

Them and Us: Us and Them

A comparison of the inter-faith understanding of Irish Methodists in the early nineteenth century with interfaith attitudes at the start of the twenty-first century

Stephen Skuce
Cliff College

1 What were the first Irish Methodist inter-faith references?

Wesley's inter-faith experiences within Ireland were understandably very limited and when he visited what he was told was a Druid temple he made no significant comment.¹ When faced with riots in Cork Wesley wrote to the city's mayor about the inhabitants that, 'Neither do I desire anything of them but to be treated, I will not say as a clergyman, a gentleman or a Christian, but with such justice and humanity as are due to a Jew, a Turk or a Pagan.'² Wesley's letter to Toplady about the Unitarian John Taylor, whom he met in Cork, declared that, 'I ... believe no single person since Mohamet has given such wound to Christianity as Dr Taylor.'³ In Limerick the crowd were 'wild as the untaught Indian's brood'.⁴

2 How did early Irish Methodist missionaries consider people of other faith?

The significance of Irish Methodists to world Methodism and especially the British Methodist Missionary movement has been well documented by Norman Taggart.⁵ Some early views will be grouped in three categories.

2:1 Rigidly Exclusive

John McKenny (1788-1847) was an example of a rigidly exclusive approach. A life-long missionary, McKenny served in Cape Colony in modern day South Africa from 1814 to 1816, then in what was known as Ceylon from 1816 to 1835 and finally in New South Wales, Australia from 1836 to 1847. It was mostly in Ceylon that McKenny encountered living non-Christian religions and there he viewed Buddhism as a 'system of heathenism' where 'minds are bound by powerful chains'.⁶ Engaging evangelistically with the Buddhist population he described a priest who was interested in Christianity as 'a very shrewd and clever man, but rooted of course, in his errors'.⁷ Controversy with Buddhists was welcomed and he encouraged tracts to be written

¹ *Works*, Vol. 23, Journal, 14 May 1785.

² *Letters*, Vol. 3, 27 May 1750 to the Mayor of Cork.

³ *Letters*, Vol. 4, 9 December 1758 to Augustus Toplady.

⁴ *Works*, Vol. 23, Journal, 14 May 1785. The line is a quote from Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Shepherd of souls' (Hymn 31 from *Hymns for those that seek and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ*, 1747).

⁵ Taggart, N.W., *The Irish in World Methodism 1760-1900*, (London: Epworth, 1986).

⁶ Methodist Missionary Society Archives, McKenny, 26 September 1831.

⁷ *Missionary Notices*, November 1819, p. 166.

opposing the religion.

Other prominent Irish Methodists from this early period include William Butler (1818-1899) who worked in India and Mexico and John Barry (1792-1838) who worked in Canada, Jamaica and Bermuda. Both held the view that other religions were deficient and that all people needed to turn to Christ. Yet theirs was not a crusading zeal that ignored all other considerations. When Barry was baptising a Jewish convert in Jamaica he did so ‘without publicity so as not to upset her mother’.⁸ In Canada the Irish Methodist James Elliott (1815-1892) ‘played an important part in the conversion of Charles Freshman, for many years Rabbi of the Jewish synagogue in Quebec’.⁹ From this activity of evangelism towards Jews it may be deduced what the early Irish Methodist attitude towards other religions in Ireland might have been. In the nineteenth century the only non-Christian population in Ireland was the Jewish community, who only became statistically significant by the end of the century. It can be presumed that a similar understanding was held towards other religions both within and outside of Ireland in the nineteenth century. It was an evangelical zeal tempered with practical and pastoral considerations.

Perhaps the most notable Irish Methodist exponent of this view was William Arthur (1819-1901).¹⁰ Described by Davey as ‘brilliant and saintly’,¹¹ Arthur was one of a number of Irish Methodists who made a very significant impact on British Methodism. His lifespan matched that of Queen Victoria and he neatly straddled the period from the pioneering days of Coke to the start of the twentieth century, although his missionary work in Gubbi, India lasted only from 1839 to 1841 before his recall to Britain due to ill health.¹²

Arthur understood the Hinduism he observed in India to be ‘idolatry’ in which people were ‘hopeless and unholy’.¹³ Taggart comments on Arthur’s ridiculing of the variety of Hindu objects of worship and that ‘he never actually entered a Hindu Temple. To have done so, he would have been required to remove his shoes. That, he believed, would have compromised his position, implying acceptance in some sense of other gods.’¹⁴ While he seemed to believe that all religion stemmed from a common faith existing at the time of Noah his view of Hinduism was ‘overwhelmingly negative’,¹⁵ it was a ‘libel creed’ filled with ‘grim gods’,¹⁶ and that without

⁸ Taggart, N., *The Irish in World Methodism*, p.151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰ For a full treatment of Arthur’s life and ministry see Taggart, N. *William Arthur: First Among Methodists* (London: Epworth, 1993).

