



## Southlands Methodist Trust

# The 'New' Southlands College: A Generous and Practical Ecumenism

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### 🎯 Introduction

In 1975, Southlands College of Education, then based in Wimbledon, joined with Digby Stuart College, Froebel College and Whitelands College to form the Roehampton Institute of Higher Education. All of these Colleges had been established in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as teacher training institutions and all continued to have high quality reputations for teacher training, while also offering a wider programme of degrees. Successive changes to government education policy in the 1970s meant the creation of this Federation was a natural move to ensure the Colleges could continue their work in the modern context. This partnership and the journey of finding an identity together while maintaining the distinctiveness of the different Colleges is told in the book, *The Story of Roehampton University* (Watson 2010). By the 1990s it was clear that a central campus for the Institute would offer practical advantages and in 1991 it was agreed that Southlands College would move from its Wimbledon site and relocate onto the Roehampton Lane site, neighbouring Digby Stuart and Froebel Colleges. This paper explores this move, and in particular the relationship between Southlands College and Digby Stuart College, on whose land the new Southlands was built. In particular, it explores the ecumenical vision and the Christian mission within education embodied in the partnership of a Methodist and a Roman Catholic College necessary for this move to be possible and successful.

## 🕒 A generous and practical ecumenism

While the political context and changes in Higher Education and teacher training policy were the main catalysts for change, the creation of the Roehampton Institute also took place in a context of increasing hope and expectation around ecumenism. A rising enthusiasm for ecumenism in the middle of the twentieth century was encouraged further by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which opened up new possibilities for conversations between different denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. In 1967 the Methodist-Catholic international dialogue was established, which continues to produce reports every five years. Its work demonstrates that, despite obvious differences, there are a number of areas of commonality between Methodists and Catholics, particularly around social justice and the theological idea of holiness.

By the 1990s, some significant setbacks in ecumenical conversations had diminished enthusiasm for formal ecumenism amongst some of the Churches, since many of the great hopes for structural change of the 1960s and 70s had not been realised. However, when the possibility arose for the Methodist Southlands College to move onto the land of the Catholic Digby Stuart College, some within the Methodist Church saw the potential for a significant ecumenical partnership and a real opportunity to put into practice their ecumenical vision.

There were practical reasons for the move to Roehampton. The Wimbledon building was in need of major renovation work if it were to continue to house the College. While closing down Southlands College might have appeared to be an option in the face of increasing pressure on small teacher training Colleges, this was one of the few sites of formal Methodist involvement in Higher Education remaining in the UK, one that the Methodist Church wanted to maintain. These practical pressures were seized upon by ecumenically-minded individuals within both the Methodist and Catholic churches and they provided further impetus to work together.

The move to Roehampton was made significantly easier by the generous act of the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart, led by Sr Bernadette Porter, Principal at Digby Stuart College. The Society offered to sell, at a reduced cost, land on which the Methodist Church could build the new Southlands College. This move was part of a pattern of generosity from the Sisters to help realise the vision of the developing Roehampton Institute. This kindness was interpreted by many of the Methodists involved as one of the fruits of Vatican II, embodying its ecumenical vision. Mike Leigh, Principal of Southlands at the time of the move, described this as 'practical ecumenism', and celebrated Bernadette Porter's courage which made it all possible. Leslie Griffiths, then Chair of the Southlands Governors, saw it a 'beautifully subversive' demonstration to the Churches, who had been slow to act on their ecumenical conversations; evidence on a large scale that, if there was a will, these large ecumenical ventures were possible.

*“Ecumenical activity has been stunted by the Church’s inability to be generous, imaginative, resourceful, or desiring of outcomes that are radical [...] This was an opportunity to buck that trend.” (Leslie Griffiths)*

### 🕒 **The unique nature of Methodist-Catholic relations**

For some it is surprising to discover that the Methodists and Roman Catholics involved in this move found they had much in common. From the outside there might seem to be little similarity between the two Churches. And indeed, for many, there are some significant differences in theology and liturgy. However, in the practical outliving of the faith and in particular in their approaches to social action, members of the denominations involved in the work to move Southlands College found natural relationships.

Historically, there was a precedent for such relationships. Although a Protestant suspicion of Roman Catholics has not been absent from historic Methodism, John Wesley was increasingly influenced by Catholic writers during his life and encouraged Methodists to work with Catholics, particularly in his sermon *The Catholic Spirit* and his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*. A generosity of spirit and emphasis on working together from the founder of the Methodist movement may have had an influence on the openness of subsequent Methodists to finding commonality with Roman Catholics. The place of both denominations outside of the historically mainstream, established Church in the UK was significant.

