

The future of the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group

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| Contact Name and Details | Rachel Lampard, Team Leader, Joint Public Issues Team lampardr@methodistchurch.org.uk 020 7467 5248 |
| Status of Paper | Final |
| Action Required | Approval |
| Draft Resolutions | <p>18/1. The Council thanks past and present members of the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group for their work in support of the Methodist Church's belief that "racism is a denial of the gospel" [SO 013B].</p> <p>18/2. The Council agrees to establish an informal ecumenical group, as set out in option b of the report, to advise the Methodist Church, and other denominations if appropriate, on responding to the threat of political extremism when such advice is required.</p> |

Summary of Content

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| Subject and Aims | To agree a way forward for the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group (CPERG) |
| Main Points | Background to the establishment of CPERG Achievements of the group Potential ways forward |
| Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function) | MC/10/23 - http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/coun-1023-racism-and-extreme-views-200110.pdf - the Council paper which established the group www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/politicalextremism - resources produced by the group |
| Consultations | With members of the existing group |

Summary of Impact

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| Standing Orders | None |
| Faith and Order | None |
| Financial | None beyond budgeted resources if proposed resolutions are accepted |
| Personnel | None |
| External (eg ecumenical) | The current group contains representatives from the Baptist Union, United Reformed Church, and Catholic Association for Racial Justice. They have been consulted about their vision for the future, but may wish for options other than that proposed. |

The future of the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group

Executive summary

1. The Countering Political Extremism Resource Group (CPERG) was set up by the Methodist Council to run until the summer of 2014. This paper looks at what the group has achieved. It suggests that the political context has changed so that the requirements of such a group are now different. It proposes that the group should be reconstituted to become a “standing group” offering advice and support to the Connexion and Connexional Team where needed.

Background

2. CPERG was set up by the Methodist Council in 2010 to act as a sounding board on issues relating to political extremism, to motivate local churches and provide web resources for them, and to emphasise the importance of voting as a way of preventing extremist parties from being elected. It was set up as an ecumenical group with URC, Baptist, Anglican and Catholic representatives, and has been supported by the Joint Public Issues Team.
3. During its time it has: maintained the Methodist political extremism website; ensured it has kept up to date with news and developments; provided resources for churches, for example briefings on the numerous emerging extremist groups, and what to do if the English Defence League (EDL) plans activity in your area; and promoted prayers and briefings advance of the local and European elections. In addition the group has provided advice on issues such as whether the UK Independence Party (UKIP) should be considered an extremist political party, and has taken action such as writing to Ofcom over a British National Party advert.
4. The group has been valuable in gathering together expertise and co-ordinating activity across the denominations. It has also had representation from the *Who is your Neighbour?* project, a Methodist funded initiative which works in areas where there is the potential for intolerance, challenging divisive narratives.
5. The costs of the group have been limited: the group has met physically once or at most twice a year for a day, using teleconference and email for other contacts. These costs have been absorbed by the Joint Public Issues Team. The main cost has been in the time of JPIT staff in administering the group and writing the resources and web pages for the group.
6. The group has now come to the end of its term, as set by the Methodist Council, so a decision needs to be taken over the future of the group.

The political landscape

7. The landscape has changed since 2010. The British National Party has imploded, losing most of its councillors. Other politically extreme groups are fractured and much less of a political force. The English Defence League and other socially extreme groups are still active in some local areas and on social media. UKIP, which the Methodist Conference has agreed does not come under the same banner of political extremism, but promotes a narrative which may appeal to people with politically extreme views, is rising in the polls and has the prospect of significant gains in the general election.

Options for the future of the group

8. There are three potential options for the group:
 - a. Obviously the group could be wound up and this area of work could be discontinued, especially as the context in which the group was established has changed so much. The Joint Public Issues Team would maintain the political extremism website and continue to write election briefings.
 - b. However it should not be imagined that the pernicious threat of political extremism has gone away. Racist groups are still present on the fringes of political activity and on social media. The group could remain as an informal group, ready to offer advice, the membership of which may change to reflect circumstances. This group would be ready to advise the Connexional Team or the wider Church should there be a resurgence of the kind of overt political extremism witnessed recently. As such it would not normally be required to meet, but instead members would keep in touch with developments and be ready to respond where necessary. JPIT would convene this group and be a conduit for any advice offered. If the group believed a new issue was emerging it would also be possible to convene a meeting of an *ad hoc* group drawing on the experience of this group and the wider Connexion and beyond to resource the necessary action.
 - c. A new working group could be set up to help the Church to respond to the context of a pervasive narrative of fear of the other, particularly migrants, which is being exploited by minor and growing parties, but which is increasingly present within mainstream political rhetoric. This would be a completely new piece of work.
9. There are two key questions: how does the Methodist Church feel it needs to be resourced, locally and nationally, in terms of dealing with racist extremism in today's society; and how should such work be supported. The three options above clearly offer different outcomes for the Church, and require different levels of support. Options a and b are manageable within JPIT's current budget and workload. Option c would require a reprioritisation of the workplan (to be agreed with the other partner denominations in JPIT) and/or additional funding.
10. The recommendation is that an informal advisory group is established to support the Methodist Church in responding to political extremism should it be required. The group, consisting of existing CPERG group members with appropriate additions, would ensure that the Connexional Team is up to date with developments so that it can take action where necessary. This group would not need to be established by the Council, but would be an informal group, with ecumenical participation, supported by JPIT. This also leaves open the door for *ad hoc* consultation meetings where necessary.

***RESOLUTIONS

- 18/1. The Council thanks past and present members of the Countering Political Extremism Resource Group for their work in support of the Methodist Church's belief that "racism is a denial of the gospel" [SO 013B].
- 18/2. The Council agrees to establish an informal ecumenical group, as set out in option b of the report, to advise the Methodist Church, and other denominations if appropriate, on responding to the threat of political extremism when such advice is required.