¹¹ Davey, C., *The March of Methodism*, p. 72.

¹² Despite eye and speech problems, for the rest of his life Arthur was in constant demand throughout the Wesleyan connexion as a public speaker and preacher. A prolific writer, he was stationed in France from 1847 to 1849, being present during the Socialist upheavals and, partially due to his continuing poor health, he was appointed a Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS). Later he was elected President of the British Conference, the second youngest to occupy that position. After a return to Ireland from 1868 to 1871 as President of the newly established Methodist College in Belfast, Arthur returned to England as an Honorary Secretary of the WMMS until his eventual retirement to Cannes in France.

¹³ Arthur, W., *A Mission to the Mysore*, (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1847), pp. 36, 63. He could also use similar comments about Roman Catholics, see p. 137.

¹⁴ Taggart, N., *William Arthur*, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Arthur, W., *Women’s Work in India*, p. 46.

Christ there was no salvation. While Arthur showed some respect for Indian culture in lamenting the change from Indian to English names that converts often underwent¹⁷ he showed a latent anti-semitism when describing the jewellery worn by wealthy Indian women. They were ‘glistening with gems rich enough to excite the envy of a Jewess’.¹⁸

Perhaps the most remarkable early Methodist inter-faith encounter in Ireland occurred in Dublin in 1791 through the ministry of Adam Clarke. Crookshank recounts the story as follows:

A Turkish merchant, called Ibrahim Ben Ali, who, arriving in the city, and knowing but little English, inquired for anyone who understood either Arabic or Spanish. He was a native of Constantinople, near to which his father, a strict Mahometan, resided on a large estate. Among the many slaves he possessed were several Spaniards, who frequently spoke to Ibrahim of the God of the Christians, and of Jesus Christ, telling him that Mahomet was a false prophet and his teaching untrue. After numerous remarkable vicissitudes, at length this young man visited Ireland, and thus became acquainted with Mr Clarke, and was instructed by him more fully in the way of salvation. In the course of a few months, at his own earnest request, he was admitted to the Sacrament of baptism, which was administered in Whitefriar street chapel by Mr Rutherford, while Mr Clarke translated the service into Spanish. This Christian Turk continued to maintain a consistent character until his death.¹⁹

The Irish understanding of this incident appears to have been that Christianity was right and Islam wrong, consequently Ibrahim needed to be saved from Islam as much as saved for Christianity. He needed to be informed of the ‘falsehood’ of Islam as much as the truth of Christianity.

2:2 Evangelical Views

The most significant early Irish Methodist was Adam Clarke 1760-1832.²⁰ A ‘protégé of Wesley himself’²¹ Clarke was President of the British Conference three times and President of the Irish Conference on four occasions.²² Considered one of the most important Methodists in the generation following Wesley,²³ Clarke spent some years as a missionary in Jersey²⁴ and had oversight of missionary work in the Shetland Islands. In 1790 Clarke was one of nine members of a Missionary Committee and as President of the British Conference he supported the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁹ Crookshank, C.H., *History of Methodism in Ireland*, p. 32-33.

²⁰ The date of birth is not certain with Clarke’s mother’s recollection being two years earlier than that of his father.

²¹ Taggart, N., *The Irish in World Methodism*, p. 87. Heitzenrater describes Clarke as ‘an assiduous scholar and friend of Wesley.’ Heitzenrater, R.P., *The Elusive Mr Wesley: John Wesley as seen by Contemporary Biographers*, (Nashville, Tn: Abingdon, 1984), p. 177. Turner sees him as ‘a fine, if occasionally eccentric, scholar.’ Turner, J.M., *John Wesley: The*

Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England, (London: Epworth, 2002), p. 92. Clarke was one of seven trustees of Wesley’s books and personal property and was buried close by his mentor.