*“We always used to say that [...] we were both non-conformist. We weren’t the Church of England. We weren’t the establishment. And I think that was pretty important in our ongoing dialogue, that the things that were important to Southlands, like social justice, like helping not-for-profit[s], were also important to Digby [Stuart]. And that we saw lots of shared opportunities for the development of social action between our two Chaplaincies and by the two organisations.”*  
(Bernadette Porter)

David Deeks described “a commonality of spirituality and ethos” between Catholics and Methodists and saw this particularly focused around their shared emphasis on holiness. A commitment to social justice and to ‘the poor’ was another particular point of agreement that was noted and, as the Methodist-Catholic dialogue has shown, the language of holiness at the heart of Methodism is echoed by similar commitments in Catholicism (see *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*, 2016).

Significantly, it was personal friendships, particularly the friendship between Mike Leigh and Bernadette Porter, which were the foundation of much of the ecumenical work surrounding the move of Southlands College. The commonality wasn't one only understood in theory, but one discovered in practice as they worked together. As well as recognising what they had in common, they also recognised that the relationship had its limits.

*"There were certain things which you couldn't push because they were essential to the Roman Catholic Church, or the Anglican Church, or the Methodist Church. So, it was actually discovering where those boundaries were, against which we should push, and we became most resistant when people from outside tried to push us beyond those boundaries, I think. That was where suspicion came."* (Mike Leigh)

While this unique relationship was significant for the Southlands move, it is a relationship which continues to bear fruit in the life of the University of Roehampton. The work in developing a student intentional community in Barat House, a partnership between Digby Stuart and Southlands, is a very recent example.

### 🎯 **A new vision for education**

In the formation of the Roehampton Institute, and later the University, the collegiate and ecumenical nature of the institution were seen to be important, not just as 'selling points' to attract future students, but more fundamentally in the vision for education that it held. The individual Colleges had been founded in a particular Victorian period in the UK when Church bodies were primarily responsible for schools. At that time, the Churches had huge responsibilities for the education of young people in the UK. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Methodist Church alone had over 1,000 schools, a number which reduced dramatically when the state accepted responsibility for education and most of these were gifted by the Church. Running so many schools, the Churches needed to create Colleges to train teachers, and so Southlands, Digby Stuart and Whitelands Colleges were established.

The founding vision of these Colleges was to train teachers to work in their denominations' schools in order to provide an education for their children. One hundred years later, this vision was increasingly limiting, but as the Colleges came together a new Christian mission for education began to form, one that was explicitly ecumenical in nature. This was a vision about human flourishing, about space for open and rigorous exploration of big questions, and about seeing young people 'formed' as well as educated.

The vision was not universally popular. Some people still felt that the purpose of these Colleges should be to serve their own denominational schools. The Colleges indeed had some difficulty convincing their own denominational bodies, their alumni and even their own governors of the fruits and potential of the ecumenical venture. In particular, many people were concerned that the Colleges would lose their own individual identities. Ultimately, however, a combination of practical need, ecumenical vision, and the leadership of individuals allowed the move to go ahead. Addressing the concerns of those who saw the move as potentially blurring the identity and vision of the College, people such as David Deeks argued instead that this change would enhance it.

*"It's more obviously part of our mission now than ever it was because we now have the opportunity in a robust environment of enquiring young minds of saying what we believe and why we believe it and why we're committed to certain values and ways of understanding relationships and learning and vocation and all those other things that are important to a University. That's why we do it. It's more important now than ever it was."* (David Deeks)

David Deeks argued that, as a Methodist College within an ecumenical University, Southlands is able to be a building block in the realisation of a rich, holistic vision for the University. This vision includes theology not just as an important academic discipline, but, through the Colleges, as being part of the institution, enabling the kind of exploration of human life that comes from open, rigorous and wide-ranging conversations across boundaries. The Church's mission is both to provide the space for that conversation and also to be thoroughly involved in it. This, David Deeks maintained, is in contrast to a secular vision for education, which can be suspicious of religion or of religious involvement. This ecumenical vision was a confident one, placing religion, faith and the Church in the heart of the educational venture, not with a dominant voice, but with the opportunity to express its beliefs, values and vision in and for a rigorous and academic environment.

