

The Theology and Practice of the Peace

Theology of the Peace

The Peace is a greeting in an act of worship to exchange ‘the peace of the Lord’ between the person conducting the service and the people, and often then among those present using words and, if appropriate, a suitable gesture. Since the Peace points towards the divine purpose to bring all things into unity in Christ (see, for example, 2 Corinthians 5:19), is a means of reconciliation within the Christian community (see Matthew 5:23-24), and celebrates the ‘unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:3) already given to the Church, it may be seen as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the peace of God’s kingdom.

Two of the gospels record the risen Jesus greeting his disciples with peace (Luke 24:36 and John 20:19, 21, and 26). During his ministry, Jesus sent out his disciples telling them to greet households with peace (see, for example, Luke 10:5). The gospels also record Jesus declaring God’s blessing on peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and offering peace to others at a time of parting (see, for example, Mark 5:34, Luke 7:50, and John 14:27).

The Peace is a sharing in the peace of God ‘which surpasses all understanding’ (Philippians 4:7). It is a gift from ‘the God of peace’ (see, for example, Romans 15:33 and Hebrews 13:20). It is also part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). This peace is not simply the absence of strife or noise but, drawing on the root meaning of *shalom* in the Hebrew scriptures, is marked by wholeness and well-being. (This is a theologically rich concept, and there is much more that can be said about these scriptural roots than is offered here.) By sharing this peace in the name of Christ, both within and beyond those who gather for worship, the Church follows the example of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

The Peace was a feature of worship in the early Church and is referred to in the New Testament as the ‘holy kiss’ or ‘kiss of love’ (see, for example, Romans 16:16 and 1 Peter 5:14). It was introduced to British Methodism as a fruit of the Liturgical Movement in ‘The Sunday Service’ of 1968 and 1974, which was included in *The Methodist Service Book* of 1975; as there, it is usually associated with celebrations of Holy Communion. Nevertheless, it is sometimes included in other forms of service (see, for example, the second of the ‘Morning, Afternoon, or Evening Services’ in *The Methodist Worship Book (MWB)*, p. 43).

The position of the Peace in Holy Communion is variable and can emphasize one or more particular aspects of it: Placed at the start of the service, it expresses the unity of the people as they gather to share in worship (see, for example, ‘Holy Communion in a Home or Hospital’ in *MWB*, p. 223). Placed after the intercession, it puts the seal on the prayers and expresses the unity of the people in prayer (see, for example, ‘Holy Communion during Ordinary Seasons (First Service)’ in *MWB*, p. 189); in this position, as in the next, it may also be in close relation to the Creed which is another expression of unity. Placed before the offertory, it reminds us of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:23-24 about the need for reconciliation before the offering of gifts (see, for example, ‘Holy Communion during Ordinary Seasons (Third Service)’ in *MWB*, p. 215). Placed just before the breaking of the bread and reception of communion, it emphasizes that the sharing of the bread and wine is based on and expresses the unity and mutual love of the people. Placed after communion and before the dismissal, it proclaims that the peace enjoyed in the Christian community is to be shared with the whole of humanity (see, for example, Hebrews 12:14) and, indeed, creation. Examples of these placements can be found in *Common Worship* (Church of England), *the Roman Missal* (Roman Catholic Church), *Book of Common Order* (Church of Scotland), the *URC Service Book* and the liturgies of the Iona Community.

The theology of the Peace is articulated through its practice as an enacted, and not only verbal, piece of liturgy. Like the sharing of bread and wine, the sharing of the Peace is inclusive of those who are non-verbal

in a way that remains relatively unusual in our liturgy as a whole. Thus it is, in itself, a means of reconciliation and not an empty gesture: we use our bodies to express and to bring about our reconciled identity as the Body of Christ. Truly, in a very physical sense, it is the 'sign, instrument, and foretaste of the peace of God's kingdom.' By the same token, it is important that the way in which the sharing of the Peace is enacted be such that the participants experience it as something that is indeed inclusive, and does not cause harm for any for whom physical interactions may be difficult due to experiences of abuse or for other reasons. This is addressed in the guidance on Sharing the Peace below.

