

THE HAILSHAM INCIDENT.

“And what happens to a little problem that doesn’t get resolved when it’s little? It gets bigger and bigger until it becomes a real problem that’s going to require a lot of time, energy, and resources to be solved. It’s much easier to confront problems early, while they’re still small and manageable. When a problem isn’t addressed quickly, it can easily spin out of your control.”

These wise words were used many times in Rev Peter Timms’ letters to the executives in Methodist Church House. He used them so often that one might have thought that he was the original author of them – but in fact they are from an official Methodist publication - “Positive Working Together”.

Ironically the advice was published in 2015 – the year when the Timms affair was still in its “little” stage. It was yet to become one of the biggest disputes inside the Methodist Church in the past decade. The executives in Methodist Church House simply ignored the advice that they themselves preached to all other members of the Church.

The website you are reading is about the Timms dispute. Like the dispute, the website started small – one report – but over the years it has grown.

The Timms dispute began as a small story in Hailsham, a village just north of Eastbourne. Rumour had it that something quite outrageous happened within the Methodist Church there in 2013. The Church did not want bad publicity and so, when the local minister, Rev Ian Pruden, asked to leave his post, it was decided that he should be moved fourteen miles along the coast to Bexhill. By chance, the Superintendent in the South East circuit, Rev Ian Wales, had left his station unexpectedly – so there was a temporary vacancy. Rev Ian Pruden filled the post.

It was an easy decision to place Rev Pruden in Bexhill, particularly since no one seemed very interested in the station anyway. But of course, the standing orders had to be adhered to. – particularly those of impartiality. However, it was not thought necessary to mention the rumours in Hailsham that had caused Rev Ian Pruden to want to leave.

Nevertheless, it is only fourteen miles from Hailsham to Bexhill - and rumours fly on the wings of supposed scandal. And so, the gossip followed Ian Pruden as he moved along the coast to Bexhill.

Thus it was that the circuit meeting in Bexhill in September 2014 became the centre of controversy. There was an “elephant in the room” – the rumour from Hailsham. No one knew the truth about it, but it nevertheless cast its long shadow over the meeting.

Rev Timms, OBE MA, was the oldest and most experienced minister in the Bexhill area. Now over eighty years old and a supernumerary, he had heard the rumours about Hailsham. He was inclined to dismiss them as malicious tittle-tattle. However, it was clear that the controversy might surface at the meeting at which Ian Pruden was to be invited to take the job as Superintendent.

Timms thought it would be better if some investigation were made before the circuit took any irreversible action. What he did not know was that such an investigation had already taken place – but the damning details that had come to light had been covered-up.

Rev Timms knew a little of Ian Pruden’s background and had some small doubts about his fitness for the station. However, on the whole, his views on Pruden were positive. Nevertheless, he thought that the circuit needed to act carefully and with visible impartiality.

Rev Timms decided that he should be careful not to mention anything of the Hailsham rumours in public. His view was that it was far better to simply delay matters about the stationing - in order to allow adequate time for proper consideration. To do that, he wondered how he might find some technical objection to the decision that might be used to delay matters. He thought that the circuit needed adequate time to consider what to do.

Just before the meeting, Rev John Hellyer, the South East District Chair, inadvertently produced just such an opportunity.

Rev John Hellyer was not well. He had been in hospital with heart problems. So it is perhaps not wholly his fault that the affair progressed as it did. He did not attend the meeting and it seems that the ministers on whom he was relying had different interpretations of the stationing of Ian Pruden.

One of the factors which may be important in the general thinking of the ministers involved was a new amendment to Standing Orders.

In 2013, Conference adopted amendments to Standing Order 545. These amendments came into effect in September 2014 – just a fortnight prior to the circuit meeting of 16th September 2014 in

Bexhill. Ministers, particularly John Hellyer, had been learning of the changes and thinking about how they should be applied.

One of the clauses of [SO 545](#) stated:

“(3A) Any Circuit Meeting to consider extending an invitation under clause (2) or (3) above shall be held on or before the 20th September”.

