the group to reflect on what it means to 'live' section 7 as a Church and try, in conclusion, to encourage your group to draw some 'working challenges' for the future (in the light of the discussion) rather than neat, slogan-like conclusions.

Method 4

Begin from the text of the report

Invite 7 members of your group each to read and prepare one of the 7 sections of the report. Stress that they will have 2 minutes each (maximum) and so they must prepare a summary which fits into that time-frame. In this way, a large number of people speak at the start of your group's meeting, and so the multiple voices

encourage others to be involved. [Stress to your team that you're asking for *a summary not an evaluation.*]

Then follow the procedure from the second half of Method 3 (from the paragraph beginning 'Having got hold of...').

Method 5

Begin with an exercise on the use of the Bible

Divide the group into 4 (or multiples of 4), and ask each group to address one of the following tasks:

- ◆ Come up with three faith-related reasons and three biblical passages/texts in support of slavery.
- ◆ Come up with three faith-related reasons and three biblical passages/texts against the practice of owning slaves.
- ◆ Come up with three faith-related reasons and three biblical passages/texts in support of pacifism.
- ◆ Come up with three faith-related reasons and three biblical passages/texts which would support armed military intervention in a case where people's lives were endangered.

Get each group to report their findings

Invite each group to make comments on each other's contributions.

[It is, of course, possible to support all four positions from the Bible and it is to be hoped that your groups will do this! The task then is to work with the material in relation to the report i.e. to identify that Christians now only support three of the four

positions. This can then be used as a 'way in' to presentation and discussion of the report's contents as in Method 3 or 4 above.]

Method 6

Begin with I Cor 12.4-31

[Ask three people beforehand each to look at paras. 7.2 - 7.4 of the report and to come prepared to speak on them at some point]

Identify the ways in which 'Body of Christ' is being understood in the passage

Ask the three speakers to offer their comments on their paras. in light of the reading of the passage

It would then be useful to identify three types of difference which may be present within the church/es to which you belong:

- Different roles (reflecting in a contemporary way on the content of I Cor 12.27-30)
- Different backgrounds - social class, ethnic background, educational or work experience (this may be tricky, but it's these factors which lead people to make implications about 'respectability', as in I Cor. 12.23-4)
- Differences caused by disagreement - take up at this point some concrete examples of where there have been differences of opinion, and hard decisions to make (whether or not they have actually been made). How do we receive the notion of there being 'no dissension within the body' (I Cor. 12.25) when

we know there almost always is? How do the disagreements relate to other forms of difference identified (if they do)? (E.g. Is it the preachers who like traditional hymns? Do preferred styles of worship fall easily along social class lines, or with respect to ethnic background?)

Having been as honest as you can as a group about what differences and disagreements there are, then work *back* through the report from Section 6, then Section 5, and so on.

Does any of the material here begin to inform what being in the 'Body of Christ' means? How does any of the text of the report help all members of the group think further about how to approach the concrete differences and disagreements which you have identified?