²² President of British Conference: 1806, 1814, 1822. President of Irish Conference: 1811, 1812, 1816, 1822.

²³ Clarke was noted for his breadth of education and his eight volume Bible commentary remains in print. Langford describes Clarke as ‘one of the most important theologians of early Methodism.’ Langford, T.A., *Practical Divinity: Readings in Wesleyan Theology* (Revised), Nashville, Tn: Abingdon, 1999), p. 22.

²⁴ Clarke’s appointment to Jersey in 1786 made him one of Methodism’s first missionaries.

establishment of the first Methodist District Missionary Committees. Known for his scholarship which included a ‘passion for oriental literature’,²⁵ it was Clarke who was approached by Wilberforce leading to Clarke’s proposal of a foreign mission to Ceylon at the 1811 British Conference, which ultimately led to Coke’s 1814 mission.²⁶

In 1818 Clarke was asked to give Christian instruction to two Ceylonese Buddhist priests.²⁷ His approach to them was based on the understanding that ‘Christianity is indubitably true, comes immediately from God and cannot be successfully controverted’, and that ‘other systems of religion are false or forged; and on them no man can rely, but at the utter risk of his salvation’.²⁸ While Clarke viewed Christianity as the way to God,²⁹ the Holy Spirit was still at work in the consciences of all people.³⁰ God would judge people in different ways and so while Christians were judged by the gospel the Jews were judged by the law and the Muslims by their rejection of the gospel.³¹

The uniqueness of Christ was clear to Clarke. His ‘personal creed’ included, ‘By no other person, and in no other way, can the lost soul of man be rescued from the filth of sin and the fangs of Satan.’³² RH Gallagher quotes from a letter from Clarke to Newstead that summarises Clarke’s view:

I have conversed with, and have seen many people, in and from different countries: I have studied the principle systems of the world: I have read much, thought much and reasoned much... And while I think well of, and wish well to all religions, and sects and parties, and especially to all who love our Lord Jesus in sincerity, yet from a long and thorough knowledge of the subject, I am led most conscientiously to conclude, that Christianity, as existing among those called Wesleyan Methodists is the purest, the safest, and that which is most to God’s glory, and the benefit of mankind.³³

2:3 Inclusive Views

A surprisingly early advocate of this view was James Lynch (1775-1858), part of the original

²⁵ Newness, T.M., *The Life of Revd Adam Clarke* (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1858), p. 235.

²⁶ Davey, C., *Mad About Mission*, p. 110.

²⁷ The passage for these two priests, Adam Seth Goona Munhi Rathana and Alexander Dherma Rama, was paid by Sir Alexander Johnston, Chief Justice of Ceylon. They lived with Clarke for two years and were baptised by him in Brunswick Chapel, Liverpool on 12 March 1820. It is recorded that ‘During the service Dr. Clarke thrilled the congregation by putting his hands on their heads as he gave out the lines – “See these sinful worms of earth, Bless to them the cleansing flood”.’ Moscrop, T. & Restarick, A.E., *Ceylon and Its Methodism*, (London: Robert Culley, 1907), p. 51-52.

²⁸ *Missionary Notices*, March 1819, p. 35.

²⁹ Clarke was an active member of the British and Foreign Bible Society, helping in the publication of Bibles in numerous languages but especially in Arabic to assist the evangelisation of Muslims. See Newness, T.M., *The Life of Revd Adam Clarke*, (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1858), pp. 170-172.

³⁰ Clarke, A., *Principles of the Christian Religion*, (London: T H Kelly, 1820), p. 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³² Newness, T.M., *Adam Clarke*, p. 321.

³³ Gallagher, R.H., *Adam Clarke: Saint and Scholar*, (Belfast: Wesley Historical Society (Irish Branch), 1965), pp. 90-91.

missionary group led by Coke.³⁴ Taggart comments that ‘Lynch’s attitude towards the followers of other faiths was more open than might have been expected’.³⁵ Lynch was able to view Hindu worship as that offered to the invisible God the Hindus worshipped and not as idol worship which was the prevalent view and the view held by William Arthur during his time in India twenty years later. Lynch had difficulty with an exclusive understanding that the accident of birth would determine eternal salvation if that person had no knowledge of Jesus. He wrote that, ‘Children and heathens may be saved through the merits of the Lord Jesus though both may have been guilty of actions and of Idolatry which would be of a damning nature in one who had and was capable of understanding the law of God.’³⁶ Lynch still worked evangelistically among people of other faiths, but did so with an understanding and respect that was not the norm at the time.

