

The Methodist Church and the UK Independence Party: a briefing note from the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group

Introduction

The rise in popularity of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has led more people to ask whether it is a fundamentally racist party. This is a particular issue for the Methodist Church as we have standing orders which state that the Church believes racism to be a denial of the gospel, and guidance that the Church and individual Methodists should not engage with racist parties. The Church also has standing orders which allow churches to rent out rooms to political parties, subject to the agreement of the managing trustees and any guidance from the Connexional Team.

This document has been produced by the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group (CPERG), an ecumenical group set up by the Methodist Conference to advise and support the Church on issues of political extremism. It suggests some of the issues which the Methodist Connexion and local Methodist churches might wish to take into account when considering relationships with UKIP.

Background

In February 2004, the Methodist Council passed the following resolution:

1. Affirms that the Methodist Church is open to all in its worship, fellowship and service to the community. The policies and practices of those who promote racism and religious intolerance are incompatible with the Methodist Church's social witness, biblical teaching and our understanding of the love of God for all people.
2. Encourages people to vote in local, national and European elections. While not endorsing any particular political party, we urge people not to vote for candidates who promote racist policies.
3. Expects members of the Methodist Church to practise and promote racial justice and inclusion, and reject any political parties that attempt to stir up racial and religious hatred and fear of asylum seekers.

In 2009 the Methodist Conference passed a notice of motion which drew on the Standing Order which states that "*The Methodist Church believes that racism is a denial of the gospel*", and argued that membership of an organisation which promotes racism is inconsistent both with membership of the Methodist Church, and with employment which involves representing or speaking on behalf of the Methodist Church. The following year, the Conference amended Standing Orders 013B and 050 to ensure that new members of the Methodist Church would be made aware of the Church's position on racism. It also set up a group, the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group (CPERG), to advise the Church on issues of political extremism. This group has produced resources for churches, guidance, prayers, and information about extremist parties.

Originally CPERG focused its attention on groups such as the British National Party, and other political parties which promoted a racist doctrine of white supremacy. Yet there have always been wider concerns about the use of issues such as immigration, sanctuary [asylum] seekers, and multiculturalism to stir up racist feeling. It has been recognised that representatives of mainstream parties have sometimes been as guilty of this, and this should be challenged where it is seen by our Church and individuals. However the bar on Methodist membership has been taken to apply when a party is *constitutionally* racist.

In recent years, the BNP has gone into decline as a political force, and UKIP's political star has risen. Although UKIP does not have the same race-based policies, individuals within UKIP have been guilty of

racist assertions, and some observers have argued that the party gives a respectable face to racist beliefs.

Concern about UKIP was brought to a head in the autumn of 2013 when the party held its annual conference in Central Hall Westminster. Some Methodists argued that the denomination, given its stance against racism, should not be associated with the party, or profit, albeit indirectly, from trading with it.

Issues to consider

Recognising that Methodists will have different responses to the question of whether UKIP is a racist and extremist party, and that there will be Methodists who support the party, the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group would like to offer some pointers to people who are considering the question of how the Methodist Church should engage with UKIP.

- UKIP declares itself to be a “non-racist party” and has no bar on membership from people of minority ethnic groups. It would appear that some UKIP policies are attractive to former BNP members but former BNP members are prohibited from joining the party. Interestingly members of the anti-racist group, HOPE not Hate, are also banned from joining UKIP
- UKIP contains individuals who are undoubtedly racist. Some local candidates have circulated election material which stokes up fear of immigrants (for example a leaflet¹ which pictured a First Nation American with the text “He used to ignore immigration...now he lives on a reservation”.) Others have tweeted or blogged racist or anti-Muslim comments². “Comedians” speaking at UKIP events have used racist material³. Some such members have been reprimanded or expelled from the party, whilst others have not. UKIP has defended itself saying that it has expanded so rapidly that it has been unable to vet all members or candidates.
- UKIP’s policies are less than clear, with the leader Nigel Farage recently calling the party’s 2010 manifesto “drivel”. UKIP supports an exit from the EU as a way of solving this country’s problems, by promoting free trade, controlling immigration, cutting foreign aid and removing the UK from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. It self-describes itself as promoting a civic nationalism, which should be “open and inclusive to anyone who wishes to identify with Britain, regardless of ethnic or religious background”.⁴ This contrasts with the obsession with skin colour and ethnicity displayed by the BNP and other extremist parties.
- Yet the claim to welcome anyone who “wishes to identify with Britain” leaves open the problem of who defines “Britishness”. A previous UKIP manifesto said “UKIP opposes multiculturalism and political correctness and promotes uniculturalism - aiming to create a single British culture embracing all races and religions.”⁵
- The party appears to have rowed back from this explicit rejection of multiculturalism, and their latest list of issues⁶ focuses on the need to control immigration. Although this is arguably the same message in a more subtle guise, it is expressed in more acceptable terms, and speaks directly to

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/general-election-2010>

² <http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Outrage-prospective-MP-condemns-Islam-blog/story-12089789-detail/story.html#ixzz2KYhtrxiS> and <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/ukip/article/3340/ukips-vile-mandela-slave-rant-exposed> for example

³ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danhodges/100261889/ukip-are-now-a-racist-party/>

⁴ UKIP Manifesto: Empowering the people. Retrieved 10 May 2013

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12570547>

⁶ <http://www.ukip.org/issues>

those who argue that immigration is a real problem. Nigel Farage's recent comments about not hearing English spoken on a commuter train (a claim rejected by other commuters) demonstrates that they are pitching for voters who believe their country is "under threat" or slipping away from them. This is echoed by their recent election posters which suggested that "your" job was under threat from European immigrants, and their earlier grossly exaggerated claims over the numbers of Bulgarians and Romanians that would come to the UK after 1 January 2014.

