

Statement on Spirituality at Epworth School: Methodist Ethos (June 2023)

1. History of Epworth School

Epworth is an independent Christian School with a Methodist Ethos, which admits boys and girlsⁱ in the Preparatory School and girls only in the High School. The school was established in 1898 by its two co-founders, Miss Emily Lowe and Miss Emma Mason in premises in Chapel Street (now Peter Kerchhoff Street) in Pietermaritzburg. It was named after the birthplace of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. For its first 21 years Epworth operated as a private venture. In 1920 it was transferred to the Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa. In 1941 Epworth relocated to its present location which was purchased from the Municipality for exclusive educational purposes. In 1982 the school was purchased from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (referred to as the “MCSA”) by the Epworth School Trust.

2. The Epworth School Trust

The principal object of the trust is “to ensure that Epworth continues to exist and operate as a Christian school under the same name and that the Methodist Ethos of the School is maintained and fostered.” The Trust deed requires “the continuation of the Methodist Chaplaincy at Epworth in consultation with the appropriate authorities of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.”

The Trust carries the ultimate responsibility for the assets of the school and is the guardian of its Christian faith. The school is managed and administered on behalf of the Trust by the Board of Governors which is responsible for governance and oversight of the operational requirements of the school.

Christian practice is central to its identity and Epworth has established itself as a place of Christian worship. Attending Epworth means attending a school where both education and Christian worship happen.

3. Methodist Ethos

Methodism affirms the historic creeds of Christianity and acknowledges the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion within the Church, which is the body of Jesus Christ. Christian belief as stated in the Nicene Creedⁱⁱ and the Apostles Creedⁱⁱⁱ forms part of the Liturgy of the MCSA and encapsulates our core beliefs.

Methodist Doctrine is based on John Wesley’s 44 sermons and notes on the New Testament^{iv} which emphasises the following tenets: Prevenient grace; the universal love of God; justification by faith and the new birth; the blessed assurance of salvation through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; growth in maturity and the priesthood of all believers.

We believe that the Bible, given by God, is divinely inspired, entirely trustworthy and the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. We believe that male and female are created by God, with an inherent dignity.

We seek to live out the spirit of the Methodist Rule of Life in all we do, this Rule of Life being: 1. Do no harm in all you do, 2. Do Good in all you do, 3. Do all in your power to use the gifts God has given us to stay and grow in your love of God.^v

Wesley's four emphases are:

- All need to be saved
- All can be saved
- All can know that they are saved
- All can be saved to the uttermost

These beliefs can be summed up in the definition: A Methodist is one who believes in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who lives in the power of the Holy Spirit and takes his/her place in fellowship of the body of Christ.

4. Epworth's relationship with the Methodist Church

The Bishop of the Natal West District of the Conference of the MCSA is an ex-officio trustee of the Trust and member of the Board of Governors. In addition, a Methodist Minister is elected annually by the Synod of the Natal West District of the MCSA as an ex-officio member of the Board.

The school employs a Chaplain (either an ordained Methodist Minister or a layperson) who is accountable^{vi} to the Pietermaritzburg Metropolitan Circuit (Circuit 801), the Board of Governors and the Trust.

Where an Ordained Minister of the MCSA is not available to serve as a full time Chaplain, the Board may appoint a suitable lay person to serve as a Lay Chaplain with an Ordained Minister who is appointed to the Pietermaritzburg Metropolitan Circuit.

In the event of a member of the MCSA not being available, a member of another denomination (belonging to the Church Unity Commission) may serve as an Assistant Chaplain, working together with an Ordained Minister who is appointed to the Circuit.

The fostering of relationships with the MCSA and the wider Christian Church is strongly encouraged. For this reason, the school is regarded as part of the Pietermaritzburg Metropolitan Circuit and the Chaplain, accountable to the Circuit Quarterly Meeting.

5. The School Chaplain

The School Chaplain, is responsible for the nurturing of the spiritual lives of the pupils and staff, and the pastoral care of the community and shall direct the Services of Worship in the school chapel.

6. The Heads of School

The Executive Head, together with the Heads of the High School and the Preparatory School, respectively, shall actively support the Chaplain in promoting the Christian faith and the Methodist ethos of the school.

7. The Trustees and Board of Governors

The Trust deed stipulates that Trustees and Board members "must have embraced or recognized the evangelical^{vii} doctrine, practice and ethos of the MCSA."

All policies and strategic planning shall be informed by our values and beliefs, which are rooted in the Christian faith. Trust and Board meetings are opened with devotions and prayer.

8. Epworth staff

“All employees shall be required to acknowledge and respect the Christian faith and to be supportive of the Evangelical, Methodist ethos of the school.” Staff shall be required to contribute, both personally and professionally, according to their conscience, to the spiritual life of the school, and shall be required to acknowledge and respect the Christian faith of the school and not propagate teachings that are contrary to the Christian faith and Methodist Ethos.

9. The outworking of the Christian faith at Epworth

Many of Epworth’s special events, notices and community life (including assemblies) happen within the sanctuary but also include prayer, worship, reading of scripture and sharing communion. Chapel attendance is compulsory.