Connected to this vision to serve society as a whole was a shared commitment to social justice. The Churches, through the Colleges, had a vision for a University which was committed to social justice through education, focusing on a widening participation agenda and looking to serve those who traditionally have less access to education. This was held alongside an institutional commitment to serving the local community and caring for the environment, the poor and the oppressed, locally and globally. These markers of identity are still very much at the heart of the University of Roehampton's identity, and shape its mission and strategic planning.

Beyond just an ecumenical partnership, there was a desire to broaden this vision beyond the four Colleges, with serious attention given to incorporating other faiths, particularly Muslim, Jewish and Hindu, into the heart of University life. Leslie Griffiths

emphasised the point that, as an ecumenical and interfaith institution, Roehampton brings together institutions which, historically at least, have been violently opposed to each other. As a result, it embodies a commitment to providing a safe place for the exploration of truth for its own sake, including dialogue between very different religious groups.

This ecumenical and interfaith vision which emerged at Roehampton wasn't only expressed through the provision and work of Chaplains, but was also to be nurtured by the various academic departments. Bernadette Porter saw the denominational basis of the Colleges as 'adding value', giving examples of how the Business School had taken on particular research and developed particular courses because of an institutional commitment to social justice. Research into human trafficking, NGOs, human rights and social justice all contained echoes of these ecumenical commitments.

One example of Colleges 'adding value' within the academic life of the University was the formation of the Southlands Methodist Trust a few years after the new Southlands College was opened. The Trust was founded with gifts from alumni and from money remaining from the sale of the Wimbledon site. It was established with a particular focus on developing academic and ecumenical connections in the College, the University and the Methodist Church. After a number of years of providing one-off grants to various different projects, the Susanna Wesley Foundation was set up by the Southlands Methodist Trust as its main activity, specifically to enable and encourage research and dialogue across disciplines, particularly around management, leadership and faith. The Foundation has an explicitly ecumenical outlook.

These strong ecumenical and interfaith commitments in the Colleges after the establishment of the new Southlands College continue to be seen in the identity and commitments of the University as whole. When Paul O'Prey, Vice-Chancellor of the University (2004-2019), explored what the University stood for, he found its purpose to be:

*“Challenging and supporting students in their intellectual and spiritual growth; preparing them to become citizens and leaders of a complex and fast-changing world; serving the communities on the University’s doorstep; working for social justice; emphasizing the value of learning and the arts for nurturing the human spirit; engaging in the pursuit of truth through freedom of thought and expression; and promoting diversity, equality and tolerance.” (The Story of Roehampton University, p107)*

## 🎯 Identity and Unity

Developing Roehampton as a collegiate University allowed each College to maintain and explore its own unique identity in the midst of the single whole. The original logo for the Roehampton Institute attempted to capture this, depicting four different squares coming together to form a single whole, with a cross at the centre.

As the University grew, attention was given to the architecture of the different buildings. When the new Southlands College was built, it was designed intentionally to reflect some of the values of the Methodist Church, and to encourage a way of living and learning that is infused with those values. These features ranged from the size and configuration of the student residences to the shape and space of the planned buildings. More obvious design elements spoke of the College's Methodist identity, including the presence of a Methodist chapel at the very front of the College, and of the commitment to the environment, enacted in attentiveness to energy efficiency in the building design.

Unsurprisingly, the Chaplaincy has been a key way that the Colleges have maintained and promoted their individual identities. Digby Stuart, Southlands and Whitelands all have their own chapels and Chaplains. The collegiate approach to Chaplaincy enabled the Colleges to exercise their individual identity and develop their interests and commitments, particularly around issues like social justice. However, the maintenance of separate denominational Chaplaincies has raised further challenges for the Colleges around how distinctiveness of identity can be achieved alongside meaningful ecumenical partnership. According to David Peacock, while Chaplaincy became the primary way that the Colleges could demonstrate their distinctiveness, it also had the potential to be detrimental to ecumenical work at Roehampton.

In 2012 a review was commissioned by the Governing Bodies of the four Colleges to look at Chaplaincy and to develop a strategy for the future. It was felt that the Chaplaincies needed a broader vision to serve the whole University, particularly given that Froebel College did not have a denominational origin, and that Muslim students made up an increasingly significant proportion of students. The review recommended a more ecumenical and interfaith approach to Chaplaincy which took the Chaplaincy provision beyond the chapels. It suggested a unified University of Roehampton Chaplaincy team rather than the individual teams in the four Colleges. The review promoted the values in Chaplaincy that had been fundamental to the ecumenical commitments, and which led to the creation of the Institute and the move of Southlands College to Roehampton Lane.