- Who are UKIP supporters? Research has shown that the average UKIP voter is not the more affluent, middle-class Conservative who is motivated by a dislike for the European Union. Rather the average UKIP voter is older, working class (indeed it is the most working class of all the major parties), less well educated, male and deeply concerned about issues of immigration, the financial crisis and the state of politics. This is a group who feel alienated by the political classes and sense that their old world is slipping away.⁷
- In this sense, policies are much less important than the sense that UKIP is "on their side". Different polls⁸ show that people attracted to UKIP are concerned about immigration, and further down the list, welfare, the economy and Europe. However research suggests that what binds them together most is dissatisfaction with the perceived state of Britain today – where "the mainstream political parties are so in thrall to the prevailing culture of political correctness that they have ceased to represent silent majority"⁹.
- This feeling of alienation is also present amongst BNP supporters. Crucially, however, UKIP supporters are much less likely to consider violence as ever justifiable, when compared to BNP or supporters, although a significant majority of both groups (90% of BNP supporters and 75% of UKIP supporters) believe that inter-racial conflict will be "inevitable".¹⁰
- UKIP has a Christian wing called "Christian Soldiers", with the slogan "The Christian Fellowship of the UK Independence Party – Fighting through Christ for deliverance from EU tyranny". Literature produced by Christian Soldiers states "Before we joined the European Union, England was a land with a monocultural society rooted in Christianity – freedom, democracy, respect for the rule of law and patriotism". Images used by the group include those depicting faux-Victorian crusader imagery.

UKIP's policies and constitution are not explicitly racist, though it espouses a number of principles which will be unpalatable to some Methodists, as with any political party. However its positioning does make it an attractive mainstream home to people who hold extreme views as evidenced by the extremists who have joined. Its policies also support an unpleasant xenophobic narrative about immigration and the "other" that feed feelings of fear and threat. They appear to be willing to target vulnerable groups for electoral gain, as, historically, extremist parties have done. This negative narrative is, however, gaining ground across the political spectrum, not just amongst UKIP supporters, and Methodists should challenge it wherever they find it. It is however important to recognise that UKIP does not promote policies in a way which is as explicitly racist and supremacist as politically extreme groups such as the English Defence League or the BNP.

CPERG therefore recommends that there is no substantive evidence that UKIP is an extremist racist party, although it contributes to narrative of disunity. Therefore the party should not be treated by the

⁷ See *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain (Extremism and Democracy)*, Goodwin and Ford, 2014

⁸ Eg Peter Kellner, *Prospect*, March 2014; *From Voting to Violence: Far right extremism in Britain*, Goodwin and Evans, 2012

⁹ <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/THEYRE-THINKING-WHAT-WERE-THINKING.pdf>

¹⁰ *From Voting to Violence: Far right extremism in Britain*, Goodwin and Evans

Methodist Church in the same way as the BNP. However opportunities should be sought urgently to challenge narratives of division which present immigration (and, by extension, immigrants) as a threat.

Relating to UKIP (and other political parties)

The two main ways in which Methodist churches may have contact with UKIP is through hustings and room lettings, though many people will obviously also be represented by UKIP councillors or MEPs.

Hustings

Many churches organise hustings or question time events for elections, and one of the questions asked most frequently is whether the organisers have to invite all the candidates. You are not obliged by law to invite all candidates to meetings, but, unless you fear inviting a particular candidate is going to cause a breach of the peace, you need an objective reason for not inviting all of them. A disagreement with a stance of a particular political party would not be considered objective, whereas excluding those parties who have polled under, say, 5% would be objective. If you do not invite a particular party because you feel their stance contradicts those of the church, then charity law enables you to do this. However electoral law means that without an objective reason, then the event is seen as promoting the election of particular candidate (or candidates) and any expenses incurred would need to be included in the election expenses of those candidates who attend (or are invited to attend).¹¹

Hiring Church rooms

SO 921 Political Matters. (1) *...managing trustees may permit occasional use of Methodist property for political meetings by non-Methodist bodies ... Before agreeing to such use, the managing trustees shall consider, in the light of any advice which the Connexional Team may issue from time to time, the extent, if any, to which the granting of such permission would have a detrimental effect on the peace and unity of the Church and its witness.*

Would hiring a room to UKIP (in this particular case, but arguably to other political parties) be detrimental to “the peace and unity of the Church and its witness”? If the question were being asked about the BNP, then the answer would be clear cut as the Methodist Conference and Council have made their minds known about racism. If concerns about UKIP are less clear cut, then the decision must, as it stands, be left to managing trustees, taking into account their own local situation. The managing trustees might wish to ask itself some of the following questions about any political letting:

- What is the reputation of the party, representative or candidate locally (eg have they made unpalatable statements with which the church would not wish to be associated)?
- Are there measures which can be put in place to ensure that the Church cannot be seen as supporting this (or any) political party?
- Would the local congregation find the policies of the party particularly unacceptable or threatening?

Final note

The Lobbying Act 2014 which comes into force in September 2014 will impact on charities ability to speak out on political issues “that can reasonably regarded as intended to promote or procure electoral success” even if that is not the primary intention. Charities, including Churches, which pass a threshold of “controlled expenditure” will have to register with the Electoral Commission and not spend more than a statutory cap on such campaigns. The full regulations are expected to be published by the

¹¹ More information is available from the Electoral Commission www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Electoral Commission in July 2014, and advice will be provided for churches organising hustings or making statements in advance of elections.

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On behalf of the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group

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