John Hellyer, through his ministers, applied this clause to the re-invitation of Rev Pruden. It meant that those at the meeting of September 16th had only three days to complete the matter.

And this is where the divisions began – for Rev Peter Timms thought that SO 545 did not apply to this particular invitation.

Furthermore, he saw it as a fortunate opportunity for debate and delay - which would give the circuit time to consider the matter properly. John Hellyer’s decision to use SO 545 could be opposed on procedural grounds, without the Hailsham scandal being mentioned at all.

The procedural point was simple. Rev Timms thought that SO 504 was the correct Standing Order to work with, not SO 545. Standing order 504 did not specifically mention that it could be applied to appointing Superintendents, but it was headed "Principles" - and he therefore considered that it covered all such appointments.

He told the Chair of the circuit meeting that he wished to speak to the motion. Unfortunately, his email with the details did not get through because the Chair's computer was broken.

That is where it all began to go wrong. Prior to the meeting, he was told that he would only be allowed to speak for four minutes. He got the impression that the other ministers involved were hustling him, trying to cut him short.

The agenda of the meeting suggested the original thinking behind the invitation. The wording had been determined by Assistant District Chair Philip Luscombe, who had supervised the appointment in the invitation committee, but who could not attend the circuit meeting. Rev Luscombe was a most erudite minister – with perhaps the best knowledge of standing orders of anyone in the South East district.

The invitation read:

“The invitation committee issued a paper with the agenda recommending the appointment of Ian Pruden as the Superintendent Minister for the remaining period of his appointment which is August 2017”

Rev Timms noted that this closely followed the wording of SO 504 (2) which states:

“If a casual vacancy occurs, the meeting with authority to appoint shall fill the vacancy with immediate effect for the remainder of the term of the appointment vacated.”

So it seemed that what was being proposed was filling a casual vacancy. At least, that was apparently how Rev Philip Luscombe and the invitation committee had seen it. However, Rev Luscombe was not present at the meeting to explain this further.

SO 504 contains no deadline at all for when any such appointments must be made. So why, when discussing the limitation on Rev Timm’s contribution, did the Chair of the meeting, Rev Margaret Heim, state that a delay could not be allowed?

It was, she said *“because of appointment time scales, this could not happen with only 3 days left for discussion.”*

This was not a simple mistake. Rev Heim was supported by Assistant District Chair, Rev Westwood, who was in overall charge of the meeting. She stated that they *“did not have all the time in the world to decide who should be the new superintendent.”*

And that phrase definitely suggested the Rev Pruden was to be more than a temporary Superintendent.

This is where the confusion began, for the date 20th September, which created the deadline of three days, came from Standing Order 545. Standing Order 545 deals with extensions of presbyteral appointments. It was also, of course, the standing order that all the ministers had been reading, because of its recent amendments.

Most importantly, as noted above, Clause 3a of SO 545 stated:

“(3A) Any Circuit Meeting to consider extending an invitation under clause (2) or (3) above shall be held on or before the 20th September”.

This is what caused the confusion – and it was clear why both Rev Heim and Rev Westwood held the opinion that the deadline of 20th September - i.e. 3 days - had to be applied at the circuit meeting. Further, since Rev Westwood was representing Rev Hellyer, the District Chair, at the meeting, this must have been the view of Rev Hellyer.

Was there anything else in SO 545 which might make it appropriate for the appointment of Rev Pruden? In fact the opposite was so.

Clause 3a of SO 545 mentioned two other clauses. Both of them make reference to a term of five years being extended.

Clause 2 states:

“in the fifth year of a presbyter’s service in the Circuit”

Clause 3 states:

“in the fifth year of a presbyter’s service in the Circuit”

The whole of SO 545 (3A) – the clause that contains the deadline - is concerned with the extension of the permanent stationing of ministers who have served a whole term of five years.

Rev Pruden had been filling in for about five months.

Nothing in SO 545(3A) applied to the extension of Rev Pruden’s temporary, or casual, appointment. It was a fine point, but an important one. The two senior ministers at the circuit meeting in Bexhill were claiming that the deadline did apply – yet, it seemed to Rev Timms, with some justification, that SO 545, with its deadline of 20th September, *did not* apply. And the man designated to organise the stationing, Assistant Chair Rev Philip Luscombe, appeared from the paperwork to hold the same opinion.