*"The history of Roehampton and its Colleges provides an unusual opportunity to explore issues of faith, society, conflict, change and social justice in an academic setting and thus to enhance the academic and cultural experiences both of staff and students."* (Chaplaincy Review, 2012, p22)

This focus was a natural development of the evolving collegiate identity of the University, and therefore encouraged the Chaplaincy to be at the heart of the ecumenical vision for the University.

### 🕒 **Continuing work**

Friendship, generosity, common values, open conversations, individual and institutional risk taking, and courage all contribute to the rich identity and vision which, through the founding Colleges, form the University of Roehampton.

Working with a Chaplaincy which is now structured to be ecumenical and multi-faith, Southlands College presently sits as part of an institution with a strategic plan based on the core values of the Colleges' providing bodies, a tradition of social justice, widening participation, promoting inclusivity and the open exchange of ideas. In many ways the vision of those who led the move of Southlands College to Roehampton Lane in the 1990s has been realised.

However, the history of the University indicates that it is the willingness to take risks and try new things which has brought new life, and that the identity of Southlands as part of a University which is an ecumenical, collegiate institution must also continue to evolve. Leslie Griffiths suggests that, in this sense, the story of the institution is similar to the story of Christianity and the Churches. If the ecumenical vision is truly to continue, the experience of Southlands suggests that it needs to be one shaped by responding to and serving the community and one that continues to take risks and give generously.

Today, Southlands is working once again to renew its identity as a Methodist building block of an ecumenical institution. It does this both in its approach to its work and through seeking to develop a range of new activities and initiatives which develop ecumenical and multi-faith dialogue. In particular, the relationship with Digby Stuart College has seen renewed life in recent years, and once again this partnership has been facilitated and enriched through individual friendships, a generosity of spirit and with resources, and also the recognition of identities which are at once distinct and united.

A cornerstone of this partnership was the foundation of the Barat House community in 2017, developed by the Chaplains and Heads of the two Colleges and sponsored by the Society of the Sacred Heart and the Southlands Methodist Trust. This student community house is guided by a rule of life developed out of the Methodist and Roman Catholic traditions, lived afresh in the modern University context, and led by Methodist and Roman Catholic members of the Chaplaincy team. The community is growing in its ecumenical identity year on year.

Beyond this, and with strong support from the Southlands Methodist Trust, Southlands College has become a hub within the Church for the development of a practical ecumenism between Methodists and Roman Catholics. Research and practical projects exploring Methodist-Roman Catholic ecumenical work are a part of the College's identity, not least in the exploration of how those traditions can work together

in their shared mission for social justice. The evolving nature of this work is an important and growing aspect of what Southlands College does. What this means in practice will, we hope, continue to evolve. An account of the work, as it evolves, can be explored in detail on the Southlands Methodist Trust's website, [southlandsmethodisttrust.org.uk](http://southlandsmethodisttrust.org.uk).

## Appendix

### 🎯 Key Dates:

- 1991      Governing body of Southlands College agree move to Roehampton
- 1994      New site for Southlands agreed on Digby Stuart land, popularly known as 'the South of France'
- 1996      Foundation stone of new Southlands College laid by the Revd Dr Kenneth Greet
- 1997      New Southlands College opened by the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, Sir Michael Checkland
- 2000      Federal University of Surrey Roehampton formed
- 2001      Parkstead House acquired as new site for Whitelands College, close to the Roehampton Lane campus
- 2004      University of Roehampton formed

### 🎯 Content

This document is based on input from the following people who, aside from the current Principal, had significant involvement with the University of Roehampton (or previous guises) during the time Southlands College moved from Wimbledon to the Roehampton Lane campus.

- Rev Dr David Deeks:      Chair of the Trustees of Southlands College from 2010 to 2016, General Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of the Methodist Conference from 2003 to 2008
- Lord Leslie Griffiths:      Chair of the Trustees of Southlands Methodist College from 1997 to 2003
- Dr Mike Leigh:      Principal of Southlands College from 1993 to 2002
- David Peacock:      Principal of Whitelands College from 1985 to 2000
- Sr. Bernadette Porter:      Bernadette worked at Digby Stuart College, initially as a lecturer, then as Principal of Digby Stuart College, then as Rector of the Federal University.
- Dr Christopher Stephens      Principal of Southlands College, 2012 to present

## 📍 References

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