Another way in which one or more particular aspects of the Peace can be emphasized is through introductory words drawn from scripture. Some of the introductory words included in *The Methodist Worship Book* speak of the purpose of God for all creation (see, for example, 'Holy Communion for Lent and Passiontide', p. 153), some point to the need for reconciliation (see, for example, 'An Order of Service for Healing and Wholeness', p. 413), and some rejoice in the unity of the Christian community (see, for example, 'Holy Communion for the Day of Pentecost and Times of Renewal in the Life of the Church', p. 177). Some of the introductory words are also of a seasonal nature (see, for example 'Holy Communion for Christmas and Epiphany', p. 135) or are thematic (see, for example, 'The Covenant Service', p. 291). The introductory words to the Peace included in *The Methodist Worship Book* do not form an exhaustive collection and other appropriate forms are provided at the end of this document.

Sharing the Peace

The practice of sharing the Peace is varied within Methodism and it provokes a range of reactions. For some people, it is an important expression of community, fellowship, and reconciliation. For others, in the ways in which the sharing of the Peace has often been practised, it can be intrusive and unwelcome. As noted above, the sharing of the Peace, where possible, in a physically enacted way is nonetheless important to its theological purpose. It is therefore important for churches to reflect carefully on how we do this, taking into account cultural factors and the ethos of a particular church.

It will often be found beneficial, within each local congregation, for there to be recognised a particular local practice for sharing the Peace, and for this to be communicated in a clear way to congregations when they worship. This can serve firstly to ensure that the approach taken is appropriate to any particular local circumstances, including any potential safeguarding considerations. Secondly, it enables worshippers to feel confident in their understanding of what they are expected to do when the moment for sharing the Peace occurs, and avoid the potentially jarring or excluding experience of simply not knowing quite what is 'the done thing'.

The following paragraphs outline the key practical issues around the sharing of the Peace, propose a selection of ways in which it may be done, and offer some pointers for local congregations in how they might consider what is appropriate in each context.

Previously established practices

Pre-Covid, in some churches, many worshippers moved around throughout the congregation, exchanging handshakes sometimes hugging one another. In other churches, people shared the words and possibly handshakes with those who sat nearby. Many churches were somewhere in between, but with an increasing tendency for people to move beyond those sitting immediately around them to share signs and words of Peace.

In light of Covid-19, many people are still being cautious, remaining in their seats sharing the Peace using socially distanced waves, elbow bumps or other signs of greeting. Some may be eager to resume previous customs, while others may not.

There are a number of issues around the sharing of the Peace which predate the Covid-19 pandemic, but which have been highlighted again as restrictions on social contact have been lifted.

Boundaries

In some churches, people are asked to respect personal boundaries and not to hug one another. Shaking hands is generally accepted as less intrusive.

This is a difficult area and can be a potential safeguarding issue. Respecting others is key. Following the changes imposed by Covid related restrictions, some worshippers may now feel more able to indicate that they would prefer not to revert to previous customs for sharing the Peace.

The lifting of restrictions gives a fresh opportunity for people to be asked or reminded to respect personal boundaries. Each situation will be different but it might be necessary to acknowledge it directly within worship. Opportunities might also arise for a sensitive discussion at a church meeting or in pastoral conversation.

Inclusivity

As noted above, sharing the Peace is intended as a reminder of our unity as the Body of Christ and a means of reconciliation. While sharing the Peace offers an opportunity to greet friends within the congregation, it can also have a deeper significance in encouraging worshippers to seek healing and reconciliation with others with whom they have been in conflict.

However, sharing the peace itself can also become a divisive action, for example if different signs of Peace are offered to different people. There may also be different cultural expectations within and between congregations about sharing the Peace.

Therefore, though it will usually be helpful for there to be a shared understanding of what 'the local practice' is, in some contexts it may be pastorally appropriate for that local practice to be the embracing of a diversity of options for sharing the Peace within the congregation, as long as it is clear to worshippers what those options are. So, while it is recommended that, where possible, all members of the congregation share the Peace in the same way, this is not absolutely essential. The most important thing is that worshippers have suitable clarity about what they are being invited to do. Nor is it essential for the Peace to be shared in the same way every time it is included in an act of worship.

