



Challenging conversations

A worship resource to support

Living with Contradictory Convictions



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An introduction to *Living with Contradictory Convictions*

The term 'Living with Contradictory Convictions' comes from a report to the Methodist Conference in 2006 that encouraged reflection on the theological implications of being a Church that must live with or contend with mutually contradictory convictions. The Church has dealt with many issues in the past that have caused fundamental differences of view, or even division. Yet we are called into unity. Sometimes these differences of view have been for theological reasons, and sometimes they have been in relation to ethical questions. Often it has been possible to reach agreement on these theological or ethical differences. For example, the question of ordination of women to Presbyterian Ministry has been answered in the Methodist Church, with men and women having equal status and access to all levels of ministry. Similarly, there were once differences of view on the ethics of slavery and apartheid, but these have been answered in terms of the views of the Church, with all forms of racism being considered a denial of the gospel, and the value of the individual no longer subject to economic preferences.

At other times we have continued to live with differences in our convictions. For example, there are a wide range of views on matters such as alcohol, pacifism and financial ethics.

For some issues, there is a mixture of agreement and disagreement. For example, attitudes to sexuality vary. The 1993 Methodist Conference resolutions on human sexuality include a commitment to recognise, celebrate and affirm lesbian and gay people in the life of the Church (resolution 6), and reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it (resolution 4). The Methodist Church also considers homophobia to be wrong. However, there is a wide range of views when it comes to considering whether the Church should revisit its definition of marriage to allow same sex marriage in Church. These differences of view also extend to wider issues around human relationships and marriage, including attitudes to cohabitation and remarriage after divorce. Whilst recognising that the Church (both as an institution, and in the diversity of its people) continues to live with contradictory convictions, it is also important to work together, as members of the Body of Christ, to listen and discuss prayerfully to try to resolve differences, and not passively 'agree to disagree'. But some matters may remain matters of disagreement.

In 2006, the Methodist Conference Report *Living with Contradictory Convictions* set out how the Church lives with, and has tried to resolve, contradictory convictions, considering Scripture in the light of tradition, experience and reason.

A copy of the report can be found online:
www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06_Faith_and_Order_committee_pt2.docx

There is also a Study Guide on the Methodist Church website: www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co_living_with_contradictory_guide_0707.doc

Principles to consider when dealing with situations where there are contradictory convictions include:

- Openness to each other: openness in the way we relate to each other; listening, sharing and learning from each other's experience and understanding.
- Openness to God: openness to a challenging God. Is God challenging our views and perceptions? Is God revealing something new to us? How can we know?

A model statement on *Living with Contradictory Convictions*

Prepared by the Methodist Church's Marriage and Relationships Task Group, 2015

We continue to believe that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and live in communion with God and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We cherish our place within Christ's Church recognising that it is Christ alone who chooses, calls and confirms us as members of his Church, the body of Christ.

Whilst we may not all agree about everything, we recognise the importance of the truths which bind us together as well as the issues which currently divide us.

Therefore, we resolve:

to engage with each other openly, honestly, prayerfully and graciously;

to treat each other with respect and dignity, recognising the sincerity of the faith of those who may see things differently;

to seek to learn from one another as we travel together as fellow pilgrims;

to renounce all language and behaviours that attempt to coerce others to change their views or beliefs;

to seek, as far as conscience allows, to preserve the fellowship of Christ's Church;

to unite under the authority of Scripture as we seek to live as authentic Christian disciples in our own generation.

Talking of marriage and relationships

The reason for this edition of ROOTS being produced now is to support discussions across the Methodist Connexion about marriage and relationships. It can, of course, be used to support conversations in many Church settings, about any subject where Christians hold differing views. This edition of ROOTS helps to ground discussions in Scripture and worship. The materials can be adapted to different contexts and formats of worship, including café church, and can be used in study and discussion groups. We also offer resources to use in children's sessions and with youth groups.

Within the Church, people have many views about human relationships and the nature and purpose of marriage. A major change to the law in 2014 enabled the introduction of same-sex civil marriage. Churches and other religious groups were given the legal option to opt-in to conduct weddings for same-sex partners. Following wide consultation, the Methodist Conference in 2014 agreed that more time was needed for careful reflection before deciding whether to look again at our understanding of marriage. Same-sex marriage is not the only consideration. There are wider issues in relation to human relationships in the modern world which may or may not lead the church to revisit our definition of marriage. The Methodist Conference in 2014 urged the Methodist people to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously in a process of deep reflection and discernment about matters relating to marriage and human relationships.

This engagement is in accordance with Methodist understanding of scriptural interpretation and reflection. Methodists traditionally use a fourfold approach to learn about our Christian faith and apply it to contemporary issues and to our Christian practice: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

Further resources to support the conversations on Marriage and Relationships can be found on the Methodist Church website. www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofmarriageandrelationships

The Marriage and Relationships Task Group



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Challenging conversations

These resources explore:

- unfamiliarity;
- disorientation and confusion;
- the way we relate to God's revelation;
- the ways in which we can be attentive to God;
- the challenge to know ourselves.