There appear to have been no significant pluralist voices in Irish Methodism during the period in question. The consistent thread through it all was the view that, despite differences of emphasis, Christ was God’s chosen way to bring salvation to the world. This superiority was so much that there was no possibility of salvation outside of Christianity, but God could still work through other religions to bring awareness of the need of salvation. Other religions might have been described in stark languages but they were sincere attempts to understand God and so needed to be respected rather than just demonised. Early voices such as Lynch pointed to a more inclusive possibility but in a very generalised way all the material analysed points to an exclusive understanding, tempered by a relatively sensitive approach.

So, how does this compare to the 2003 perspective?

3 Survey of Contemporary Irish Methodist Inter-Faith Attitudes

3:1 Methodology

In June 2003 a questionnaire was circulated to all Irish Methodist ministers who were in Conference appointed positions, a total of 116. Ministers excluded from the survey included those who were retired and those who were without pastoral charge. Prior to this, prospective questions had been discussed with a number of interested parties to highlight any ambiguities.³⁷

³⁴ A former Roman Catholic, Lynch joined the Irish Methodist ministry in 1808 and was a member of the first group of Methodist missionaries led by Thomas Coke to Ceylon. Upon Coke’s death Lynch was elected leader and chaired the first ‘conference’ in Ceylon that directed the missionaries to their individual areas. In 1817 he was appointed to Madras where a small group of Christians had requested a Methodist missionary. Lynch’s inability to master Tamil and disagreements with the Missionary Committee in London led to his return to Ireland where he served in circuits until retirement. Lynch influenced William Butler who later founded the American Methodist Episcopal Church’s mission to North India in the 1840s and helped establish their mission in Mexico.

³⁵ Taggart, N., *The Irish in World Methodism*, p. 109. Lynch is also described as ‘somewhat in advance of his time in his tolerant attitude to members of other faiths’ in Cooney, D.L., *The Methodist in Ireland: A Short History*, (Blackrock: Columba Press, 2001), p. 241. The attitude of British Methodist missionaries to Ceylon at this time are found in Coplans, B.A.R., *Methodism and Sinhalese Buddhism: the Wesleyan Encounter with Buddhism in Ceylon, 1814-1864, with special reference to the work of Robert Spence Hardy* (PhD, University of Leeds, 1980)

³⁶ Methodist Missionary Society Archives, Lynch, 23 June 1820.

³⁷ Care was taken to phrase questions in ways that would be appropriate to the Irish Methodist ministry and so in question eight of the ministers’ questionnaire the phrase ‘Scriptures of non-Christian religions’ was used. While ‘sacred writings’ could have been an appropriate designation it was felt that ‘scripture’ better conveyed the meaning

Care was taken to avoid open questions, biased questions, vague wording or broad questions. A pilot survey was then carried out among the ministers of the Dublin District. After this no significant changes were made to the questions, although a covering letter spelt out more clearly the purpose of the questionnaire. Space was left for respondents to supply additional information on inter-faith involvement and awareness.³⁸

The finalised questionnaire contained two sections: section A was to be completed by the minister on behalf of his/her circuit or society, section B was to be completed by the minister based on her/his personal views. A covering letter explained the purpose, scope and rationale of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was hand-delivered to all ministers attending Conference, with the hope that it would be returned before Conference ended to assist in obtaining a high response rate, and posted to any not attending Conference. About six weeks later a second copy of the questionnaire was circulated to those who were perceived not to have responded. Although the questionnaire could be completed anonymously most chose to indicate their name and circuit.

There were 89 responses from a total of 116 resulting in an acceptable response rate of 77%. Given the small size of the sample a response rate of at least 70% was desired to ensure the findings could be considered indicative of overall opinions.

No regional bias was detected. Given the regular movement of ministers between districts that was to be expected, however some churches are in areas where there have been other faith communities for 100 years while others are in areas which have had virtually no other faith presence until very recent years, if at all.