Recommended practices

There are a number of ways in which the Peace might be shared today that commend themselves for use, according to local context. In most situations, the normal practice will be for worshippers to exchange with one another words such as, 'Peace be with you', accompanied by a physical gesture. The words may be spoken or sung, and the gesture may take a variety of forms. For the latter, the following three in particular are possible practices, which cater to varying sensitivities according to the considerations outlined above:

1. A handshake: This is the most widely recognised approach in recent decades and will still be suitable in many contexts. It has a very long pedigree as a natural gesture of human connection. Scripturally, it reminds us of the occasion in Jerusalem when James, Cephas, and John gave to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9).
2. BSL sign language: The British Sign Language hand sign for 'Peace be with you', shared between worshippers, makes for a very elegant and inclusive gesture which is easily learned. It carries the

liturgical force of an embodied act, yet avoids any need for physical contact between persons, and lends itself to widespread use. The sign, which uses both hands, can be described as follows:

- Begin with both hands in front of the body with palms facing out, hands open but touching each other at the thumb and index finger tips, and with the thumb and index fingers together.
- With thumb and index finger tips remaining together on each hand, draw the hands apart from each other by about a foot, as though straightening out a piece of string.
- Bring the hands back together to touch each other at the finger tips, then open both hands, palms upwards, towards the person you are greeting.

A short video of this sign can be viewed at www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/posts/peace-be-with-you-bsl

It will be easy, with some simple planning, for local congregations to learn this sign and incorporate it into their practice. It might be recommended, for example, to undertake a brief demonstration of the sign before the beginning of an act of worship when it is to be used.

3. Simply turning to one another, with no other physical gesture: While a physical gesture involving the hands will be appropriate in many contexts, there may be some where it is most appropriate simply to turn and greet one another verbally, in spoken words or in song. The sharing of eye-contact with one another while doing this can also be effective and meaningful as a means of embodying this act, as with both the approaches above. Here though there should be sensitivity to the fact that eye-contact itself can present difficulties for some, for example, due to experiences of abuse, or reasons of neurodiversity.

Attention is drawn to various musical forms that might be sung as part of sharing the Peace. These include, from *Singing the Faith*, numbers 768 'The peace of the Lord be always with you' and 774 'The peace of the earth be with you'; as well as the song 'Peace I leave' by John L. Bell (p. 116 in *A Wee Worship Book*, Wild Goose Publications).

There are yet other more creative ways of sharing the Peace that will be appropriate in some contexts.

These include the 'Shalom dance': This Shalom can be sung while dancing slowly in a circle, holding hands. It is necessary to devote time, perhaps fifteen minutes or so before the worship itself, to learn the songs and the dance. If children are involved, they might like to learn it in advance, so they are able to teach it to everyone else. The following is a guide, but may be adapted as appropriate to enable participation by individuals of all abilities.

The Shalom dance is easy! *Start by joining hands in a circle.*

Shalom, shalom, shalom, *three steps to the right (note main beat is on the 'lom!)*

My peace I give to you. *three steps to the left*

Shalom, shalom, shalom, shalom, *two steps inward, on the first and third shalom*

My peace I give to you. *two steps back, on peace and you.*

Sha - lom, sha - lom, sha - lom, My peace I give to you.

Sha - lom, sha - lom, sha - lom, sha - lom, My peace I give to you.

A Leaderless Eucharist, Annie Heppenstall, Copyright © Wild Goose Publications 2007

Education and consideration of local practice

Local churches should reflect carefully on the practice of the Peace, and on how they might best enact the *The Methodist Worship Book* rubric: 'The people may greet one another in the name of Christ'. In the course of such local reflection, attention should be given, with care to preserve appropriate confidentiality, to any local issues that may have a bearing from a safeguarding perspective. It is good practice for the local church to involve its safeguarding officer in conversations around this, as they will be aware of specific safeguarding concerns that may be present. Where there are particular challenges, it may be appropriate also to consult with the Circuit Safeguarding Officer.

In facilitating sensitive conversations about appropriate practice, it is helpful to encourage and enable congregations to learn more about the place of the Peace within Christian worship. Although learning is not the primary purpose of worship, it still gives an opportunity to grow in faith by learning more as part of our nurture and discipleship.

Fuller discussions might be facilitated in the context of a house group, worship consultation, Church Council, or whole congregations. Any conversations should begin with the above overview of the theology of the Peace having been read by or introduced to the group planning to discuss it. It is suggested that such conversations be encouraged to cover the following:

1. Discuss the meaning of Jesus's understanding of peace/shalom.
2. Discuss the New Testament references to peace and liturgical forms of the Peace in the early church.
3. Note how the liturgical movement brought this practice into use in most mainline churches and in Methodism through the 1975 *Methodist Service Book*.
4. Review what the practice(s) of the local congregation has been in recent years, and how members feel about this.
5. Think about how much that practice has been informed by theology or by other cultural ideas.
6. Discuss what effect both Covid and safeguarding considerations have had on the practice of the Peace in recent years.
7. Think about making recommendations to the local church (or churches) about how the Peace might now be practised, taking account of all the above.