Bible readings

Jonah 3
Acts 10
Matthew 19.16-30

Bible notes

Old Testament Jonah 3

Jonah belongs to the northern tribes of Israel, a people soon to be invaded by Assyria and to adopt a largely Samaritan worldview: but for now this is Israel, God's chosen people. From this place, and unequipped with the tools of a confident apologist, Jonah is called to speak God's message to the people of Nineveh, a place marked (at least for the people of Israel) by its wickedness (Jonah 1.2). In the centre of Nineveh and in utter faithfulness to Yahweh, Jonah declares the message given to him by God (Jonah 3.4).

To Jonah's contemporaries it is an apparent contradiction that God, at least the God revealed in the history of Israel, would call anyone as a messenger to the people of Nineveh. What appears to the modern reader as the obvious disobedience of Chapter 1 may well have appeared to Jonah's contemporaries as a reasonable reluctance to resolve conflicting realities. Yahweh does not send his people into wickedness.

One of the many remarkable characteristics of this story's progression is that it has almost nothing to do with certainty nor with the defence of long-established understandings carefully discerned through diligent attentiveness to the Torah, nor with the pursuit of tired religion. In contrast it has everything to do with understanding ourselves always before the person and presence of God. Jonah 'remembered the Lord' (2.7). When Jonah just doesn't 'get it' he prays to the Lord. What is utterly remarkable is that the words of Jonah's prayer (Chapter 2) retell unimaginable struggle in the language

of thankful, God-focused joy. God called Jonah, God guided Jonah, God delivered Jonah, God imparted a message of hope on Jonah's lips, God positioned Jonah in God's place, God declared more than the people of Nineveh could otherwise comprehend, God received the faithful witness of a reluctant servant. Descent into Sheol (2.2) becomes rescue from the pit (2.6).

Jonah's attentiveness to Yahweh, despite his own reluctance, enables a new definition of what it means to be Jonah, but also a new definition of what it means to be Nineveh.

New Testament Acts 10

In Acts 10, Luke's attentiveness to the formulation of the story of Peter and Cornelius is incredible, not least in the detailed symmetry he outlines. Both Cornelius and Peter have at least a part of their world view and their subsequent actions formed by something other than the grace of God, despite the fact that being God-fearing men, they know God to be both beyond all understanding and worthy of all obedience.

The reader of Acts 10 ought not to gloss over the magnitude of this story. First, holy people, religious people, prophetic people, Jewish people like Abram (Genesis 15), Jacob (Genesis 46), Samuel (1 Samuel 3.1), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 8.3), Daniel (Daniel 2.19) and Mary (Luke 1.27) have visions and dreams which are an articulation of the divine and become pillars of Holy Scripture. Such experiences in themselves do not, at least if they are true and holy, belong to Italian centurions or doubt-filled disciples. Peter has gone to pray (Acts 10.9), as the tradition demanded, and he gets far more than he was seeking. Revelation is rarely comfortable.

Second, visions occur in remarkable and significant places, deep valleys and prostrate prayer. They do not occur at noon or three o'clock in the afternoon as a response to human hunger.

Third, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance prescribed to the keeping of rituals concerning food within the Jewish tradition. Abram (Genesis 12.10), went to Egypt in search of bread. Though slaves died from starvation, the Hebrew people complained and reimagined their slavery to have included bountiful meat (Exodus 16; Numbers 11) and manna from heaven came as assurance of Yahweh's faithfulness (Exodus 16.31). Food laws were powerful stuff (Leviticus 11). The purpose of the food laws was that their manifestation might bear witness to the world that God is holy and has done a holy thing in his people.

Finally, until this point, through incredible suffering and with almost unimaginable faith, the community of the Way had kept to the traditions it believed to be true, often at enormous cost. Eating the unclean meat of the Gentiles would have made Early Church life much, much easier.

In the faithfulness of both Peter and Cornelius, the boldness of their submission to God's revelation invited a deeper understanding of what is true, based not on defensiveness, but on attentiveness to the very person of God.

Gospel Matthew 19.16-30

The story of the rich young man operates on an interesting set of assumptions. First, that being good is purposeful. It is somehow what we are meant to be, the motivational desire which drives our existence. Second, that virtues are a behavioural act, not a rational proposition. We must 'do something' rather than proclaim our endorsement of a well-reasoned argument.

In Matthew 19, a young man receives from Christ very clear teaching: 'Sell your possessions and give your money to the poor' (v.21). It is a profoundly difficult passage, prompting us in the West to address it with clever reasoning that avoids any kind of literal interpretation. Neither was Jesus' reply attractive to the rich young man in Matthew's story, and his response is instant. It is simply to go away grieving: raw, unbelievable honesty, in sharp contrast to the response of the modern Church. When did you, when did we, last grieve ownership of property?

When the disciples heard the subsequent teaching regarding the camel entering through the eye of the needle they were 'astounded' (v.25). Throughout Matthew 19, Jesus' teaching is turning upside down the material and cultural realities of his world. He is forcing convictions into contradictions. It had become widely assumed that those whose existence appears rich are somehow closer to God than those for whom material poverty is close. Jesus simply declares 'not so!' There is an assumed understanding into which the religious authorities of that day, and the present day, have invested large parts of their identity but which the presence of the divine is slowly dismantling.

Towards the end of the story Jesus does a remarkable thing. He takes a question about what it means to be human and turns it into a teaching about the nature of God (v.26). When God self-empties God's self on the cross, a new future is revealed (cf. Philippians 2.7). A Church capable of such self-emptying is a declaration of God's good news for the world.