Special Chapel Services are held throughout the year to celebrate Christian Holidays such as Lent, Easter and Christmas. Parents are invited to attend these services. Staff are required to attend all Chapel services as part of their work commitment.

In addition to Chapel, pupils are encouraged to participate in Scripture Union, in the Preparatory school and the Students Christian Association (“SCA”) in the high school.

In the High School, weekly cell groups, which focus on fellowship and Bible study, meet during the school day and are led by senior pupils. Pupils may choose to rather participate in our FACT programme, where current issues are discussed, without a religious focus.

Confirmation classes take place during the second and third terms and culminate in our confirmation service in the third term. There is also the opportunity for pupils to be baptised at this service. Confirmation is open to all pupils from Grades 8 to 12.

We desire that each pupil would make a personal, authentic, commitment to follow Jesus but that no-one will be compelled to do so.

Christian values will be promoted at all levels of relationship in the Epworth Community, especially those of faith in Christ, compassion, courage, care, respect and integrity expressed in social concern and outreach programmes.

Pupils are allowed to wear a small cross or crucifix on a necklace.

10. Other faiths

Epworth welcomes pupils and staff of other faiths. While Chapel attendance is compulsory, no pupil will be required to participate (eg: Made to read scripture or pray, made to sing songs, required to receive communion, made to play a biblical character etc.)

Epworth does not allow the practice of other faiths at the school. Provision is therefore made for pupils and staff of other faiths to observe their religious practice and to attend their places of worship, or celebrate special religious festivals, by prior arrangement with the Head/s. This includes not setting exams on the significant religious holidays of other faiths. Pupils are allowed to wear Red Strings, Isiphandla, IsiXhosa blessing beads and/or a navy Hijab.

11. Prohibition against politics and gambling

The Trust deed contains specific prohibitions against the support, advancement or opposition of any political party, and the application of any resources towards or from activities of a gambling nature eg: raffles.

Footnotes

ⁱ Boys and Girls as defined by biological sex; meaning the biological condition of being male or female as determined at birth or, when necessary, at the chromosomal level.

ⁱⁱ The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Apostles Creed

I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; The holy catholic church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

^{iv} The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the holy catholic church (universal Christian Church), which is the Body of Christ. The Doctrines of the Evangelical Faith, which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds, are based upon the Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. These Evangelical Doctrines, to which the Preachers of the Methodist Church, Ministerial and Lay, are pledged, are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and his Forty-four Sermons

^v Methodist Book of Order, 2016, p25.

“Christian Community:

As the law of love is the law of Christ for all His disciples, the spirit and practice of Christian love is an indispensable condition of faithful membership in the Methodist Church. The spiritual and ethical ideal of this fellowship has always been, and still is, that its members should constantly seek to be made perfect in love – ‘pure love filling the heart and governing all words and actions’. The standard set by the Apostles is the high vocation of the Methodist Church. ‘With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each

one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ'. Sharing in Christian community is therefore incumbent upon every Member of the Church. The distinctive Methodist institutions of the Class Meeting, the Love Feast, and the Covenant Service are based upon the assumption that those who love the Lord Jesus and seek to do His Will shall become helpers one of another. None is excused from this debt of love. The Church owes special and tender care to those who have excluded themselves from the means of grace.

The Methodist Rule of Life:

Upon the same foundation of Christian love rest the social obligations and the sacrificial service for the Kingdom of God, to which those who confess Christ commit themselves after the example of their Lord and Master. No code of rules can fully contain these obligations. 'The Rules of the Society of the People called Methodists', drawn up by John and Charles Wesley in 1743, still enshrines the spirit of fellowship and universal fervour in the new world order of social relations and civic and international responsibilities.

The directions we accept as our rule of life from the early Methodists fall into three principal groups:

that of 'doing no harm, avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is more generally practiced'. Besides the open and publicly acknowledged sins of life, all doubtful and dissipating pleasures, selfish indulgence, personal ostentation, love of money and covetousness, all gains made to the injury of others by trading upon their ignorance, weakness or necessity, all dishonest evasion of lawful dues or neglect of civic duties, all abuse of public office or influence for private ends, and all foolish, careless or malicious talk come under this condemnation;

that of 'doing good by being merciful after one's own power, doing good of every possible sort to the bodies of people as well as to their souls and, as far as possible, to all'. Within this obligation are embraced personal testimony for Christ, sacrificial giving to the work of God, missionary effort, the manifold forms of social and philanthropic service, and the pressing necessity for promoting lasting peace and goodwill among all people. Every Methodist should be an evangelist and in spirit a missionary. The familiar line, 'O let me commend my Saviour to you', expresses the true genius of Methodism;

that of 'attending upon all the ordinances of God'. These include public worship of God, observance of the Lord's Supper, maintenance of Christian community, private prayer, reading the Scriptures, and habits of self-discipline. The practice of family worship is earnestly commended. The New Testament contemplates families as Christian as well as individuals."

^{VI} Accountable in reference to the MCSA is defined as "to be in fellowship with, and to be under the discipline of and remain in good standing with the MCSA".

^{VII} Evangelical as defined in terms of the Lausanne Covenant, 1974

<https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant#cov>