Materials will be made available to resource and facilitate local conversations along these lines.

The Peace does not have to be overloaded with different purposes. The greeting people receive when arriving at or departing from worship and the opportunity to share fellowship over refreshments after a service can likewise have an important part to play in fostering a sense of community.

Summary

The Methodist Worship Book provides a permissive rubric ('The people may greet one another in the name of Christ') in most orders of service in which the Peace is included (with the exceptions of 'Holy Communion for Lent and Passiontide' and 'Holy Communion in a Home or a Hospital'). While this remains appropriate, there is opportunity for further reflection where this rubric has come to be interpreted as directive rather than permissive, or where particular customs for exchanging greetings may be the cause of tension or discomfort for members of the congregation. Such reflection should be encouraged, and where helpful, clear guidance given to worshippers about what the local practice is.

Additional introductions to the Peace

The following may be used to enrich the variety of ways in which the Peace may be introduced. They augment and complement the forms found in *The Methodist Worship Book*, by the use of biblical texts that draw especially on the Hebrew scriptures, and by the use of introductions taken from other sources. The Iona publications referenced may be obtained from www.ionabooks.com.

Each introduction is intended as a preface to the words:

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Advent

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the
messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who
announces salvation, who says to
Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

Isaiah 52:7

Christmas

A child has been born for us,
a Son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Lent

Note: For Lent, in order to accentuate the solemn, penitential character of the season, the rubric 'The people may greet one another...' is purposely omitted in the order for 'Holy Communion for Lent and Passiontide' in *The Methodist Worship Book*. This markedly pares down the physical and congregational enactment of the Peace from its normal extent. But this is so the sharing among the congregation will be all the more welcome and meaningful when it happens again during the exuberantly joyful season of Easter.

Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and
I will heal them.

Isaiah 57:19

Eastertide

You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12

Christ is our peace,
the indestructible peace
we now share with each other.

Eggs and Ashes, Ruth Burgess and Chris Polhill,
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When Jesus rose from the dead,
he surprised his friends,
who had run away,
and lost heart
and given up hope.

He came among them,
showed them his broken hands and side,
and greeted them with words he had taught them:
'Peace be with you.'

A Table that needs no turning, David Coleman
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In ordinary seasons

May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Psalms 29:11

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness
and peace will kiss each other.

Psalms 85:10

Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and
all her paths are peace.

Proverbs 3:17

Jesus said:

'When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.'

Matthew 5:23-24

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14

Not an easy peace,
Not a conditional peace,
not a half-hearted peace,
but the peace of Christ
is with us now.

Let us share it with each other.

Iona Abbey Worship Book
Appendix to Sunday Morning Services, The Iona Community
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Angels said it to frightened shepherds,
Jesus said it to dismayed disciples.
And now these words which come from heaven
are given to reconcile us to God and to each other.

Iona Abbey Worship Book
Appendix to Sunday Morning Services, The Iona Community
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Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the Son of peace to you.

Traditional Gaelic Blessing

Peace between friends,
Peace between family,
Peace between lovers,
in love of the God of life.

Carmina Gadelica, adapted in *Moments of our Nights and Days*, Ruth Burgess
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Jesus says: Happy are those who work for peace.

**Let us do all we can to be channels of peace
in our families, communities and the world.**

Jesus says: Peace is what I leave you.

**Let us accept the peace that Jesus offers,
and work to enable it to spread.**

Emma Wright in *Youth*
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The following introduction is intended for sharing the Peace after the sharing of Holy Communion:

Christ who has nourished us,
is our peace.
Strangers and friends, male and female,
old and young,
he has broken down the barriers
to bind us to him
and to each other.

Having tasted his goodness, let us share his peace.

Liturgy for Holy Communion A from *A Wee Worship Book, Fourth Incarnation*
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Covenant

For the mountains may depart and
the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord

Isaiah 54:10

Remembrance

From the darkness of death,
God calls us into glorious light.
From the tumult of war,
God call us into the beauty of peace.
Children of light,
God calls us today to remembrance.
In light and in peace,
We will remember them.

Winter, Ruth Burgess
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