The links between the readings

In each of the biblical passages, God breaks into an established pattern of life. For Cornelius and Peter; for Jonah; for the crowd present as Jesus teaches, for the disciples and for the rich young man, God reveals not only something new, but something that requires action. Action is the manifest empowerment of hope without which we have only a naive and debilitating optimism. God's people are marked, not by their belief, but by their participation in revelation. People shift from fearing God to being used by God, from defending God to receiving God's endless invitation, from supremacy to solidarity. Peter and Cornelius thus position themselves to hear what God is saying (Acts 10.33).

What matters is not that Jonah, Peter, Cornelius or the crowd 'get it' but that they 'get' that 'getting it' is probably just about the most dangerous place to be. They place their faith in a God who is always making all things new. Unlike old, fallen creation, new creation is marked not by the disobedience of humanity but by the creative hope of God.

Today our challenge is not that religious beliefs must be revised, or that non-religious beliefs must be revised, but that utter attentiveness to God will require us to allow God to reveal what we otherwise could not see. Living with contradictory convictions is not about the Church keeping up with the world, nor that those outside of the traditional teaching of the Church simply need to get with our script, but that all people are most fully who God calls them to be only in their united attentiveness to God's voice. To quote the great leveller, St Paul, we are all clay.

All the readings call us back to a refreshing reminder: there is nothing new about living with contradictory convictions, nor is that situation likely to change any time soon. Some convictions have proved much easier for the Church to embrace than others, but this is not always a measure of our faithfulness to God. It wasn't then and it isn't now.



Prayers

Call to worship based on Isaiah 43

The Lord says,
'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned.
You are precious in my sight and I love you.'

An opening prayer

God our Creator and Sustainer,
who at the dawn of creation spoke the word
that set life on its journey,
grant us your passion for the world in all its diversity,
that justice may roll down like a river,
and love and resources may be shared together.
We ask this through Jesus,
who came that we might have life in all its fullness.
Amen.

A prayer of approach

We are here, gathered together in the presence of God,
as God's people.
We come with the legacy of our histories and traditions,
with our knowledge and ignorance,
judgements and opinions, belief and unbelief.
We come with our learnt prejudices,
balancing our certainties and confusions:
wisdom and foolishness, in an uneasy tension.

We are here, in this place and at this time,
to meet with God and with one another,
to listen and to share in openness of heart and mind,
with confidence and respect,
waiting for God to reveal to us what we have yet to discover.
Loving God, come among us now.
Amen.

A prayer of confession

Liberator God,
forgive us when so often we try to mould you in our image,
enslaving you in our limited understanding of your nature;
confining you in creeds and liturgies,
in limited language and outdated images;
chaining you to history and gender,
creating a God who fits our notion of who you are
and where you are to be found.

Liberate us from the shackles of unhelpful tradition
and stagnation of a faith which asks no questions.
Enable us to break free of the barriers
of self-imposed limitations
and open our eyes to visions of new possibilities.
Release us to dance
beyond the circumference of our understanding,
and free us
to be liberators for those who can only dream of freedom.
Amen.

Prayers of intercession

We remember and hold before God this day:
those who feel on the margins of Church –
that the Church may strive to be more inclusive;

those who hold on to faith by their fingertips –
that God's faith in them will give support;

those who see no relevance in Church worship –
but walk justly and love mercy;

those who have difficult news to share –
that it may be accepted without reproach;

those whose faith is challenged –
that they will be able to discern what is true;

those whose confidence denies a contrary voice –
that difference will be respected;

those whose illness makes them vulnerable
to anxiety and despair –
that they will find a place of sanctuary;

those who struggle to accept different life styles –
that faithful love will always be the measure;

those who dare not speak for fear of censure –
that they will be liberated to find their voice;

those who are disorientated and trapped in confusion –
that God's light will break through the darkness.
Amen.

A reflective prayer

God the same yesterday, today and forever – yes,
and yet always available to a world of change –
helping us to grow and develop the more we learn
and discover of God's nature.

Dear God, how you must have wept through the years,
as humankind has done so much mischief,
justifying it in your name, resulting in abuse of your word:
the crusades, slavery, apartheid, the holocaust,
and all acts of aggression and violence being perpetrated,
even now, in your name.
So often, through ignorance and fear,
we have sought to justify, explain
and claim that God was on our side.

Throughout history, people have experienced you
in many different ways
and have sculpted their religious life accordingly.
Enable us to accept that there are contradictory convictions.
Help us not be frightened by them,
but to seek to understand,
and live with the tension of difference,
whilst recognising the conflict between good and evil,
and to know the difference.
Amen.

An opening litany

This might be used as an opening litany for café-style worship. It may be read by two or three people.

Each table has a central candle, and a different candle is lit after each stanza. If there are more stanzas than tables, go round again, or just leave some out. People could be invited to think of other words and to write their own.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was imagination,
and imagination stepped into our dreams.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was creativity,
and creativity stretched the web of our being.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was diversity,
and diversity danced with possibility.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was challenge,
and challenge whittled away prejudice.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was equality,
and equality released trapped wings to fly.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was value,
and value accepted difference with joy.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was integrity,
and integrity clothed truth and justice.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was welcome,
and welcome outstretched its arms in love.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was hope,
and hope filled the chasms of despair.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was peace,
and peace hovered like a dove.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was joy,
and joy came as an unexpected gift.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was love,
and love filled the life of promise.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word became flesh,
and the flesh brought new meaning to birth.

