

Some Social Issues in the 20th Century

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The MMS and its precursor bodies have traditionally had four dimensions to their relationships:

- A primary concern with the people of what were once mission fields and are now sister churches.
- An obvious, necessary concern with the home constituency of Methodist congregations and their ministerial and lay leaders, the providers of human and financial resources, the root of prayer and interest..
- An ecumenical dimension (addressed at this Conference by Selvanayagam).
- And fourthly the relationship with the denominational leadership and with other elements of the denomination's life. A Society which was itself an integral part of the denominational structure, accountable to the annual Conference, was no different in this respect from the independent mission agencies such as CMS. But the way in which the fourth dimension was addressed in Methodism was more methodical and structured.

Thus it was by decision of the Wesleyan Conference that in 1924 the *Overseas Joint Temperance Committee* was established. True, its first meeting early that year preceded the formal Conference resolution. The officers of the WMMS and of the Temperance and Social Welfare Department had already decided that it made sense to work together to combat "the evils of alcoholism among native peoples" and six members representing the Foreign Missions work met with six from the Department, headed by the redoubtable Henry Carter, on 7 January at Bishopsgate. But they were not content to meet. They got Conference to formalise the arrangement. The situation does not seem to have resembled that which, long afterwards, created the *Ethics of Investment Committee*, on which representatives from the Division of Social Responsibility sat with representatives from the Central Finance Board (and a Chair from neither). In that instance a Conference resolution was needed to bring the CFB to the table. Conference pressure was unnecessary in 1924. The WMMS had a solid track record of concern for social issues and human development. There was opposition to slavery and to cannibalism on the one hand; the promotion of education and medical care on the other. So in the heyday of the temperance movement (with prohibition in force in the USA) the joint Temperance Committee was an unsurprising innovation. But a proposal from the floor added to the Joint Committee's terms of reference: "The Committee shall also deal with the drug problem" - and over the years the scope of the Committee's interest continued to widen, as a study of the Minute Book covering the first twenty years will show.

The Committee's brief had never been quite as narrow as "alcoholism among native peoples". (It may be noted in passing that in 1937 it was agreed that the word "indigenous" be substituted for "native" in the committee's vocabulary.) At the initial meeting it was agreed to draft a questionnaire to be sent to each mission field, which would touch on the extent and nature of the drink problem, the temperance work done by the local church, legislation and the attitude of the government, and sacramental wine; but also on the matter of counsel to be given to British subjects proceeding overseas and the extent of drinking habits among British and other European residents.

Temperance (or, rather, abstinence) issues dominated the agendas of the Joint Committee: reports from the *Native [?]* and *Liquor Traffic United Committee* (for there

was an ecumenical dimension to this as well); rum-running in the Bahamas, the Gold Coast gin traffic, and the existence of a bar at Achimota College (1936: half-a-century before a bar at Southlands featured in a difficult Conference debate!). In 1926 the Committee readily endorsed a statement dissociating the churches from attempts to undermine the American Prohibition Law. But from the outset, in accordance with Conference's directive, the opium trade was a concern; reports from League of Nations Conferences were discussed.

Other issues were soon taken up. As early as May 1925 the Committee agreed to consider gambling questions, and to send a list of relevant literature to missionaries (keeping missionaries informed, at a time when communications were still quite slow, was an important element in the Committee's rationale). In 1928 there was an item about the export of greyhounds to China, with a view to the inauguration of racing, news of a track being made in Hong Kong, and then confirmation that racing had started in Shanghai. In 1927 there was a cryptic minute about "a book of a very undesirable character" circulating in India – whether this was pornography or some other undesirable subject I have not as yet ascertained. (Opinion as to what constitutes undesirability constantly shifts: in 1917 Edwin Smith's description of Ila life containing sexually explicit material had been put, for propriety's sake, into Latin before publication!)

An issue in 1929 was "the moral influence of cinema films in native countries". It was reported that in Britain an arrangement had been reached with American film producers and distributors to cut "bad features of American films" but no such arrangements were in place in other lands. What was true of film censorship then is of course true of tobacco advertising today... Then in 1931 it was reported that three British films had been banned in India, but this was for political reasons not because of their 'moral influence'.