Considering what was going on elsewhere concerning Rev Pruden, this sounded like a deliberate twisting of the rules as a means to an end. To some it may have seemed that it was an attempt to reassure Rev Pruden that he was safely embedded in Bexhill for the next two years. The Hailsham incident might have been long forgotten by then.

Was this the reason why Rev Timms’ contribution to the matter was limited to four minutes? His was the only contribution that was so limited that evening. Were the ends more important than the means?

The objections of Rev Heim and Rev Westwood caused Rev Timms to leave the podium without making his procedural point.

In fact there was a more basic point he might have argued. This action of using SO 545 might actually be breaching the standing orders. Was the stationing under discussion an *extension of a temporary stationing?* Rev Westwood called it a “re-invitation”. A temporary stationing might be brought to an end at any time – but this stationing was specifically limited to filling in the rest of the term of office that Rev Wales had abandoned – some two years.

That meant that the stationing could run until August 2017 – at which point Rev Pruden could request an extension of five years, until

2022. And even then, he could request a further five years' extension. That would mean that Rev Pruden could stay in office for twelve years - until 2026. And yet the normal limit to any such stationing is set in the standing orders as being only ten years.

Furthermore, SO 543 established that SO 545 (2) was specifically concerned with appointments of five years. The meeting was discussing a term of considerably less than that.

No one at the circuit meeting in Bexhill, other than Rev Timms, considered this. And Rev Timms was not given the opportunity to mention it.

In fact, the appointment of Rev Pruden earlier in the year to fill in for Rev Wales was already, in accordance with SO 504, "*effect(ive) for the remainder of the term of the appointment vacated.*"

So there was *no need at all* for anything to be done about the stationing of Rev Pruden. His term of office was already extended until August 2017.

And there was no need for the oldest minister in the circuit to be gagged - as he was. It suggested ulterior motivations were at work.

Why was the question of Rev Pruden even brought to the circuit meeting? Why did the senior ministers claim that the decision had to be taken within three days? And why, after this meeting, were there no further advertisements for the station? And why, Rev Timms was later to ask, were the minutes of the meeting edited - with all detail of his objections omitted?

We might look again at the question of why the contribution by Rev Timms was curtailed to four minutes. The circuit surely, to use Rev Westwood's words, had "*all the time in the world*" to decide what action to take. In fact they had two years - until August 2017.

When one considers this distortion of the Standing Orders - either because of design or simple ignorance - one can understand Rev Timms' frustration with what had gone on.

His objections were simply an attempt to get the circuit back on the right track in accordance with the Standing Orders of the Church. He thought it dangerous to station someone permanently when there was such gossip coming from Hailsham. He thought that the senior ministers were interpreting the Standing Orders incorrectly in their haste to push through Ian Pruden's stationing. Most importantly, thought Rev Timms, it left the Church open to charges of impartiality with consequent damage to its reputation.

For this strict adherence to the standing orders, Rev Timms has since been crucified. He is currently suspended from all Church activities – and has been so for some three years. His life is in ruins. Half a century of devotion to the Church has been turned to bitterness.

So what happened to cause this uproar, to cause this website to be made – and to cause a petition to be sent to the Charity Commission about the activities of the Methodist Church?

It is a classic example of “*what happens to a little problem that doesn’t get resolved when it’s little,*” - to quote “Positive Working Together”.

Back in 2014 and 2015, Rev Timms was astounded to find that none of the senior ministers in the circuit would discuss the matter with him. Indeed, they seemed to be deliberately twisting his words in order to shut him up. They used their false charges against him as leverage to shut him up.

Soon the matter was no longer a question of confusion about the intricate wording of standing orders; it was about ethics - and in particular the question of whether the systems of reconciliation in the Methodist Church were adequate. Because, though he tried, Rev Timms could not engage in reconciliation. No one would listen to him.