And the Word lived among us, as a human being.
And we beheld God's glory,
full of truth and grace.

Amen.

A sending out prayer

May the God who created a world of beautiful variety
send us out on our journey of discovery,
treasuring those things that are good and lovely.

May God stand with us as we struggle
with the things that puzzle and bewilder us,
gently cautioning us not to seek conclusions
when there are no easy answers.

May God gift us with the grace to live with
uncertainty, diversity and loose ends.

May God bless us and all peoples with love.
Amen.



Gather

Prepare the space

Set up a small table with a cloth and a cross. Add an inflatable beach ball style globe or a conventional globe, a Bible and a *Methodist Worship Book*. Cut out some question marks and pin them to the cloth.

For a café worship setting

Set out tables with chairs around them. Add paper cloths, to be decorated during worship and a pot of felt tipped pens on each table. Depending on your setting you might add a plate of biscuits or cakes or a bowl of fruit. It can help to have songs printed on a folded hymn sheet, like a menu, or projected if equipment is available.

Open the Word

Present the Old Testament

This introductory activity will prepare listeners to hear the reading from Jonah 3.

You will need: enough scissors to share and a piece of hessian for each person. You can buy it from craft shops, or buy some potato storage sacks from a garden centre.

Give a piece of hessian (sackcloth) to each person and invite them to hold it against their cheek, feeling the roughness of the weave, how abrasive it is. Invite them to ask themselves, 'Have there been situations where I have been abrasive or harsh without due cause?' Next, invite people to hold the hessian in their hands and consider what it may/ could be used for: transportation of goods and produce. Take a moment to wrap up those negative/confrontational emotions created when we are in a conflict situation so that we may now see things from a differing perspective or at least be more open to listen.

Invite people to take the sackcloth and attempt to rip it in half. See how the weave twists and turns and how difficult it is to tear apart. Now use scissors to cut the hessian in half. People might like to work together to create an attractive design with all the bits of cut sackcloth. What tools might help us to address difficult arguments, so that instead of tearing and twisting ideas we can construct something together out of many different pieces?

Present the New Testament

The version of Acts 10 in *The Message* is reasonably easy to listen to. Although a long passage, if the reading is well prepared and delivered as a story, it should be engaging. The reader might practise beforehand with a critical friend. An internet image search will provide a wide selection of pictures that might be projected to illustrate the creature-filled sheet. Choose a style that will engage your congregation.

Present the Gospel

You might use the reflective story presentation that is offered in the material for children on page 13. This style of presentation, while suitable for children, is equally engaging for many adults. Use the *Talk together* questions offered after the story presentation for children, but add three further questions:

- I wonder what is a challenge for you?
- I wonder what is a challenge for the Church?
- I wonder how knowing God can help us?

Explore & respond

Sermon ideas

Drawn from Jonah 3

- Like the Book of Ruth, Jonah describes an inclusive God who cares about peoples other than the Jews. Both contrast with the more exclusive God portrayed, for example, in Ezra. Similar tensions can be found elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments.

- The Book begins with Jonah avoiding God's call. At the beginning of Chapter 3 Jonah responds positively. But when God relents it 'was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry' (Jonah 4.1). Might this sequence of events speak to us both when we resist God, and when we seek to follow faithfully? What might the writer have intended us to hear in this sequence of events?

- The NRSV text of Jonah 3.10 is crystal clear; we are told that 'God changed his mind' (note that REB and NJB use the rather weaker, but still challenging, 'God relented'). An unchanging God can nevertheless change his mind at least about the calamity which he had planned to wreak on Nineveh. This is not the only Old Testament example in which God changes his mind. Often such changes of mind are responses to the behaviour of people – repentance in the case of the King of Nineveh, the opposite in the case of King Saul who is supplanted as king by David. And right at the heart of the gospel is a Christ who claims that nothing and no one will remain the same. John Bell reflects on all this in his interesting song *The Mind Of God*. (John L Bell, *I will not sing alone, Songs for the Seasons of Love*, Wild Goose Publications 2004, ISBN 1 901557 91 X. Text also available on HymnQuest)

- Is the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15.21-28; Mark 7.25-30) an example of him changing his mind?

- Do any of us know the mind of God perfectly? How do we discern it? Are we challenged by stories like this to explore new understandings? Is our faith open to the possibility that God may be calling us to do and say things that are uncomfortable to us – as Jonah certainly was? When is it right to be open to a change of mind? And when might it be wrong? We are called to speak the truth

in love (Ephesians 4.15); but where does listening to God and to other people fit? (Faith and Order Committee Report to the 2006 Conference *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, especially section 5)

