

'Passionately Christian, Compassionately Inter-faith' was the way I started these columns last September. As I gather thoughts for the last of these columns for the Recorder, I am recently returned from Annual Conference in Birmingham where inter-faith matters were largely confined to a couple of fringe events and the presence of a few inter-faith guests. Still, there is considerable work that the Methodist Connexion could be involved with, and I want to use this final column to highlight a few situations that have attracted my attention in recent days.

The first has again to do with telling our faith stories to the younger generations, a theme I explored last month. Since then, I've been to visit another school with my local interfaith group. The topic we were assigned was 'Death and Dying', and each of us shared briefly from our faith traditions with the Year 8 students. What grabbed my attention was the display on the classroom wall featuring three words: Theist, Atheist, and Agnostic. Around each word were word balloons that students had prepared, apparently describing why they felt one of those words described their own beliefs. There were about a dozen captions around each of Theist (belief in a higher being) and Agnostic (not sure), but the Atheist tag was swamped with scores of captions, clearly illustrating that most of the students identified with that description of their beliefs. Surely peer pressure has a massive influence on adolescents, so it's hard to determine if atheism is the 'flavour of the month' or a deeper indication of a society which has turned its back on faith in God. It was also interesting to hear the students reflect that they were most interested in the concept of reincarnation, though they understood that primarily to mean that 'everybody lives again' or 'everybody goes to heaven' rather than one's status in the afterlife is determined by their deeds in the current life. As the Humanist version of atheism claims that there is no afterlife, perhaps the students are not as atheist as they think themselves to be. In that case, hearing directly from persons of faith continues to be an important source of learning for our younger generation.

Indeed, after the session, one of the girls came up to those of us who had presented our faith traditions. She had tears in her eyes as she thanked us profusely for sharing our beliefs. 'I feel so alone in being a believer; I've never heard of anyone else sharing their faith in this school!' We must take every opportunity we can find to be that calm but confident voice of faith in difficult times.

A second situation has occurred with a circuit church which intends to sell its Community Centre as it no longer has the resources to operate it. A group of ten Muslim men met with me as superintendent recently to discuss their hopes of purchasing the building for their own use as a Community Centre. They were all working age, and they assured me they had the funds and the personnel to run a Community Centre for young people: they just needed a building. Some in the Church congregation have wondered why the Muslim group thought they could make the Community Centre work when the Church group could not. I began to reflect on when I last had a meeting with ten working-age men at a church with resources and eagerness to run a Community Centre! Have we Christians lost our vision?

I've also been in conversation with a person from a Messianic Jewish group who wants to preach in our circuit churches. He is a baptised Christian, but his allegiance to Messianic Judaism is at odds with our current connexional policy, so my conversation with this eager-to-preach person has been tricky. How to promote good interfaith relations while upholding our Methodist discipline? Certainly, there are provisions in place for changing connexional policy, but the path is long and treacherous. It was attempted last in the late 20th century and

roundly defeated in Conference at the time. Since then, few have been willing to make the effort for change.

On a brighter note, my work with inter-faith marriage couples continues to bear fruit. This summer I will attend the wedding of one such couple with whom I've worked over the past year via zoom. She is a Roman Catholic from America; he is a Muslim of Turkish descent who grew up in Germany. They met while studying at St Andrews in Scotland, and that is where they heard one of my radio broadcasts about inter-faith marriage and contacted me. We have had zoom sessions nearly every month since then, even when the couple moved to Rome. The wedding is in Germany, and then they will be moving to Washington, DC, where they both will be pursuing PhD studies. They have blessed me tremendously with their eager desire to honour both their faiths, to work through difficult situations with family, and to consider new ways of listening to and growing closer to God and each other. Theirs is a relationship I would covet for everyone!

Telling our own faith stories and listening compassionately to those of others is as imperative as ever. As we listen and share, we can grow, rediscover, and explore our own beliefs and practices, gaining a better understanding of ourselves and God. So be it with us! Amen!