3:2 Survey Findings - Church Results

Irish Methodist ministers have definite opinions. The 'don't know' category was consistently small, the highest return being 12% with an average of just 6.7%. Given the nature of Irish, and especially Northern Irish, society, it is not that surprising that ministers expressed fairly strong opinions on a subject that many acknowledge they have had relatively little direct involvement. Overall there is little Irish Methodist interest in other faith groups. Only 27% of ministers have had other faith experience, and supplementary information points to much of that involvement taking place outside Ireland. Circuits have little awareness of non-faith communities in their midst, only 19% have had even minimal contact in the past and only 12% have any proposed contact. Ministers perceive that 82% of Methodists have a low level of knowledge of other religions and only 21% of circuits have held any studies or discussions on non-Christian religions.

1 Are there any significant non-Christian faith communities within your circuit area, that you

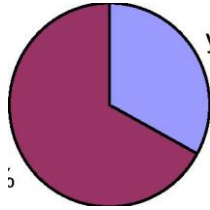
of the question and avoided appearing to make a distinction between 'scripture' and 'sacred writing'.

³⁸ For a more general survey into Irish inter-faith attitudes see MacGriell, M., *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited*, (Maynooth: Survey and Research Unit of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996) pp. 200-223. See also Cassidy, E.G., 'Modernity and Religion in Ireland: 1980-2000' in Cassidy, E.G. (ed), *Measuring Ireland: Discerning Values and Beliefs* (Dublin: Veritas, 2002), pp. 17-45.

are aware of?