Drawn from Acts 10

- Peter and Cornelius are both challenged; and both are converted in different ways. Peter is hungry before he dreams of forbidden food and through his hunger God is revealed in a new way. What might trigger such a challenge to us?
- There were differing strands within first-century Judaism (e.g. Sadducees and the Pharisees), and Paul's letters reveal differences within the Early Church. Were first-century Jews already living with contradictory convictions? Might Peter have had doubts before his dream? Peter is invited to 'think outside the box' in responding to a representative of the occupying power and to the world around him as it is, rather than as he might have liked it to be. Peter travels to meet Cornelius and learn more about him and his culture. Are we called to go to uncomfortable places, literally or metaphorically, to learn about people who may seem strange?
- Peter must examine what faithfulness to his tradition means. He learns that it is more than merely following rules. He has to think for himself, challenging what has become his personal, cultural and religious norm. Which of our personal, cultural and religious norms might be challenged in this generation?
- This is by no means the first challenge Peter has faced: think for example of his denial and Jesus' response (John 21.15-19). The dreams represent a serious theological challenge, the arrival of the messenger, a sign helping their interpretation. What parallel signs in our culture challenge us to deal with uncomfortable things?
- A significant exclusive strand in first-century Judaism was underlined by the reign occupation of Palestine. Cornelius represented the occupying power whom Jews tended to avoid. What parallels are there now: refugees and asylum seekers; people from cultural backgrounds we find hard to understand; people whose sexuality we find difficult; people who appear excessively tolerant; those who appear excessively rigid?



- The 2006 Conference report, *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, described 'a readiness to "accept people as they are" and to listen to people's stories is basic Christian practice.' (Faith and Order Committee Report to the 2006 Conference *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraph 5.2) How might Peter have responded to those words before the events described in Acts 10 and how differently afterwards?

Drawn from Matthew 19.16-30

- 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions...' The words of verse 21 are hard, especially for those of us who live in the West in relative comfort and wealth. The young man was faced with real choices but could not bring himself to do the one thing that Jesus challenged him to do. If money was the difficult issue for him, what is the difficult issue for us?
- A preacher might well spend some time reflecting prayerfully on the ways in which this passage challenges her or him personally. Without making any sermon excessively personal, such reflection could well offer insights into ways to unpack the challenge for members of the congregation.
- Like the young man, we live conflicted lives: we say we love God, but we also love our possessions, including things that many of us did without for much of our lives, like mobile phones and broadband. We each live with conflicting convictions: what are those we can each identify?
- Is the desire of our hearts goodness and wholeness or to defend what we think we have or believe or know? How do we know what the right thing is particularly in our relatively wealthy Western society? In this story the young man has the opportunity to ask. What opportunities are we looking for? Jesus told the disciples that it would be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (vv.23-24). Are we prepared for it to be hard, both to seek opportunities and to accept challenges?
- Jesus recited the familiar commandments but then challenged the young man not on those specifically mentioned but on something else. He went for something much more fundamental: the possessions that underpinned the young man's lifestyle. This passage illustrates the fact that Jesus' teachings say much more about the use and abuse of money than they do about the use and abuse of sex. It follows one of the few pieces of very specific teaching from Jesus relating to sex; teaching on divorce (Matthew 19.3-9) which few of us now consider absolutely mandatory.

Informal talk based on the reading from Acts 10

A way to guide all ages through the reading.

Ask whether anyone has ever played the game *Tummy Ache* (manufactured by Orchard Games). You could hold up the game if you have one, or show a picture of it. If people know it, someone might describe how to play. (Each player has a place setting and takes turns to choose a card from the middle of the table to add some food to their plate. The fun comes when someone picks up the card with the rotten apple and they have to try to get rid of that one to someone else!)

The story from Acts is about a challenging choice faced by Peter when he encounters people who were to become followers of Jesus in the time of the Early Church, the time after the resurrection when news about Jesus was spreading rapidly. Peter was a Jew, as Jesus was, and their customs around food and what might be eaten, were very strong, amounting to rules. Before he meets people who might naturally be strangers to him, Peter has a food-related vision while he is at prayer. The vision consists of a food challenge: he is invited to kill and eat something that is traditionally, ritually forbidden. This happens three times. There can be no avoiding or mistaking the challenge.

But the vision prepares Peter for the real task, which is not about food at all. It is about people.

Peter is taken to the home of a Roman centurion, the home of a Gentile, and is amazed to discover that Cornelius and his family know God. As Peter spoke to them about Jesus he recognised that the Holy Spirit was with them all. He realised that there was no difference between them, and as a sign and acknowledgement of this, he baptised them. The food vision was not really about food, it was rather a preparation for a much bigger and more important realisation – that Jesus is for all.

In the Acts story, this is the real turning point for Peter. He says, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Sometimes God challenges us to think about what we do and what we believe. Some things will never change but sometimes we see things in a new light. In all of this, God asks us to trust him and promises us that he won't do anything to hurt us. And in turn, we must trust one another, and do nothing to hurt each other.

Active worship

The following suggestions are particularly suited to a café-style setting but might be adapted for other settings. The discussion questions build upon one another and are interspersed with hymns and prayers. Feedback is often not necessary. Links from the leader often allow the worship to flow more readily.