The agenda was by now so broad that in 1929 the Committee's name was expanded. Temperance and Social Welfare had long been the title of the Department and Social Welfare was belatedly included in the Joint Committee's designation. A Conference was arranged by the Missionary Society in 1931 on Marriages in West Africa (the thorny problem of polygamy) – the Conference was not the Joint Committee's responsibility but was properly reported to it. In 1933 Conference received, and referred ? to the Committee, a memorial from the Burma Synod about the Remarriage of Divorced Persons. In the same year there was a Conference Resolution on the Abolition of Slavery, a century after the emancipation of slaves in British territories. The Committee decided to send to all the Chairmen of the Overseas Districts the texts of previous Conference resolutions not only on alcohol and gambling but on War and Peace and on Sunday Observance. Overseas Chairmen had not automatically received Conference resolutions which were prepared in, and intended for, the British context, since it was recognised they were not automatically relevant or appropriate in very different cultures (though as they were almost all British ministers it might have been supposed that in any case they would have valued being kept in touch with the home scene).

A significant item in 1934 concerned "Hindu and other students" in London, experiencing problems with accommodation. Discrimination was being practised. Meanwhile in India cricket was being played on Sunday. Both of these are continuing realities in the 21st century, though only one remains anathema.

In 1936 two matters arose from Southern Rhodesia. Legal aid for native prisoners was one of these; but it took up less of the Committee's time than a complaint from the Synod about advertisements in the Methodist press for quack remedies, which prompted the Committee into correspondence with the Methodist Recorder. Female circumcision in Kenya was brought up in 1937, the South African Institute of Race Relations was prophetically commended in 1938, and juvenile delinquency in Sierra Leone was a topic in 1940. By then, of course, the Committee was operating in a world at war and subsequent minutes are brief and uninformative.

In 1936 an invitation had come from the Caribbean, requesting Henry Carter to pay an extended visit and share in a consideration of "the various and complex social and economic problems with which the Christian Church in the West Indies is faced". It was constantly deferred, at first because of Carter's workload and then because of the critical international situation in Europe. It was kept on the Committee's agenda because the intention was that the MMS and the T&SWD would share the expense of the visit. But Carter retired before the war was over.

The purpose of this summary is to underline that a concern with the world beyond the English Channel was not the sole prerogative of the Missionary Society. The Society was the means through which Conference administered the Overseas Districts, and the channel through which the social concerns of Methodists abroad were communicated; but those concerns were shared by many British Methodists and particularly by those who were charged with what has subsequently been labelled the Christian Citizenship, the Social Responsibility and now the Public Issues agenda.

The Revd Edward Rogers, who joined the Christian Citizenship Department in 1950, the year it was so renamed, and oversaw its transformation into the Division of Social Responsibility in 1973 before retiring in 1975, kept the international scene at the forefront of his concerns. In 1958 he was on a visit to British Guiana, when he received a letter which he described in his journal as "A bombshell from Basil Clutterbuck. They want me to be General Secretary of the Missionary Society. It hasn't penetrated yet, but very soon I must think very very seriously." (21.1.58). Two weeks later, in Barbados, a further letter reached him and he recorded "Reached almost final decision to decline".

Ted Rogers' interest was in the Methodist Relief Fund, and later the World Development Fund, which were eventually merged into MRDF. The relationship between these later expressions of the Methodist people's global concerns and the Missionary Society/Overseas Division is a significant element in recent Methodist history. Work for economic and social justice and development have been widely seen as integral to God's mission, numerous Methodists have taken a leading role in promoting it, and many Methodists have found the structural division between 'mission' and 'development' unhelpful and confusing. Others have found it a helpful distinction because, they argued, it should have led the MMS to concentrate on the primary evangelistic task; but historically, as this paper underlines, the more holistic view of what mission is held sway, together with the recognition that mission is the affair of the whole church and not only of a society within the church.