yes 33%

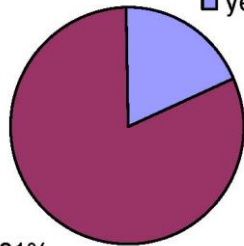
no 67%



2 Has your circuit/society had any contact with other faith communities in the past?



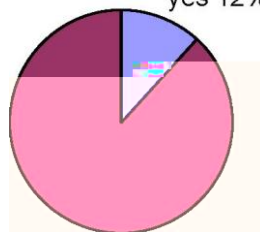
yes 19%



no 81%

3 Has your circuit/society any current or planned contact with other faith communities?

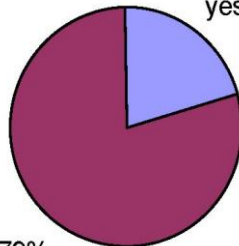
yes 12%



no 88%

4 Has your circuit/society held any discussions in the general area of non-Christians religions?

yes 21%



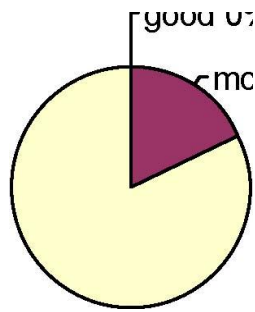
no 79%

5 How would you assess the level of knowledge of other religions that members of your circuit/society currently have?

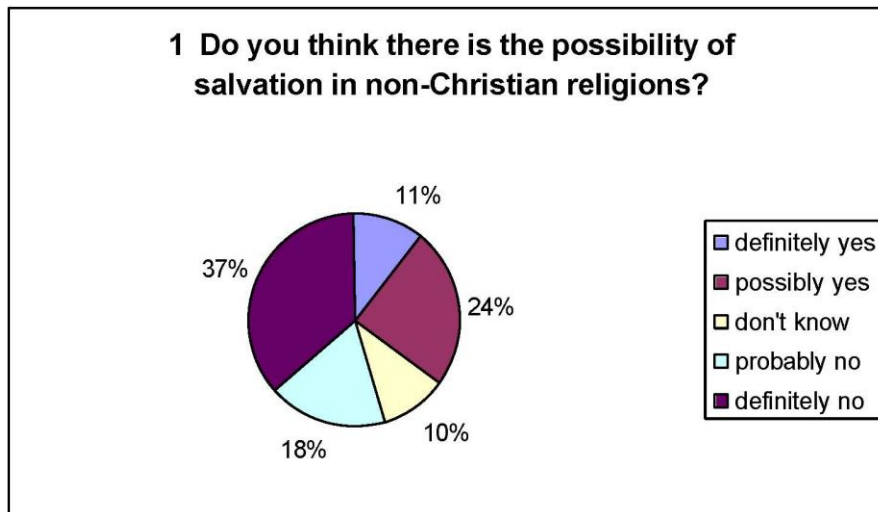
good 0%

moderate 18%

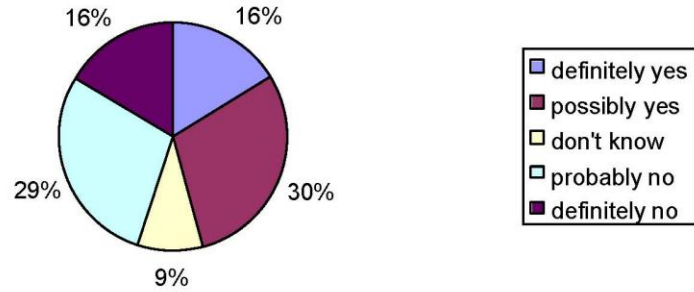
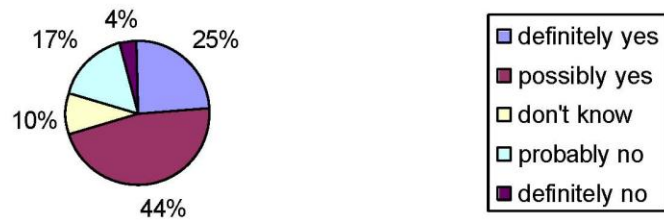
low 82%



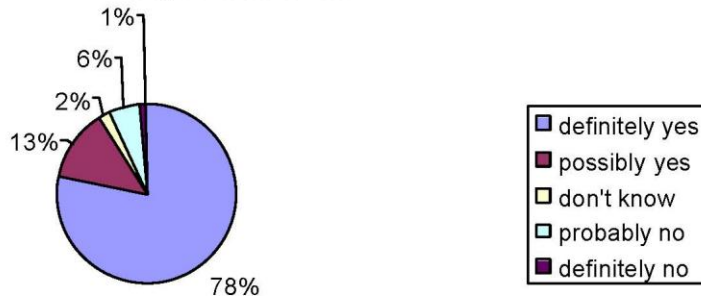
Overall, the results support the view that Irish Methodism is a largely conservative and evangelistic denomination. The validity of evangelism towards people of other faiths within Ireland was definitely or possibly supported by 89% and evangelism beyond Ireland by 91%. The pluralist option of all religions being equal ways to God was approved by just 3%, whereas 83% were definite this was not the case, with another 11% thinking this was probably not the case, giving 94% disagreeing with this possibility. This points to evangelism in practice but not necessarily evangelical theological views, although some would presume that the two normally go together. However, given the Wesleyan pragmatic activism, there could be a case for arguing that within Methodism, more than other denominations, practice and theological reflection do not necessarily have a watertight connection. This same argument is relevant in the response to the questions dealing with inter-faith worship and involvement in marriage services.



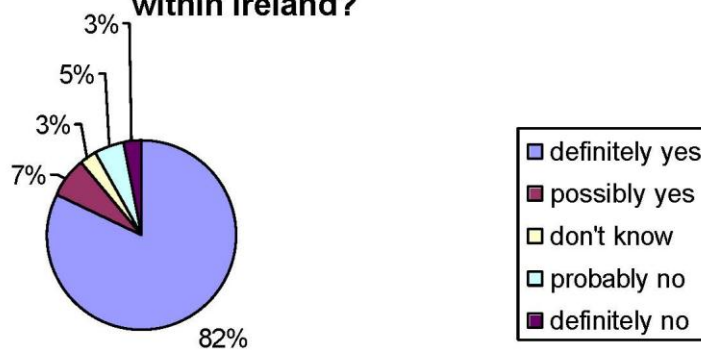
Inter-faith worship was a problematic issue for many, despite the MCI having clear, conference-approved guidelines. The ministry was equally divided on their participation in such an occasion, although for most this was an academic question as the reality had not been met. A more pastoral response was detected in relation to an inter-faith marriage with 70% possibly or definitely happy to participate with a leader from another faith. These two responses may appear inconsistent when taken together but a compassionate response to a pastoral situation that overrules a prior doctrinal position is understandable in a ministry whose members are virtually all working in pastoral contexts.