Opening question

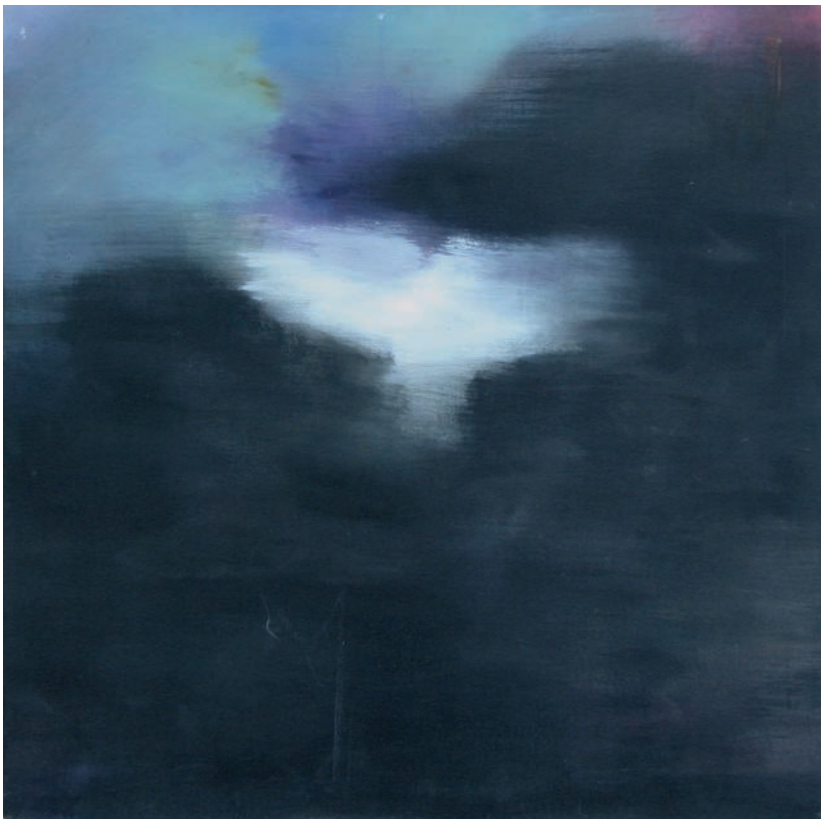
- What is your earliest memory and the biggest change you have seen in your life?

Allow five minutes for this discussion.

- Link with an example from your own life. Maybe ask one or two people to describe their biggest changes.
- This might be an appropriate time to offer prayers of thanks to God for all we have, the times we have experienced, the changes we have seen and the constancy of God's presence through all time.

Question 2

- In your Christian life, your life in the Church, where have you seen changes? How do you think continuing to find out about Jesus challenges and changes us?
- Allow seven minutes for this discussion.*
- Maybe here acknowledge that we have talked quite a lot about change but that it is good to acknowledge that we have a God whose love for us never changes. It might be good to pause and sing 'Through all the changing scenes of life' or 'Be still and know that I am God'. Or listen to a few verses from Psalm 8 or Psalm 139.



Question 3

- People in the Bible faced challenges and changes, too. We are going to look at one of the changes and challenges Peter faced. It started when a man called Cornelius, a centurion who knew about God, saw a vision of an angel who told him to send for Peter. Listen to what was going on with Peter at that time: read Acts 10.9-16.
- Peter was a Jew and in the Jewish tradition some of the food that he saw in the vision he was not supposed to eat. For him it just wasn't right.
- Discuss what you think was going on in Peter's mind. Allow only a few minutes then try to summarise the challenge to Peter's tradition, getting Peter to think about his beliefs and his confusion and wondering and confirm it with the next verse: read Acts 10.17.

Question 4

- Peter went with the men and met Cornelius and his family and friends. This is what happened next: read Acts 10.27-33.
- Peter was then able to talk to them and tell them about Jesus. Peter baptised some of the people who believed.
Discuss Peter's dilemma and how he worked his way through it.
Allow five minutes for this discussion.
- Summarise by identifying the dilemma that Cornelius and his family were not Jews. Peter was prepared for his counter-intuitive meeting with them by his shocking vision. He worked his way through a completely unforeseen and unprepared situation by acknowledging God at work in the lives of people from a completely different background and culture through identifying Jesus as work in them and the blessing of the Holy Spirit.
- Peter had to listen to God, be open to God and trust God, whilst holding in his mind all of his teaching and tradition and experience of God. What had changed for Peter? Not God's love but that God's love was for people beyond the Jewish community. God's love was for all.

A simple worship activity for all ages

For each table or group of about six people you will need a shoe box (the lid is not needed). Wind string or strong wool tightly around the box to make a weaving frame. Provide a basket of wool of different colours together with strips of material and paper. Invite people to reflect on what it is that they are concerned about, what puzzles, disturbs or frightens them, and to choose a colour and fabric to represent this and to weave it onto the frame. You may wish to have some music playing quietly in background. People can be invited share their concerns, or not, as appropriate. The boxes might be stacked on top of each other to make a wall of prayers.

Use the following prayer to close the activity:

Weaver God,
you invite us to share in weaving
the cloth of creation,
setting the loom to hold us
in the tension of your love,
taking the threads and colours
that we offer,
each strand important to your design.
We bring our broken threads
of pain and anxiety,
knots of fear, our prejudice,
sorrow and regret,
the faded colours of broken dreams
and promises.
We bring them all for you to fashion,
and, in the rhythm of the
weaver's shuttle,
through the warp and weft
of our humanity, you weave
the bright colours and textures
of our love and laughter, joy and hope,
into a beautiful, vibrant cloth of love
and justice to clothe the world.
Amen.