In late 2015 another rumour had brief circulation in Bexhill. It was said that Rev Pruden had actually visited Rev Timms sometime after the circuit meeting, and explained to him what had happened in Hailsham.

Rev Pruden’s story apparently completely exonerated him from blame. Indeed, the revelations caused Rev Timms to have a lot of sympathy for him. It seems that Rev Pruden had been the victim in the terrible affair.

Certainly, Rev Timms’ comments about Rev Pruden became much more supportive at around that time. As for Ian Pruden, if the story is true, it seems that he appears to have readily understood that the Hailsham scandal was at the heart of the matter.

However, the evidence also suggests that when Rev Timms finally heard the truth of the Hailsham affair, he realised that it merely moved the scandal one step further into ignominy. It made matters worse – for Rev Pruden’s revelations apparently exposed the fact that the Church was covering up *someone else* – someone who had committed a heinous and corrupt act against Rev Pruden.

For some reason, it also now appeared to have crossed Rev Timms’ mind that the Hailsham incident might be involved in the major inquiry by Jane Stacey into sex abuse in the Methodist Church. That

inquiry had been seeking evidence during 2013, the year of the incident in Hailsham. As chairman of the Loudoun Trust, a leading think-tank on the subject of child sex abuse, Rev Timms was closely involved with developments in that area. What comments he made, suggesting local links, were made in connection with evidence he was submitting on behalf of the Loudoun Trust to the Home Office.

For whatever reason, Rev Timms continued with his efforts to put things right inside the Church - as he saw it. He persisted with his objections to the conduct of the ministers concerning the 2014 circuit meeting. After some two years, it became clear that the senior ministers were solely concerned with shutting Rev Timms up. It seemed that they had been instructed to stamp out all reference to the Hailsham scandal. The irony was that Rev Timms had had no intention of mentioning it at the circuit meeting; it was their own, perhaps well-intentioned but misguided, fears that had caused the arguments.

This blatant gagging of the most distinguished minister in the District, a friend of Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, merely spread the corruption further. Who was the person who had caused the Hailsham Incident? Who is so influential and powerful that he or she had to be protected at all costs? It had to be someone with a lot of power within the Church.

Angered by the treatment he had received, Rev Timms took the matter to national, connexional, level. And it was there that the worst actions began – and the worst cover-up took place.

The egregious actions by Methodist Church officials and agents are detailed elsewhere on this website, but perhaps the worst was the first response from Methodist Church House when Rev Timms lodged his complaints. It was like something out of Stalin's Russia.

When Rev Timms submitted his complaints, the Church went on the offensive. Rev Timms, the complainant, was immediately categorised as the person being complained about!

Worse - he was sent a false confession to sign. It stated that he had been found guilty of a breach of confidentiality. It was a charge of which he knew nothing and a judgement which had been decided in his absence. This was a kangaroo court or a Star Chamber, at the heart of the Methodist Church!

The little affair in September 2014, had turned, by September 2016, into

“a real problem that's going to require a lot of time, energy, and resources to be solved.” (Positive Working Together)

In late 2017, Rev Timms wrote to the President of Conference, Rev Loraine Mellor. His words to her were as wise as those of “Positive Working Together”. He told her:

“I live for the Church. The Church has survived over the past three centuries because of ministers who have fought against the type of corruption that I now see around me in this District.

The Church cannot survive if false confessions can be sent to ministers with threats designed to persuade them to sign them. The Church cannot survive if panels of inquiry can lie to complainants. The Church cannot survive if anyone who complains is immediately investigated, even spied upon, without being even able to defend themselves before being found guilty.

The Church cannot survive if such things are hushed up.”

The President did not reply.

Despite Peter Timms’ martyrdom in his efforts to right the wrongs in the cause of openness, honesty and integrity in the Methodist Church, we still do not know any detail of what happened in Hailsham in 2013. It seems that Rev Timms knows – but he continues to protect the reputation of the Methodist Church by keeping quiet about it. And yet he is punished.

He suffers for the sins of another, a man who hides his shame in the shadows of the Methodist Church - the perpetrator of the Hailsham incident.

Is this what John Wesley intended? Is this the Methodist Way?