2 Would you participate in inter-faith worship?**3 Would you participate in a wedding ceremony between a Methodist and a person of another faith, along with a religious leader of that other faith community?**

4 Should Irish Methodism be engaged in evangelism towards followers of other religions beyond Ireland?



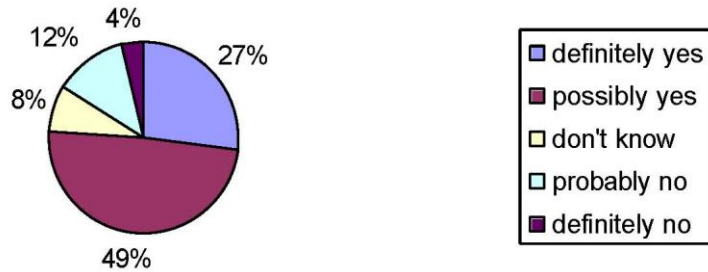
5 Should Irish Methodism be engaged in evangelism towards followers of other religions within Ireland?



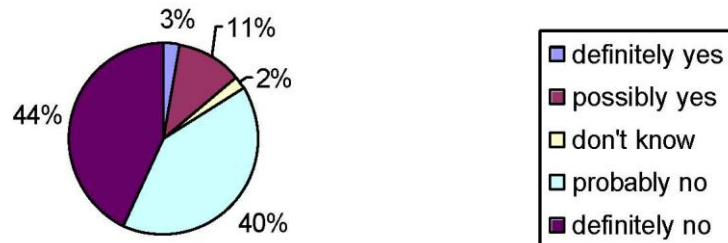
However, the reverse can be seen with regard to the use of premises. A total of 76% are definitely or possibly happy for other faith groups to use Methodist premises for community events but only 14% possibly or definitely agreed to this if worship was involved. Definite or probable opposition to other faith worship in Methodist premises came from 83%. Here doctrine seems to triumph over pastoral opportunities to the wider community, although some who opposed other faith worship did suggest on their form that if a mosque or synagogue had been destroyed, either accidentally or deliberately, then they might reconsider. A significant section of Irish Methodism, primarily in Northern Ireland, may struggle to respond positively to a request from a Roman Catholic group to use Methodist premises. Anecdotal evidence points to some finding it easier to allow other faiths to use premises than to allow Roman Catholics.³⁹

³⁹ Several respondents commented to this effect, with written comments followed up by conversations