Hymns & songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

Amazing grace
A new commandment
Be still and know that I am God
Born in song
Come all who look to Christ today
For the healing of the nations
God beyond our dreams
God is working his purpose out
He's got the whole world in his hands
Let love be real
Lord for the years
Master speak
O Lord, our Lord throughout the earth
Seek ye first
Summoned by the God who made us
Thanks for friends

Send out

Live in faith

Invite people to look out for situations that would be difficult or uncomfortable for them and to find out more about them; or they could go to a shop (e.g. a betting shop) or other setting where they know they will feel out of place. Spend some time afterwards reflecting on the experience.

Challenging conversations

Matthew 19.16-30

These resources explore:

- unfamiliarity;
- disorientation and confusion;
- the way we relate to God's revelation;
- the ways in which we can be attentive to God;
- the challenge to know ourselves.

Prayers

A gathering prayer

Jesus calls us:

'Come, follow me!'

Let us come closer,
let us listen with our ears,
and watch with our eyes,
so that we might learn more about
what following Jesus means.

Amen.

A prayer for forgiveness

Lord, you are not always the first thing in my heart.
Often I forget to put you before everything else.
I cling too tightly to the stuff I own –
the latest phone, toy or computer game.
I worry about what I will wear,
or how much money I have to spend.
Forgive me when I think about these things too much,
instead of focusing on you.

Amen.

A prayer for others

Invite the children to close their eyes and think about the following questions:

What is important to you? *Pause.*

What is important to other people in your life? *Pause.*

How important is Jesus in your life? *Pause.*

Jesus,
help us to understand how much you love us,
and how important you are in our lives.

Amen.

A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus,
help us this coming week,
to notice what is important,
to pay attention to our families
and friends,
and most of all, to you.

Amen.



Gather

Prepare the space

Put out a selection of small attractive things that will appeal to children: small toys, books, shiny stones or toy jewels, sweets, etc.

Gathering activity

Invite the children to take something from the display in *Prepare the space* and to hold it out in their hands. As they look at their item, say, 'Dear God, Help us to share things we like with you. Help us to share them with others, as you share so many good things with us.' Ask one child to collect all the things in a basket.

Open the Word

Present the reading Matthew 19:16-30

You will need: a long piece of cloth, it is called yellow in the instructions, but any rich colour is fine. Pictures (laminated, if possible) of wine bottles, food, bread, wine glasses, 'thumbs up', hearts, a clock; a bag of chocolate coins or real coins or pictures of coins; an empty bowl; some small figures and a knotted rope; a sewing needle. A basket to hold everything.

There was a rich young man (*lay out the yellow cloth*) who had lots of good food (*place the pictures of food, wine bottles and glasses on the cloth*). He had time and money (*place the clock and the coins*) to do lots of fun things. And he tried out lots of things and became good at them so that he had lots of friends (*place 'thumbs up' and hearts*).

One day, he heard that Jesus was nearby so he went to him with a question: 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' Jesus stopped what he was doing and looked around. Then he gave the rich man some ideas:

'Look around you. Some people are hungry (*put empty bowl in front of cloth*).

Look around you. Some people are lonely. No one wants to be near them. No one wants to speak to them (*place figures in front of cloth*).

Look around you. There are people struggling in all kinds of ways. They could just use a bit of help (*place knotted rope in front of cloth*).

Go and give them what you have.

Feed the hungry (*lift a food picture*).

Give money to the poor (*lift a coin*).

Give them some of your time (*lift the clock*).

Use your talents to give a helping hand (*lift the thumbs up picture*).'

The rich young man thought for a moment, considered the challenge and saw that it was too great (*carefully fold the yellow cloth leaving the pictures inside it*) and he walked away (*put cloth aside*). For him eternal life was too costly.

Jesus looked at his disciples. Then he took a sewing needle (*hold up a needle and look through the eye*). 'Do you know, it might be easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a person who loves their wealth to enter God's kingdom.' The disciples were astounded: 'So who can be saved?' they said. Jesus looked at them. 'For God all things are possible,' he said. 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'



Talk together

- I wonder what you liked about this story?
- I wonder what was important in this story?
- I wonder why the rich young man walked away?
- I wonder what the rich young man might do next?
- I wonder what puzzled you about this story?
- I wonder what it means to enter God's kingdom?
- I wonder what it means 'to be first' or 'to be last'?
- I wonder what you might do now?

Explore & respond

Do

Table questions

10 mins

Observe, value and discuss our differences

- Set out four tables with chairs around, each with a different coloured cloth. On table 1 put paper and felt tips, on table 2 put toy building bricks, on table 3 put a variety of toy dolls and figures, on table 4 put really attractive story books.
- Invite the children to choose a table to sit at. They won't be there long, but which is most attractive?
- Encourage conversations with their table companions. Why did you choose this table? How is it different to the others? Are the people at other tables different in any way? Would you move to another table? Why? Why not? If everyone had to move, what might happen? If the things on the table were mixed up, what might happen? What kind of conversation would be needed to help people move?

Make

Change machine

10+ mins

Construct and use an imaginary machine to stimulate a conversation about change

You will need: boxes; masking tape; marker pens, craft bits and glue for decoration; pieces of card and pens; cards already illustrated with e.g. the sky, mountains, lunch box contents, a group of friends, different homes, a church/chapel, a Bible, a rolling pin, a saw, a landline phone.