6 Should Irish Methodism allow Methodist property to be used by other faith communities for non-religious purposes?

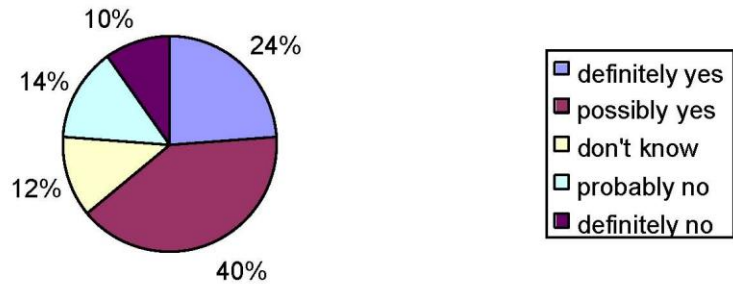


7 Should Irish Methodism allow Methodist property to be used by other faith communities for religious purposes?

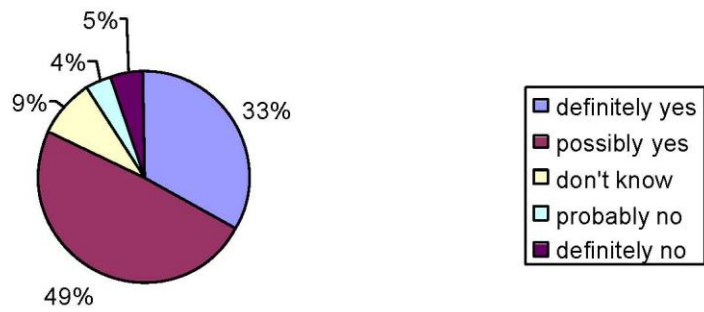


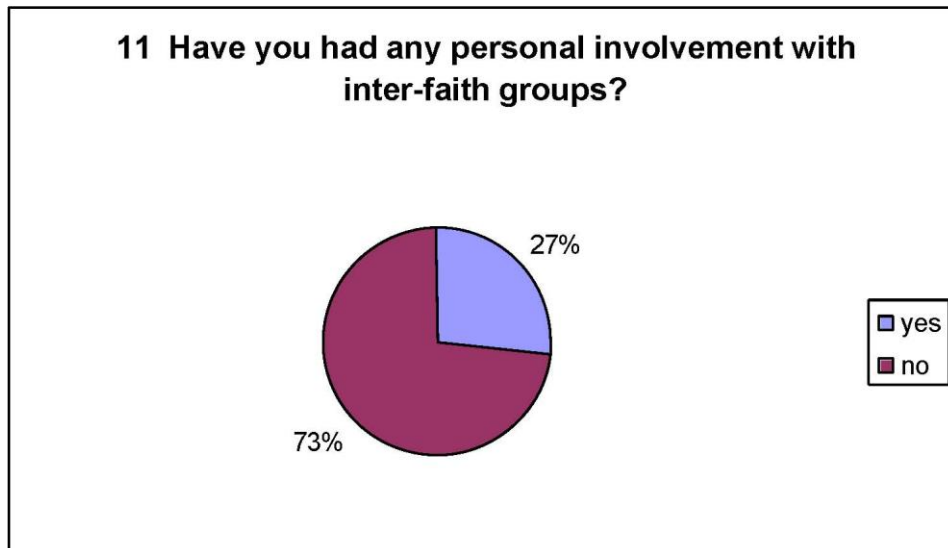
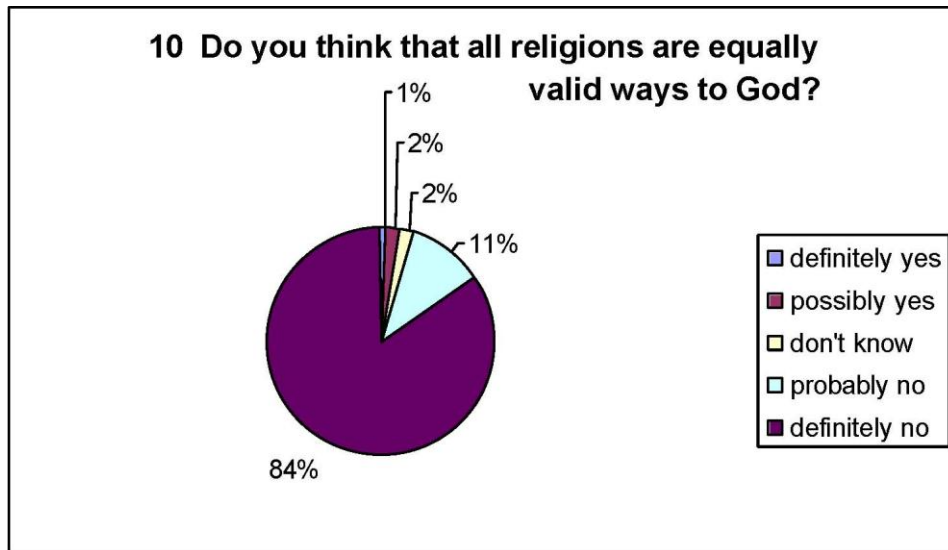
Irish Methodism clearly considers God to be at work through other faiths, even if those faiths are not equal with Christianity in their relationship to God. A total of 64% thought that God probably or definitely spoke through the Scriptures of other religions and 82% considered that God works through non-Christians religions today. The possibility of salvation through other faiths was either definitely or possibly there for 35%, although 37% definitely discounted this. These are surprisingly high figures, especially when considered in light of Irish Methodism's historic inter-faith views. A parallel can be drawn between these findings and Methodist ecumenical response. Conference votes show that Irish Methodism strongly supports ecumenism in theory with large majorities voting for involvement in ecumenical bodies, however in practice there are many Methodist congregations which have had no active ecumenical involvement involving Roman Catholics. This is primarily in Northern Ireland where the political context and presence of numerous small fundamentalist churches opposed to ecumenism has made active ecumenism problematic. In this survey Irish Methodism has shown a willingness to see God at work beyond Christianity but with little active involvement with people of other faith.

8 Do you think God speaks through the Scriptures of non-Christian religions today?



9 Do you think God works through non-Christian religions today?





4 Conclusion

For the twenty-first century Irish Methodist Church God is at work, to some extent, in and through people of other faiths but salvation is found only through Christ, consequently evangelising people of other faith is necessary.

The extreme attitudes of exclusivity and pluralism have little support but what is notable is the continuation of a largely exclusive approach to people of other faiths. It may have moved from the harshness of Arthur's approach to the greater generosity of Clarke. Yet overall the evangelical approach has been maintained across two hundred years.