- Use the boxes, tape and pens to invent a 'change machine'. If time is limited prepare it beforehand.
- Each child chooses two pieces of card and draws or writes something they would like to change on one card and something that cannot be changed on the other. Discuss ideas briefly. Children keep their own cards.
- Show the illustrated cards, then place them face down in front of the change machine. Turn them over one at a time. Discuss whether what is illustrated could be changed or not. People may not agree. Then post the cards with things that can be changed into the change machine. Leave the things that can't be changed on display. Talk about what it feels like if you want to change something and someone else doesn't. What can be done?
- Reflect together on the change experiences of the rich young man in the story.

Me sticks

15 mins

Personalise a lolly stick to identify choice and acknowledge difference

You will need: large craft lolly sticks, felt tips.

- Give everyone a lolly stick. On the top 3cm ask people to draw their eyes, hair and mouth. Below the mouth, draw a horizontal line across.

- Explain that the children will be asked five questions, each with four answers to choose from. The answers are each given a colour: red, yellow, blue and green. After they choose their answer, they colour a strip across their lolly stick. You could ask the questions like this: What is your favourite game? Skipping – red, tennis – yellow, football – blue, tag – green.
- At the end, each lolly stick will look different. Acknowledge this and how we are all different, all unique and all loved by God. Finally you might wonder if the 'me stick' might look different in a few years' time.

	Red	Yellow	Blue	Green
What is your favourite colour?	red	yellow	blue	green
What is your favourite game?	skipping	tennis	football	tag
What is your best day out?	seaside	theme park	cinema	countryside
What is your favourite food?	burgers	pizza	spag bol	curry
As an adult, if you were to get lots of money would you	spend it all?	give it to charity?	save it up?	share it with friends and family?

Pray

Heart in our hands card

10 mins

Make a card as a focus for prayer

You will need: A4 card, pencils, scissors, felt tips.

- Fold a sheet of A4 card in half short edge to short edge.
- Place a hand on the card with index finger and thumb tips touching the fold. Draw around the hand but not across the tops of your index finger and thumb. Keep them on the fold.
- Cut out and open out your card. You will see two hands with a heart held between them. You could stick it to another piece of paper and colour the heart in.
- Write or draw names, words or symbols to represent different groups of people or situations on the hands. Use the card to pray that God loves each of us, all so wonderfully different. Take the cards home as a reminder that God says, 'I will not forget you. I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands' (Isaiah 49.15-16).



Send out

Live in faith

Work, sit or play with someone you don't know very well and get to know them better.


ROOTS YOUNG PEOPLE

BIBLE Acts 10

Warm up 5 mins

Work together to make a mind map of taboo subjects in conversations with friends. Now expand the map to include taboo subjects with parents and grandparents (use a different colour for each). Discuss the result.

Big puzzles 20 mins

Give each person a copy of Acts 10. Choose a version from Bible Gateway (www.biblegateway.com). Invite everyone to use coloured pens to highlight the text as they hear it read, noting questions: **?**, puzzles: , surprising things: **!**. Discuss the different responses. Look at the *Informal talk* (p.10) to see if this helps shed light on the story.

EXPLORE

Peter's dilemma 15 mins

Peter's vision commanding him to eat food that was forbidden by the Jewish laws prepared him for the encounter he was about to have with a Gentile household. This meeting was simply unthinkable for someone of his tradition, yet it revolutionised his life and made the spread of the Church more likely. It was risky, however; he had a lot to lose. Draw a sheet held up by four hands and write on it all the risks Peter took to go beyond a position that was safe and comfortable.



CONNECT

Around here 15 mins

Print out a map of the area and mark on it the different traditions and cultures that are around you. They might be different faiths, and also different and distinctive ways of life – particular trades, language groups, farming traditions. Create a symbol for each item you mark on the map. Then invite each person to initial the things they know something about. Are there any items that are completely unfamiliar to everyone? Is there anything you can do about this? Are there consequences of doing nothing? How might you share what you do know among yourselves?

Eliminate misunderstanding 30 mins

Try to recall items from the media or from story or film, of people who were misunderstood, and the impact this had. How might things have been different? Create a storyboard for a short film to persuade your peers that we must all look out for people who are likely to be excluded, bullied or misunderstood. Divide out the tasks among the group so that everyone works to their strengths.

PRAY

Covenant words 15 mins

Use some words from the Methodist Covenant Service to reflect on the dilemmas we face when we talk about stepping out of our comfort zone or addressing deep disagreements. Look together at Section 15, version A of the Service (on page 287ff. of the *Methodist Worship Book*). Give each person a copy and an assortment of coloured pens. Invite people to respond: they could decorate and illustrate the words, have a discussion, or make a list of things they could do to make a difference in the world. Conclude with the Covenant Prayer.

Live in faith

Invite people to look out for situations that would be difficult or uncomfortable for them and to find out more about them. Spend some time afterwards reflecting on what you've discovered.



In 2006, the Methodist Conference Report *Living with Contradictory Convictions* set out how the Church lives with, and tries to resolve, contradictory convictions, considering Scripture in the light of tradition, experience and reason. These resources support discussions across the Methodist Connexion about marriage and relationships, and can also be used to support conversations in many church settings, about any subject where Christians hold differing views.

This edition of ROOTS helps to ground discussions in Scripture and worship. The materials can be adapted to different contexts and formats of worship, including café church, and can be used in study and discussion groups. There are also resources to use with children and young people.

Front and back cover artwork:
Breaking diptych, by Juith Tutin